The effect of LEADER on local empowerment in Dutch local development

Bachelor Thesis

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Preface

Few people ever heard of LEADER, including myself. When I searching an interesting topic for my thesis, LEADER crossed my Google search results and I was immediately drawn to this unknown but widely used method. This curiosity eventually led to the accomplishment of this thesis. A thesis about the effect of LEADER on the local empowerment in Dutch local development. It was the very same curiosity that helped me to fight against discouragement when facing complex European and national policy, to keep me motivated in times extensive readings consumed all my energy and to keep focused on this thesis when my teacher training and internship overcharged me with additional work. But as a student of the bachelor Geography, Spatial Planning and Environment at the Radboud University I have enjoyed writing this thesis and are truly happy with all this relevant knowledge on European funding, local empowerment and local development. My curiosity became more than satisfied. I hope this thesis will also satisfy the curiosity of everyone interested in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment, whether it will be policy makers or locals in search of more control over their own environment.

I want to thank the Dutch Local Action Groups for their helpful and honest interviews, especially the coordinators of the Local Action Groups Kop van Noord-Holland, Utrecht Oost, Salland, Zuid-West Twente, Holland Rijnland and LEADER Achterhoek. I also want to thank Thodoros Soukos for coaching me in the first phases of this thesis, otherwise I would have lost myself in the multitude of available literature. My thanks also go to all the professors and associate professors of the bachelor in Geography, Spatial planning and Environment at the Radboud University that nourished my interest in local development and empowerment of the local community. At last I want to express my gratitude towards my family and household for their patience concerning my paper filled working spaces in the living room and bedroom.

I hope you find this thesis enjoyable and informative!

Bryan Toussaint Nijkamp

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Preface

What once started as international economic cooperation among several nations, eventually grew out in a vast governance institution that affects national and local policy of member states on almost any aspect. Using multi-level governance the EU produces advanced forms of (transboundary) cooperation and policy with significant territorial impact. One of these advanced forms of policy is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The current CAP objectives are besides viable food production, also the sustainable management of natural resources plus climate action and a balanced territorial development. In order to achieve these objectives the CAP has been through major changes in its regulatory framework and the organization of funding. One of these major changes in the regulatory framework of the CAP regards the rural development policy from the European Union.

To assure the multi-governance in European rural development a certain method is introduced to the field of the European rural development, LEADER. This method assures that the policy design, policy context and the impacts and outcomes of the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) serve the multi-functional local needs. LEADER is a method to stimulate processes in the local economy (ESPON, 2005). The aim of LEADER is "to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas." In order to reach the aim of the programme about 2600 Local Action Groups are formed (LAGs). Each group covers one or more projects in a certain local area. The LAGs consist primarily of local actors as inhabitants, the local governments, local companies and other stakeholders. Local Action Groups's are funded by the European Union using the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

According to the European Union LEADER proved to be a successful method for local development. Evaluation reports conclude Local Action Groups and European funding have been crucial for implementing local projects in every European member state. These projects boosted rural economies by improving the local job market, introducing profitable activities to local communities or polishing the economic image of local areas. Although improving the economic conditions are an important intention of LEADER, the method also tents to target social aspects of local development. Mostly by engaging local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas. This shows a large overlap with the concept of local empowerment. In local empowerment local communities with the proper resources obtain autonomy in their own local development. Local empowerment involves locals with the financial, social and organizational capital, social capacity and inclusion in policy design and implantation to take control over their own environment. Although LEADER actively aims for the empowerment of local communities by providing them with funding and networks, evaluation reports do not take local empowerment into account leaving the effect of LEADER on local empowerment a mystery.

luckily some scientific research has been done on the effect of LEADER on local empowerment. Research suggests power relations, the representation of the local community in Local Action Groups, regulations, resource dependency and preconditions may all play a role in the relationship between LEADER and local empowerment. Sadly research is still inconclusive about the effects of these variables on the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. Furthermore, these studies have been conducted in Eastern European member states. This resulted in an incomplete view concerning the effect of LEADER on local empowerment, as LEADER is in use in the whole European Union. This includes countries with very different power relations and preconditions than in Eastern Europe. The Netherlands are in particular very different from Eastern European members states. The Netherlands co-founded the European Union and participated in LEADER from the beginning, while Eastern

European member states acquired their European membership much later and joined LEADER far more recently. The Netherlands also have a very different social, economic, political and institutional climate than Eastern European member states resulting in a significantly different context for LEADER. To complete the scientific research on the effect of LEADER on local empowerment this thesis will therefore answer the following main question:

How does LEADER affect the local empowerment in Dutch local development?

This thesis addresses how LEADER affects local empowerment in local development and is rooted in a Dutch context. The aim of the thesis is not to find empirical evidence on the *existence* of a relation between LEADER and local empowerment in Dutch local development or to *quantify* this relation somehow. This thesis has the aim to *understand* how LEADER affects the local empowerment in Dutch local development. A qualitative research fits this research best. It will help understand the relation between LEADER and local empowerment, identifying key variables, their role in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment plus applying this to the Dutch context.

In order to structure these relations and concepts in a proper way to do research on the effect of LEADER on local empowerment an approach is needed. This approach must provide in a framework for the internal variables in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment, like power relations and the representation of the local community. The approach must also frame the external variables like regulations, resource dependency and preconditions in an understandable format. A fairly recent approach seems to fit these requirements. The Neo-Endogenous approach has an extensive history in local development and pays special attention to exogenous and endogenous variables. The Neo-Endogenous approach serves as a good approach to frame all the variables in a more clear structure.

The results of this thesis are interesting and refreshing. In The Netherlands LEADER is categorised under the national Plattelands Ontwikkelings Programma (POP), this is the Dutch Rural Development Programme (RDP). The POP focusses on the Dutch rural development in general and contains five themes, LEADER being one of them. Because LEADER is part of the POP the national government is responsible for it. The national bureau in charge of the application procedure of the projects, granting European funding and monitoring the outcomes of LEADER is the Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland (RVO). The RVO is responsible for carrying out all national policy regarding entrepreneurship in The Netherlands. Because LEADER is categorised under POP all projects must meet the requirements set by the RVO. These requirements are based on EU regulations, but altered to meet also national standards. Besides the national government also the Dutch regional and local government take part in LEADER. Regional governments can take over certain responsibilities from the national government, for example the monitoring of the project administration from locals.

LEADER proves to be extremely successful in developing Local Action Groups which enable locals with autonomy over their own environment an local development. The transparent, non-hierarchical cooperation between different actors in Local Action Groups provide locals with social and organizational capital, social capacity and a degree of financial control. The organizational freedom results in a representative board with large networks in the local community, capable of taking locals and their needs serious in decision-making. On the other hand this excludes marginalized groups form being represented by the board, as these groups often miss networks due to a lack of social capital. The participants in local projects are selected on their administrative skills, prior experience with LEADER and financial capital, things marginalized groups lack. Meetings to involve locals in the design

of the Local Development Strategy are on the contrary successful due to their open character, but not all Local Action Groups involve locals in this process.

LEADER delegates the financial control and management of projects to national governments. Thus allowing exogenous forces as national regulations to affect the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. The demanding Dutch national regulations concerning the funding application and project administration of local projects result in financial centralization, decreasing the financial capital and financial autonomy of local communities in their local development. The complex regulations undermine the bottom-up approach from LEADER, as these regulations shift the financial autonomy and self-control of local communities to the Dutch national government and make locals dependant from the Dutch national government for financial capital. These demanding and complex Dutch national regulations also undermine the LEADER method by making the relation between LEADER and local development more sensitive for preconditions like administrative knowledge, prior expertise with LEADER and financial capital of locals. It appears these preconditions are essential for the participation of locals in their local development, leading to the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in local development. At the end the Dutch national government decides which locals participate and intervene in their local development, empowering some of the knowledgeable and experienced locals and excluding the marginalized others.

In conclusion LEADER affects the local empowerment in Dutch local development in a mostly *negative* way by facilitating the Dutch national government in establishing financial centralization leading to a lack of financial autonomy for locals and a poor representation of the local community in local development as marginalized groups are excluded from resources, capacity to act and decision-making.

Further research could use a different approach such as the participatory approach to put more emphasis on the social processes in generating local empowerment. Another possibility is to look into the effect of Dutch culture (like citizen participation) on empowerment in the context of LEADER. Further research could also involve the experiences and knowledge of other actors such as national and regional governments. Further research could also expand the context of research to more member states of the European Union, like Western and Northern Europe to enrich the study on LEADER and local empowerment.

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Attachments

Introduction

The 20th century has been of great importance to our world. Nowadays political, economic and cultural systems are largely influenced by major events and movements from the 20th century. The European Union is for example rooted in the Second World War and its outcomes. Never again Europe wanted to fall prey to a war and suffer hunger. European cooperation seemed a perfect way to maintain peace and regional equality. By initiating international policies and large scale subsidies the European Union kept its promise till today. For a long time Europe has been economic strong enough to match economic powers as the USA and newbie China. By introducing the Common Agricultural Policy the European Union succeeded in food security and in keeping farming profitable.

However, in the late second part of the 20th century globalisation and urbanisation started to challenge the authority of the European Union. With the upcoming globalisation, anti-globalisation movements started to win ground in the more local areas, calling for less influence from the European Union. At the same time the rising urbanisation caused an economic downfall in many rural areas across Europe. In the last decades many local serves disappeared from rural areas resulting in an endangered liveability. To counterattack this development the European Union launched LEADER, a programme that centres around local projects that produce local development. For the last thirty years LEADER has proven to be successful and many local projects have been completed since. LEADER is famous for its bottom-up approach to local problems. The programme allows locals to participate in the whole process of local development from beginning till end and funds their projects. But it provides locals with much more than funding, like networks or knowledge. LEADER is of great influence on our rural areas, as more than 50% of Europe's rural areas are designated LEADER areas.

Although LEADER is a fairly successful programme and wide spread in use in our rural environments, it remains quite unknown for the large public. It seems that all the programmes and funding of the European Union are not so transparent and too complex to raise any interest from the general public. And not only to the public. Behind the great stories, beautiful brochures, inspiring presentations and successful local projects it turns out LEADER is often complex and not transparent for participants either. It is highly paradoxically that a program originally based on a bottom up approach can be at the same time complex and not transparent to local people. This phenomenon is so urgent that many locals combined their voices in independent interest groups all over The Netherlands, claiming that LEADER must be revised drastically in order to preserve its original goal, to empower locals and meet local needs. It is interesting to learn how this discrepant phenomenon is embedded in LEADER and how it affects local empowerment and development, both corner stones of the programme. This thesis will investigate the effect of LEADER on local empowerment in Dutch local development.

1.   Context on the topic and critical literature review

I.   Introduction to this chapter

European policy is notorious for its complexity. The immense variety of topics covered by European Union policy combined with the expansion of the Union over time has led to programmes that are so complex a certain expertise is needed to understand them. Because this thesis will be stored in the Radboud University's repository it will be available for a wide audience. This compels me to write this thesis not only for an audience specialised in European Union policy, but also for a wider audience of interested parties. So it is necessary to include a certain introduction to more general European Union policy in order to receive a decent understanding of LEADER and it's context.

This thesis starts with a brief overview of the Common Agricultural Policy and the general outlines of LEADER. Followed by a more critical paragraph regarding the present-day outcomes of LEADER and the available evaluation reports. After introducing the concept of local empowerment this chapter will conclude with a critical literature review discussing the role of LEADER in local empowerment.

II.   The context of LEADER – The European Union and its Common Agricultural Policy

What once started as international economic cooperation among several nations, eventually grew out in a vast governance institution that affects national and local policy of member states on almost any aspect. Using multi-level governance the European Union produces advanced forms of (transboundary) cooperation and policy with significant territorial impact. One of these advanced forms of policy is the Common Agricultural Policy. The CAP provides a legislative and financial framework for agricultural and rural development, using up to 38% of the European Union taxes. Being one of the oldest forms of policy from the European Union the CAP went through major reforms in time, causing major changes in the landscape and our societies. After different reforms the CAP shifted slowly from purely economic goals to a more multi-sectoral approach (European Commission, 2017).

The current CAP shifted the focus to more greening practices, job creation, environmental issues and climate related issues. The current CAP objectives are besides viable food production, also the sustainable management of natural resources plus climate action and a balanced territorial development. In order to achieve these objectives the CAP has been through major changes in its regulatory framework and the organization of payments (European Commission, 2010; Soukos, 2013).

One of these major changes in the regulatory framework of the CAP regards the rural development policy from the European Union. The rural development policy is given form by Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) which are designed by national governments of the member states. The initiative to emerge the RDPs into real life projects that serve rural development lies at local actors (ENRD, 2017). This should be seen in the context of a critical culture change in government approaches. The last decades we observe a shift from government to governance and from top down to bottom up policy. These developments led to drastically reforms in cooperation, networking and partnership among public and private sectors resulting into multi-governance strategies and a more effective multi-functional approach to local problems and needs (Bailey, 2002). The rural development policy of the European Union under the current CAP is a clear example of this changing culture (Ray, 2000). Part of

the rural development of the European Union is LEADER. A programme that is embedded in the multi-governance of European rural development. With LEADER the European Union assures that the policy design, policy context and the impacts and outcomes of the RDPs serve multi-functional local needs (ERND, 2017).

III.   LEADER

LEADER is established in the early 90s and is and abbreviation of Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale (links between development actions of the rural economy). LEADER is officially not seen as an approach or programme, but as an instrument to stimulate processes in the local development (ESPON, 2005). Nevertheless, because LEADER consists of regulations, funding and methods it is often referred to as an approach to local development. The aim of the programme is "to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas." (ENRD, 2017). LEADER is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

To engage local actors in the programme and facilitate bottom-up development, LEADER facilitates local actors with funding and networks. Funding provides local actors with financial resources to set up projects which meet local needs. Networks provide local actors with the organizational and social resources to set up these projects and form the foothold of LEADER on local level. The networks are called Local Action Groups (LAGs) and are formal part of LEADER. Each group covers one or more projects in a certain local area. The Local Action Groups consist primarily of local actors as inhabitants, the local governments, local companies, local NGOs and other stakeholders (ENRD, 2017; European Commission, 2014). Local Action Groups play a crucial role in administering funding for local projects.

IV.   The outcome of LEADER so far

Recent information on the outcome of LEADER on European Union level is not widespread. Some conclusions regarding the outcome of LEADER on European Union level are published in a report of the ESPON Monitoring Committee dated 2005. The ESPON is an applied research programme that supports the formulation of territorial development policies in Europe. ESPON produces wide-ranging and systematic data on territorial trends related to various economic, social and environmental aspects. The Monitoring Committee consist of one representative of each European Union Member. The ESPON Monitoring Committee from 2005 certified in an ex-post evaluation LEADER as efficient and effective. "It proved to be adaptable to the different socioeconomic and governance contexts and applicable to the small scaled area based activities of rural areas." (ESPON, 2005). The committee states in the same report that LEADER-projects have a more experimental and innovative character then other structural funds instruments and serve a broader range of beneficiaries. The effectiveness of LEADER is supported by many successful local projects. Projects improving the local development to be profitable or rendering employment.

More strong evidence for the success of LEADER is the territorial coverage and widespread usage. About 2600 Local Action Groups are formed in the European Union and cover over 54% of the rural population in the European Union. LEADER had been in use for 20 years now and everyday new Local Action Groups emerge. Over thousands of projects have been conducted with great outcomes for the

rural economy. This is an impressive result, especially for a programme which receives relatively few subsidies (ENRD, 2017; European Commission, 2014). From aforementioned reports it is clear LEADER affects economic development in local areas in a positive way.

It is curious though that the effectiveness of LEADER is argued in these reports from a mostly territorial and economic viewpoint. The goal of LEADER is to "to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas", so an evaluation from purely economic viewpoint seems incomplete (ENRD, 2017). It is largely unknown how well LEADER includes local communities in the process of development in their own areas by a bottom-up and multi-sectoral approach. We know LEADER is effective in boosting rural economies, but does LEADER also enforce local people with strategies, decision-making and resource allocation to meet their own local needs (European Commission, 2014)? These more social aspects are an important part of LEADERS purpose and extend to far more then economic rural development. Regarding the goal of LEADER social aspects must also be taken into account to obtain a complete and valid evaluation. Evaluating LEADER only on economic success is just one part of the story, nevertheless aforementioned reports fail to look at the social outcomes of LEADER.

Understanding LEADER from an economic viewpoint also dominates most scientific research. The social outcomes of LEADER are sparsely covered by the scientific community. Interestingly these papers link the strategies, decision-making and resource allocation of locals to the concept of empowerment (European Commission, 2014). The concept of empowerment is often used in the context of feminist movements. But the concept of empowerment can be applied to a much wider context. Hjorth explains empowerment as self-assurance from citizens in their abilities, which increase their political power and social influence. Speet et al. sees empowerment as a process grounded in the community that includes collective action and critical reflection. Empowerment helps marginalized groups in accessing and managing resources. Bennet writes about empowerment as the capacity to participate, to manage resources and work cooperatively with others. It is clear that when studying the participation of local communities in local development we can't omit the use of the concept local empowerment.

The concept of local empowerment embraces the goals of LEADER perfectly as it refers to the autonomy of locals to determine the local needs of their community and to actively shape their own local development through action, managing resources, cooperation and participation in the development process. Schulz et al. [54] points out that capacity of local organizations, participation and access of timely information, are some central aspects of empowerment. It is important to understand that locals are actively engaged in bringing empowerment about. Empowerment is like a positive reinforcing spiral. It does help people to participate, but at the same time people need to be empowered in order to exercise their right to participate (Solava & Alkire, 2007). Local empowerment involves the local access to resources, like financial capital, social capital and organizational capital. To become empowered the local community needs access to funding, loans or co-financing (Bailey & De Propris, 2011). Locals also need access to networks and a certain degree of freedom in setting up these networks and local development (Brown et al, 2002; Sugarpa, 1997). To become empowered the local community must be able to pressure strong actors as the European Union and national governments, to criticize and discuss policy and regulations (Clarke, 1998; Cisar, 2012). To be fully empowered locals need most of all autonomy. They need financial power by financial decentralization (Ferry & McMaster, 2005), inclusion in policy design and implementation (ENRD, 1017), control over their won

environment (Belligiano & Salento, 2017) and the ability to take responsibility in solving local problems (Brown et al, 2002).

Policy reports and scientific papers both prove LEADER has a positive effect on rural economy. But both fail to prove LEADER has a positive effect on the local empowerment, an important target of LEADER. Policy papers only evaluate LEADER form an economic viewpoint and fail to look at the effect of LEADER on local empowerment. A minority of scientific papers did investigate the effects of LEADER on local empowerment, but did not offer conclusive evidence. First of all these papers include research only done in Eastern-Europe. The rest of Europe is not represented in these papers, despite of LEADER being a European wide initiated programme and Local Action Groups being active in all European countries. For a full and accurate understanding of the effect of LEADER on local empowerment research in the rest of Europe's local communities is needed. Secondly these papers have the tendency to be inconclusive about the effects of LEADER on local empowerment or to contradict each other (as we will see in the next pages). So it remains unclear if LEADER has a positive effect on local empowerment in Europe.

To scientifically prove and explain the effects of LEADER on local empowerment we must understand which variables and dynamics are crucial in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. Our main question must cover a valid and complete evaluation on the effects of LEADER on local empowerment in Europe and conduct a conclusive research on these effects by fully understanding the variables and dynamics involved. An evident main question could be: How does LEADER affect local empowerment in non-Eastern-European countries?

In order to conduct a proper thesis we must take a critical look at recent papers concerning the effects of LEADER on local empowerment. Research in this field is scarce, inconclusive and focused on Eastern-Europe. Nevertheless the aforementioned papers give some valuable insights in the variables and problems in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. In the following section we will explore these papers more in depth.

V.   Networks

Crucial in the success of LEADER are the Local Action Groups (LAGs). The groups are made up of local actors in order to meet local needs. According to the LEADER guidelines the Local Action Groups should consist of local representatives with local public and private socio-economic interests. Due to this diversity Local Action Groups incorporate the knowledge, energy and resources of local actors from all sectors in the implementation to empower locals and to meet local needs. Possible Local Action Group members could be entrepreneurs, local authorities, rural associations, groups of citizens. NGOs. Public authorities have max 50% of the votes and no interest group has more than 49% of the votes. I this way locals stay in charge over their local development and their local voice counts strongest (European Commission, 2018; Lukesch, 2007).

Local Action Groups are of vital importance to the success of the implementation of multi-sectoral European policy on local level. By using local stakeholders and expertise the policy is made to fit best the local needs. Besides the rural development (and since 2014 also urban and fishery areas development) the Local Action Groups serve a more abstract but nevertheless very important goal of

the European Union. A core goal of the European Union is to strengthen its ties with the Member States and achieve the trust of its citizens. Local Action Groups are one way to do so (Haken, 2017).

Looking at the processes inside the Local Action Groups themselves we can distinguish formal and informal processes. Formal processes are framed by a large amount of policy documents and handbooks provided by the European Union. However, Local Action Groups are a form of public participation and public participation is a fairly informal platform, as there is no formal body that oversees or regulates participatory processes. In public participation power relations and social capital are crucial in the cooperation process and shape local empowerment (Patel et al., 2007). Both systems can't exist on their own as the informal system provides for an embedding and translation of the formal system in the Local Action Groups existence (Volk, 2014). However, informal processes in the Local Action Groups severely influence the perception of its members and are related to behaviours and attitudes that help the Local Action Group to function effectively. According to maharaja (2007) the dynamics within Local Action Groups are influenced by the experience and personal attributes of the individuals. In particular knowledge, group thinking, and values play an important role (Volk, 2014).

Local Action Groups are considered a great success as they currently cover more than 50% of European territory, are active in all 21 member states and count about 2600 groups. Already under the LEADER approach the Local Action Groups are seen as permanent partnership and service structures (Lukesch, 2007). The success of Local Action Groups extends further than territorial and material achievements. Some research claims that interactive participation in Local Action Groups enhances the confidence of also the weaker stakeholders as they can engage in direct contact with each other and the decision-makers. Thus Local Action Groups play an important role in giving power to locals over their local development (Patel et al., 2007; Wilson, 2013).

But not all scientists are positive about Local Action Groups. Pechrova critizes the equal representation of members in Local Action Groups as she introduces the phenomenon of the project class. The project class consists of experienced managers in the Local Action Groups board (every LAG has a board which is in charge of granting projects and functions as an executive committee). Although an experienced board leads to a better performance of Local Action Groups regarding their goals, it also creates unequal power relations in the Local Action Groups (e.g. experienced managers versus local inhabitants) (Pechrová, 2014; Pelcl et al., 2008). Interestingly this phenomenon not only occurs within but also between Local Action Groups. Local Action Groups that run for longer time and have higher educated and experienced managers have for example better knowledge transfer than Local Action Groups with shorter existence and lower educated and less experiences managers (Pechrová, 2014). They form the project class, a new elite group (Kovách, Kučerová, 2006). The project class has also access over the funds. It could be problematic if only a limited number of stakeholders has access to the funds (Marquardt et al., 2011) Osti (2000) even states that that LEADER and Local Action Group might be 'camouflaged forms of the corporatist agreements with certain powerful and well-organized interest groups continuing to establish stable accords with the local organs of public administration in order to monopolize the flow of resources from the centre to the periphery'. Volk has results that point in a similar direction. According to his research the dynamics in Local Action Groups are importantly influenced by the power relations of the actors (Volk, 2014). Local Action Groups undergo a strong domination of the public sector as co-financing beneficiary. Although it could be argued that the public sector has more financial resources and knowledge a survey showed that a lack of recognition of the

basic LEADER features among Local Action Group members is a major cause of this structure (Volk, 2014).

Other scientists criticise Local Action Groups on different fronts. The work of Belligiano and Salento (2017) for example introduces another substantial argument against Local Action Groups. According to Belligiano and Salento LEADER and Local Action Groups are a form of multi-governance. Although multi-governance is generally seen as a solution to the failures of previous more hierarchical forms of governance, multi-level governance itself is subject to frequent and manifest problems also recognizable in Local Action Groups. A significant problem relevant to Local Action Groups could be the shortcomings of representation. The actors involved in the processes of networking, communication, negotiation and cooperation in the Local Action Groups are not all stakeholders with a direct interest in the decisions undertaken, they are just representatives. This means Local Action Groups can have trouble in addressing the local needs properly (Belliggiano, Salento, 2017).

Besides problems with the representation of locals in Local Action Groups and LEADER several papers point out other shortcomings surrounding the Local Action Groups than can influence the effects of LEADER on local empowerment. Such a shortcoming is formed by the little knowledge of Local Action Group members about the basic futures of LEADER. Especially in new European Union Member States concepts as networking and multi-sectoral actions are less well known to Local Action Group members. (Marquardt et al. 2012). Another shortcoming can be found in inadequate networking and transnational cooperation between different Local Action Groups. This transboundary cooperation is useful to exchange new methods and best practices in rural development in order to prevent unnecessary mistakes. Less experienced Local Action Groups could learn from Local Action Groups in a more developed stage and prevent costly mistakes (Volk, 2014). Although LEADER is very successful in raising awareness and strengthening cooperation, it is proved too difficult for Local Action Groups to reach out of the local level and engage in (transboundary) cooperation with other Local Action Groups (ESPON, 2005).

Previous results stand in high contrast with the dynamics as set out in the Local Action Group handbooks provided by the European Union. In these policy documents Local Action Groups appear as highly effective cooperative networks that represent local actors and local needs (European Commission, 2018; ENRD, 2017; ESIF, 2016). But field research has shown a different side of Local Action Groups. Although some of them have proven to be extremely successful, others have to overcome inequality, shortage on knowledge or isolation in their organization according to aforementioned papers. If Local Action Groups can't guarantee a good representation of the local community this could cause serious problems to reach the goals of LEADER, like empowerment of the local community over their own local development. In particular the arguments of Belliggianoa and Salento concerning the representation of locals in Local Action Groups and LEADER and the arguments of Pechrova and Volk concerning power relations within Local Action Groups stand in high contrast with the works of Luckesh, Patel and Wilson. The latter claiming Local Action Groups have a positive effect on local empowerment. This way the effects of LEADER and local empowerment stay inconclusive. Although it became clear that the relation might be influenced by power relations and the representation of locals in Local Action Groups, at least in Eastern-Europe. Power relations and representation of locals form two important variables inside LEADER that can influence the effect of LEADER on local empowerment, although it remains inconclusive if they really do so. Thus two evident sub questions could be:

Do power relations in Local Action Groups influence local empowerment?

Are Local Action Groups a good representation of the local community?

A second way LEADER affects local empowerment is through funding. The important Local Action Groups could never exist without proper funding. Through funding it is possible to erect Local Action Groups which involve locals in their local development and empowerment by setting up a Local Development Strategy. Local Action Groups also appoint funding to the actual projects of locals. In both ways funding directly affects local empowerment. Funding is crucial for the bottom-up approach of LEADER that helps locals to obtain autonomy and empowerment over their own local development. However, if Local Action Groups fail to accurately represent the local community then funding also fails to fund projects that truly attend local needs and empower the local community. In a worst case scenario funding could work against local development, especially when Local Action Groups fail to preserve social justice in the participation process of locals. Thus funding plays a crucial role in the effect of LEADER on local empowerment. The next part of this thesis forms a critical literature review on the role of funding in LEADER local empowerment.

VI.   Funding

Local development has always proven to be a real challenge for European policymakers. Rural areas are a complex field of historical, social, political and economic factors and processes represented by various groups of actors (Belliggiano, 2017). Besides a complex and fragmented reality policymakers also face uncertainties as juridical constraints and market dynamics in the rural areas. To make these challenges feasible local stakeholders are asked to participate in rural policymaking and implementation. Local stakeholders bring knowledge, interests and perspectives with them which is vital for an integrated area-based implementation of European Union policy. For over more than thirty years the European Union supports local development, for example with specific programmes as LEADER. The most important form of support are the Structural Funds. European initiatives as LEADER use Structural Funds to mobilize necessary resources and members of the local community to contribute to local development and empowerment (Greenwood, 2010; Mahony &Beckstand, 2011).

The long tradition of funding local empowerment has shown that there is a strong link between the European funding and local development. Some scholars even claim that these funds play a crucial role in the success of local development and identify a positive effect of funding on local empowerment (alber etal, 2011). First of all funds create certain new institutional and procedural frameworks that are usually absent at local level. These frameworks or institutions are of great importance as they improve the ability of local communities to steer for local development and obtain empowerment (Johansson & Svensson, 2000; Börzel, 1997; Bache, 1999). How? Brown et al (2002) argues that funding can grant access to resources and thereby encouraging and empowering groups to implement their own objectives. Local Action Groups bring people together by arranging meetings, classes and having social functions. Doing so Local Action Groups provide in an organizational structure which is crucial to be able to address specific problems. Even the presence alone of Local Action Groups may already challenge local elites (Clarke, 1998) by providing in political space and opportunities for citizens to press their demands on governments (Lehman, 1990; Loveman, 1991; Sugarpa, 1997). Moreover, local

action groups provide in resources which are needed to increase community involvement among individuals. In doing so local groups create social capital and organizational capital and therefore the community is equipped to press government for change.

Funding is of crucial importance to Local Action Groups in another, more practical way. Local Action Groups severely rely on external funding as it is extremely difficult to raise local funds. This is mostly due to domestic environment, the low capacity to get resources from the general local population and the approach of political elites (Cisar, 2012). Especially access to long term funding is difficult and long-term funding is essential for local development (Global Taskforce, 2016). Without external funding the beginning, further exitance and expansion of small community organisations is simply impossible (Brown et al, 2002).

Funding also raises the flexibility on activities of local development and boost local authority and participation. The frameworks, programs and institutions needed for the implementation of European funds made more local self-government possible. How? As local communities engaged in participatory approaches they map their needs and bring together isolated institutions and actors, giving them a local voice and forging new local networks (Ferry & McMaster, 2005). Empirical evidence suggests that funds have a positive effect in empowering previously marginalized groups in society. This is mainly because donors that give external funding target small community based groups. They attempt to reach for segments of the population fostering civil society and social capital (Brown et al, 2002). Local Action Groups can empower these previously marginalized populations by through a certain mobilization. Organizational events like meetings have proven to be of great use for marginalized groups in society to express their concerns and problems. This leads to an increase in associational activity exposing people to alternative viewpoints and making them consider alternative programs (Brown et al, 2002). Cisar (2012) underpins this as he explains that community involvement, capacity to act and professionalization of local groups has led to more local development. A clear precondition to this is the reception of substantial European funding and the imposing of responsibilities, which boost legitimacy and authority (Ferry & McMaster, 2005).

It seems that European funding leads to more autonomy for local action groups and their communities but some papers are far less optimistic about the effect of funding on local empowerment. When interest groups receive external funding they could for example become in turn dependent of this funding. This is known as the resource dependency effect (Beyers & Karremans, 2007). This is certainly true in the case of Local Action Groups that depend on their survival on keeping the channels for external funding (Brown et al, 2002). Scholars warn for the fact that local interest groups could prioritize issues in their local development that might be more relevant to the European Union then on local level, resulting in more energy devoted to the aimes of the European Union (Cisar, 2012). It is also possible that Local Action Groups are less willing to criticize the European Union being their donor (Brown et al, 2002). It is noteworthy though that not all scholars agree on this. Jenkins (1998) argues that external funding does not lead to displacement in local development. He claims external funding will lead much more to the professionalization of local groups.

External funding could also lead to local groups handing in some autonomy on their development agenda and structure. It is clear that local groups depend on structural funds for existence, but to receive this funding local groups must fulfil a wide range of formal criteria and accommodate certain European requirements. Scholars point out that this severely affects the organization goals and cooperation in local groups (Fagan & Zech, 2005). It turns out that as local action groups are dependent

of European funding they adjust their agenda and organizational structure to meet the European regulations for funding. Pursuing the goals and aims of the donor limits local groups in the possibility to implement structural funds at their own environment, simply because domestic local policy priorities are delineated from European agendas (Ferry & McMaster, 2005). In regard to local development the European Union turns out to be primarily interested in obtaining policy relevant information and not in autonomous capacity of local communities (Cisar, 2012).

Other scientific work draws attention to the other external influences on the relation between funding and local empowerment. For example the mis usage of funding for electoral purposes. European funds are not the only funding Local Action Groups receive. Local projects also require co-financing. Co-financing can come from the local government, the capital market or regional governments. This funding should be protected against manipulation for electoral purposes. This has emerged as a serious concern in the Eastern European Union (Global taskforce, 2016). Like regional and local governments another actor of influence might be the national government. Although domestic political and administrative characteristics determine the local adaptation to European funds (Benz & Ebedun, 1999), some scholars argue that national governments have severe influence in local development. Mainly because they control the flow of funding, also the funds from the European Union. If their main interest is the policy implementation of the European Union it is possible they create their own development agendas at the expense of local interests (Bache, 1999; Urvin, 1998). By doing so national governments undermine the validity of the local contract (the local contract refers to the decentralized approach to local policy making). In order to honour the local contract an increase in financial decentralization is needed. In this setting national governments should be consultive organs instead of genuine partners in local development processes (Ferry & McMaster, 2005)

Even if locals get fully access to funds themselves they often can't use them properly. The idea of funding in LEADER is based on the concept of subsidiarity. However some scholars argue that this concept only brought entitlement to the access of European funds, but that the capacity of local groups to activate such entitlement is highly overestimated by the European Union (Bailey & De Propris, 2011). In fact a lot of local groups proved to be unable to access or effectively utilize the funds. Moreover local development is associated with strong local institutions which are able to access and use funding. As not all regions have strong local institutions, this could in some cases attribute to the gap between regions (Bailey & De Propris, 2011). According to Ferry & McMaster (2005) being unable to access or use funds is also due to the fact they are still controlled by the centre as they originate in the centre, for example the European Union or national government.

Although empowerment is often about the marginalized groups in society it is often vague about who exactly is to be empowered. The individual, the community or a category of people like woman or other socially excluded (Global Taskforce, 2016)? Furthermore, it seems often people in LAgs share the same background (Brown et al., 2002). And as add on it turns out that local groups with an extensive experience on European Union programmes gain the most empowerment through European funds (Tarkowski, 2003). This could main that European funds produce differentiation among areas as experienced local areas or regions gain at the expense of others (Sodomka, 2003). This differentiation is also seen in local capacities. It turns out that local areas with existing institutional and financial resources are a lot stronger partners in local development. Also local groups with an extensive experience on European Union programmes become the most or are the most developed (Tarkowski,

2003; ÖIR, 2003). Apparently preconditions like experience and resources are an important variable in the success of LEADER on local development.

Besides the problems concerning preconditions local groups also seem to have to adopt at regulatory requirements too fast, resulting in financial regulations not being at the same pace as institutional building. European funds require a significant mobilization of institutional capacity like financial and human resources (Ferry & McMaster, 2005). This could evolve in a clash of priorities and perspectives. On the short term local groups will try to compete with European assessments and try to absorb maximum funds. But on the long term they try to figure out what is the best utilization of funds (Grosse, 2003).

Scientist seem divided whether LEADER has a positive effect on local empowerment through funding or not. Scientists as Brown, Jenkins, Börzel and Bache emphasise the role of funding in providing locals with social and organizational capital. Their arguments are counterargued by Fagan, Zech, Benz and Ebedun who point to the resource dependency effect in Local Action Groups. Funding could turn Local Action Groups into slaves of the interests of the European Union and national governments instead of empowering locals with social and financial capital. Lehman, Clarke and Sugarpa claim otherwise as funding should empower Local Action Groups to stand against elite actors as governments. Although resource dependency is a serious variable to into account, according to these papers it is inconclusive if resource dependency plays a role in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. An evident sub question could be:

What is the role of resource dependency in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment?

Besides the inconclusive effect of resource dependency on local empowerment Baley, Sodomka and Tarkowski suggest that local empowerment is much more a result of preconditions like experience and resources than funding and LEADER. This stands in clear contradiction with the research of Johansson, Svensson, Brown and Bache who emphasise the importance of funding for creating institutional and procedural frameworks essential for local empowerment. These frameworks are absent on local level and large groups are excluded from participation in local development they claim. Ferry, McMaster and Grosse also draw attention to regulations and requirements that are not evolving at the same pace as these frameworks, complicating the usage of funding for local needs. It seems funding is not solely responsible for achieving local empowerment in LEADER. It is possible but unclear if preconditions at local level influence the effect of LEADER on local empowerment. And what about regulations and requirements? Evident sub questions could be:

To what extend do preconditions influence the relation between LEADER and local empowerment?

Do regulations affect the relation between LEADER and local empowerment?

Research concerning the effects of LEADER on local empowerment is limited to the Eastern European Union (this also regards the papers used in this critical literature review). In overall research is primarily focused on Eastern Europe due to the relatively poor rural areas and great disparities in power relations, making local empowerment a relevant research topic. Unfortunately this research gives an incomplete view on the relation between LEADER and local empowerment in the European Union. LEADER is also active in the Northern, Southern and Western European Union and many Local Action Groups are funding projects in these areas to boost local empowerment and development. Existing

research leaves unknown what the effects are of LEADER on local empowerment in the rest of the European Union. Do the same variables occur as in Eastern Europe? And if so do they affect the relation between LEADER and local empowerment the same way? It is relevant to answer these questions as for example the Western European Union is significantly different from the Eastern European Union in its social, political and economic climate. All circumstances that greatly influence the preconditions, regulations and power relations important in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. Because of the limited resources of a bachelor thesis it is impossible to conduct a research to the effects of LEADER on local empowerment in the Northern, Southern and Western European Union. A good and realistic counterweight can be found in the Netherlands. A country which is significantly different from the Eastern European Countries in legislative, political, social, cultural, economic and institutional way. The country has an extensive history of cooperation with the European Union and is familiar with LEADER from the very beginning. This means LEADER has been active in The Netherlands for almost 30 years. The extensive experience and history in the very topic of this thesis makes The Netherlands a valuable example. Another relevant fact concerning The Netherlands is its practice of citizen participation. Since the 1400s The Netherlands are familiar with the phenomenon of citizen participation in spatial policy. This makes Holland and interesting example for this study as citizen participation has strong ties with local empowerment, cooperation and autonomy. It is expected that the long history of citizen participation provides a more stable climate to study empowerment in.

A research on the effects of LEADER on Dutch local empowerment will enrich existing research on the effect of LEADER on local empowerment in the European Union. A focus on the effects of LEADER on Dutch local empowerment compels to rephrase the main and sub questions. The main question could be rephrased as following::

> *How does LEADER affect the local empowerment in Dutch local development?*

The sub questions could be rephrased as following:

> *Do power relations in Dutch Local Action Groups influence Dutch local empowerment?*

> *Are Dutch Local Action Groups a good representation of the Dutch local community?*

> *Do regulations affect the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment?*

> *What is the role of resource dependency in the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment?*

> *To what extend do preconditions influence the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment?*

2.   The Neo-Endogenous approach

The critical literature review reveals that the relation between LEADER and local empowerment is complex and the amount of variables involved seem infinite. The critical literature review also proved the effects of LEADER on local empowerment are inconclusive and incomplete. In order to structure research on the effect of LEADER on local empowerment an approach is needed. This approach must provide in a framework to structure the different involved variables and the relation between LEADER and local empowerment in an understandable format. A fairly recent approach seems to fit these requirements, the Neo-Endogenous approach. This approach has an extensive history in local development and pays special attention to exogenous and endogenous variables.

The Neo-Endogenous approach emerged from the notice that rural areas are affected by globalisation and that not only local forces shape the countryside. Besides these endogenous forces on local level also exogenous forces from outside the particular rural area influence rural development and empowerment. Woods (2007) coined the term globalised countryside to explain how both local and global forces construct rural areas with hybrid relations and a globalised rural economy. The force of the Neo-Endogenous approach is that the approach focusses on the dynamic interactions between a local rural area and other institutional or political environments around it (Ray 2001: 3–4). The Neo-Endogenous approach is very good to use in the case of LEADER and local empowerment as the approach focusses on development that is locally rooted and characterised by dynamic interaction between local areas and their wider environments. The Neo-Endogenous approach categorises actors involved in local development in three different levels. First in a local level (like Local Action Groups in the case of LEADER), secondly by institutions on top level like the European Union and thirdly by an intermediate level consisting of mostly national and regional governments. Al these levels can be involved in local development and empowerment at the same time. LEADER and Local Action Groups initiate bottom-up development with local autonomy at the heart, but at the same time national and regional governments are responsible for funding and implementing LEADER.

The Neo-Endogenous approach serves as a good approach to frame all the information presented in the critical literature review into a more understandable reality. Especially the three levels of different actors involved in local development are really helpful to structure the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. Applying the Neo-Endogenous approach in the topic of this thesis results in a more clear picture of the relations in and outside the Dutch LEADER areas. In LEADER we clearly see the first and second level in the form of Local Action GroupsS and the European Union. The third level is represented by Dutch national and regional governments in charge of the funding and implementation of LEADER. Applying the Neo-Endogenous approach on the relation between LEADER and local empowerment show that although locals do their own projects and actively work on local development they are affected by the regulations and demands of governments and the European Union. In this way the neo-endogenous approach fits perfectly research about how LEADER affects Dutch local empowerment in local development.

Another strong point in the neo-endogenous approach is the attention to networks. The Neo-Endogenous approach places networks at the heart of development, portraying networks as dynamic mechanisms through which actors can draw on resources to respond to local needs. Applying this on

the relation between LEADER and local empowerment provides in a context for variables and certain phenomena as the resource dependency (Bosworth ET AL, 2015).

Although local actors seem to have a great autonomy in executing their projects, Local Action Groups are never totally endogenous or directed only by local needs. The framework for local development is established from outside the local area and funding is provided exogenously. This means that to properly answer the main question of this thesis attention must be paid to all different actors and their relationship with local participants in both endogenous and exogenous way (Bosworth ET AL, 2015). Using the neo-endogenous approach we can frame resource dependency, regulations and preconditions as exogenous forces. Power relations and local representation can be framed as endogenous forces in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment.

According to the neo-endogenous approach LEADER highlights how development and empowerment is not only about balancing top-down and bottom-up influences, but also about networks that integrate the endogenous and exogenous. The Neo-Endogenous approach on local development shows how top-down rules can facilitate local action and provide reassurance and credibility to local groups. The Neo-Endogenous approach enhances the understanding that it may take time before relationships between actors form. While local development and empowerment take time, it also takes time for those giving power to local communities to build the confidence to delegate control (Bosworth ET AL, 2015).

Concluding, the neo-endogenous approach provides in a framework to properly answer the main question of this thesis by categorizing involved variables in endogenous and exogenous forces. The approach also sorts involved actors in three levels; Local Action Groups, the European Union and national/regional governments. The neo-endogenous approach also emphasises that development and empowerment are locally rooted and characterised by dynamic interactions between local areas and their wider environments. This certifies the neo-endogenous approach as an excellent format to approach a research on the effects of LEADER on Dutch local empowerment.

3.   Project framework

The project framework contains the goal, questions, relevance, conceptual model and operationalisation of this thesis and its research topic.

I.   Goals

The objective of this thesis is to provide an insight in how LEADER affects the local empowerment in Dutch local development. The aim of the thesis is *not* to find empirical evidence on the *existence* of a relation between LEADER and local empowerment or to *quantify* this relation somehow. This thesis has specifically the aim to *understand* the *role* of LEADER in the empowerment of the Dutch local community by using known variables from the literature and applying them to a new context of LEADER and local empowerment, namely the Dutch context.

This thesis tents to enrich the research concerning LEADER and local development by focussing on local empowerment. Local development is usually approached from an economic point of view and social aspects are underrepresented in both scientific research and policy. This thesis will not only have an evaluative character, but will also provide an understanding of the role of LEADER in local empowerment by examining several key variables in the relationship between LEADER and local empowerment. This is a challengeable goal as the effect of these key variables are inconclusive in the literature. Therefore this thesis will also look deeper into the effect of key variables in the relationship between LEADER and local development to add some clarity on its effects.

Finally this thesis tents to enrich the discussion about the effect of LEADER on local development by using a Dutch context. This is a valuable addition as most scientific research on LEADER and local development is done in relatively newer European Union member states located in Eastern Europe. Besides it is hard to research the effect of LEADER on local empowerment as there are many levels involved in the implementation of LEADER on local level. According to the literature national and regional governments have great influence in the implementation and outcomes of LEADER. To research the effect of LEADER on local empowerment on European level is therefore impossible and far too extensive for a bachelor thesis. In order to do proper and meaningful research a focus is needed. In this thesis a focus on the Dutch local development and empowerment is chosen.

In short this thesis tents to:

- *Enrich the scientific debate of local development by shifting its viewpoint to more social aspects rather than the usual economic outcomes*
- *Examine the effects of LEADER on Dutch local empowerment*
- *Provide in an understanding how LEADER affects Dutch local empowerment*
- *Enrich the discussion about the effect of LEADER on local empowerment by using a new, Dutch context*

These goals are reached by conducting a qualitative research to first reveal the relation between LEADER and local empowerment in local development, identifying key concepts and their effects on the relation between LEADER and local empowerment and applying this to the Dutch context. This information will be acquired by qualitative research performed among the Dutch Local Action Groups.

II.   Research questions

Main question:

> ***How does LEADER affect the local empowerment in Dutch local development?***

Sub questions:

1. *Do power relations in Dutch Local Action Groups influence Dutch local empowerment?*
2. *Are Dutch Local Action Groups a good representation of the Dutch local community?*
3. *Do regulations affect the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment?*
4. *What is the role of resource dependency in the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment?*
5. *To what extend do preconditions influence the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment?*

The sub questions are rooted in the critical literature review and address variables of key importance to understand the relation between LEADER and local empowerment and the effect of LEADER on local empowerment in the Dutch context. By determining the role and influence of these key variables in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment the mean question will be properly answered. The first two sub questions addresses endogenous variables a power relations and local representation in Local Action Groups. The third, fourth and fifth sub question cover the exogenous variables as resource dependency, regulations and preconditions.

III.   Scientific relevance

At the moment scientific research on the effects of LEADER on local development is mostly focused on economic and territorial outcomes. Local development consists of more than economic success and embraces also several social aspects like the empowerment of locals. Scientific research so far fails to prove LEADER has a positive effect on the local empowerment, Although a minority of scientific papers did investigate the effects of LEADER on local empowerment, they don't offer conclusive evidence. This thesis proves its scientific relevance by completing scientific research on the effects of LEADER on local development through addressing the social side of local development in the form of local empowerment. This thesis will also contribute to more unambiguity in scientific research concerning the effects of LEADER on local empowerment.

In another way this thesis will complete scientific research on the effects of LEADER in local empowerment by introducing a new context. Research in this field so far has been conducted only in an Eastern European Union context, although LEADER and local empowerment concern all of the European Union. This thesis proves its scientific relevance by examining the effects of LEADER on local development from a total new context, a Dutch context. The Dutch context is a significantly different context than the previously used Eastern European context in social, economic, cultural, legislative, political and institutional way.

IV.   Societal relevance

By researching local empowerment in the context of local development his thesis will lead to a better understanding of rural development in general. Local development is in society usually addressed from an economic viewpoint. This is an incomplete understanding of local development as it also consists of social aspects like local empowerment.

This study is especially societal relevant for several actors involved in policy and local development. Not only knowing what the effect of LEADER is on local empowerment, but also understanding the effect is important for the European Union to maximize local development and use funding efficiently. Becoming aware of the social side of local development might be of great use for future policy making of national and regional governments, which are responsible for implementing LEADER and for proper development in local areas. Being co-financers of local projects it is good to know how their financing steers local development and meets local needs, which is impossible without local empowerment.

But the this study is also of great value to the Local Action Groups themselves and the rural communities they operate in. Knowing how the dynamics work in Local Action Groups and how these (and the projects) are affected by endogenous and exogenous forces makes it possible to use LEADER to the fullest for their own development. This thesis can help local communities to know what to change or do to obtain more empowerment and gain control over their local development through European programmes as LEADER.

4. Conceptual model

According to the literature discussed in the critical literature review the influence of LEADER on the local empowerment of the Dutch local community can be conceptualized as following:
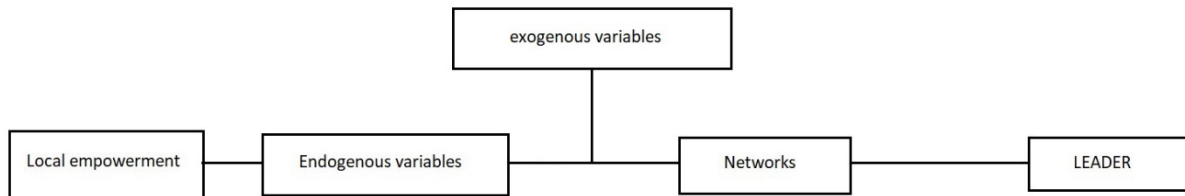
The conceptual model visualizes the effect of LEADER on local empowerment by an intermediate relationship (networks and endogenous variables) and an moderating relationship (exogenous variables).

The scientific literature is unanimous in the fact that LEADER has an *indirect* influence on empowerment by creating a framework for participation. The LEADER programme provides in networks that provide capital, autonomy and civil capacity for locals; all crucial for the empowerment of local actors. Therefore the variable networks is adopted in the conceptual model as an intermediate variable in the relationship between LEADER and local empowerment.

The relationship between the intermediate variable of networks and local empowerment however is proven to be a topic of much debate in the scientific literature. According to the literature the following concepts influence the relationship between networks (provided by LEADER) and local empowerment: local representation, power relations among local actors, local preconditions, resource dependency and regulations. In order to keep the conceptual model clear these variables are grouped together to more global concepts. Based on the neo-endogenous approach used in this thesis the variables "local representation" and "power relations" are grouped under internal or endogenous variables as they originate from within the local networks. Process regarding the representation of local actors and the power relations among local actors originate *within* local networks themselves and in return influence these networks and the local empowerment of the very same actors and the local community. The conceptual model visualizes these internal/endogenous variables as *intermediate* variables in the relationship between networks and local empowerment. The resource dependency, regulations and preconditions are variables that originate from *outside* the local networks and the local actors, but do influence the relationship between networks and local empowerment. They are grouped under external or exogenous variables. They are visualized in the conceptual model as *moderating* variables on the relationship between local networks and local empowerment.

The conceptual model tends to grasp the relations found in the literature regarding the effect of LEADER on local empowerment. The literature points out how LEADER creates local networks (like Local Action Groups) that empower the local community. But it seems the outcome of empowerment is influenced by internal variables as the representation and power relations of local actors in networks and by external variables as resource dependency, regulations and preconditions that moderate the relation between local networks and local empowerment.

5.   Operationalisation

This paragraph contains the operationalisation of the variables from the conceptual model. The operationalisation is based on the literature reviewed in the critical literature review. The operationalisation scheme also includes relevant references to the scientific publications or reports reviewed in the critical literature review. This operationalisation is the basis for the interview guides (see attachment).

Local empowerment

Access to resources	Local access to financial capital	Funding, loans, co-financing	Bailey & De Propris, 2011; Schulz et al, 1995
	Local access to social capital	Networks, contacts	Brown et al, 2002; Sugarpa, 1997
	Local access to organizational capital	Administration, procedures	Sugarpa, 1997
Social capacity	Locals are able to pressure the EU, governments and elite actors		Clarke, 1998; Sugarpa, 1997
	Locals are able to criticize/discuss policy and regulations		Cisar, 2012
Autonomy	There is financial decentralization on local level		Ferry & McMaster, 2005
	Local involvement in policy design and implementation		ENRD, 2017
	Locals are taken serious		Belligiano & Salento, 2017
	Locals have space to take responsibility in solving problems & own solutions		Ferry &McMaster, 2005; Brown et al, 2002

Networks

Institutional and procedural frameworks		Johansson & Svensson, 200; Börzel, 1997; Bache, 1999
Small community based groups	Distribution of local actors	Volk, 2014
	Presence of community involvement	Cisar, 2012
Cooperation	Ability of cooperation among actors on local level	Schulz et al, 1995
Meetings, classes, Exchange of capital		Marquardt et al, 2012

Exogenous forces — Ferry & McMaster, 2007

Resource dependency	Lack of financial power on local level	Fagan & Zech, 2005; Beyers & Karremans, 2007
	Locals prioritize interests/agendas donors	Cisar, 2012
	Funds used for electoral purposes	Global Taskforce, 2016
	Less criticism regarding donors	Brown et al, 2002
Regulations and requirements	Criteria and rules for local funding and development	Fagan & Zech, 2005
	Bureaucracy local funding and development	Grosse, 2003

Preconditions

        Experience of local actors   Tarkowski, 2003; Pechrová, 2014; Benz & Eberlein, 1999

        Knowledge of local actors   Pelcl et al, 2008

        Existing financial and institutional resources on local level   Tarkowski, 2003; Bailey & De Propris, 2011; Sodomka, 2003

Powerrelations   Pechrova, 2014; Pelcl et al, 2008; Maharaja, 2007; Volk, 2014; Kovach & Kucerová, 2006, ESPON, 2005

Role of local actors in networks and development

Relationships between local actors in policy design and implementation

Relationships between local actors in taking responsibility

Local actors taken serious

Criticism/discussion possible among local actors

Cooperation among local actors

Inclusion form local actors in networks and development

Representation   Belliggiano & Salento, 2017

Participation of marginalized groups in local development   Brown et al, 2002; ESPON, 2005

Recruitment and selection   Brown et al, 2002

Direct interests of local community taken serious   Ferry & McMaster, 2005

Direct contact between local actors possible   Patel et al, 2007; Wilson, 2013

6.   Research design

Taking the research questions, topic and approaches into consideration it seems that qualitative methods are the best way to succeed in a reliable and valid research.

It is the objective to answer the research question: How does LEADER affect the local empower me Dutch local development? The aim of the thesis is *not* to find empirical evidence on the *existence* of a relation between LEADR and the empowerment of the local community or to *quantify* this relation somehow. This thesis has the aim to *understand* the *role* of LEADER in the empowerment of the local community in Dutch local development. To receive an understanding a qualitative research is needed to first reveal the relation between LEADER and local development, identifying key concepts and their relations in local empowerment and applying this to the Dutch context. So there is no use for quantitative data as the relation between LEADER and local empowerment already proves to exist, but how this relation exactly works can be discovered only by using qualitative data.

The critical literature review showed the relation between LEADER and local empowerment contains a number of social-economic factors. This information is hardly quantifiable. Qualitative methods is than of the utmost use as it exactly unravels how a phenomenon or relation works and allows to find and identify the between variables (Marhall & Rossman, 1995). We want to go beyond quantitative methods as we want to find causes instead of correlations and understand how the complex system works.

When doing qualitative research a big variety in qualitative research methods is available for use. Again we should determine which of them serves the reliability and validity of this thesis best in order to provide a solid research. When taking the topic, its research context and the research questions into account two qualitative methods immediately come up as very useful, namely interviews and desk research. As mentioned previously the research topic is of great complexity and contains variables forcing us to do thorough research. Interviews help us to understand the nature, strengths and interactions of variables. Interviews are of great value as they allow to collect data in a very elaborate and thorough way. Interviews can provide valuable insights by having the opportunity to make progress while collecting data (Kvale, 1994). The complexity of the research topic asks for an iterative process, were new knowledge leads to more knowledge and one conclusion forms a gateway to further information or aspects.

Speaking to involved actors is of crucial importance to this research as they contain key information regarding the networks, recruitment and cooperation processes important for local empowerment. We must explore their views, experiences, beliefs and motivations. A semi-structured interview is very suitable for this kind of data collection. Being structured it can provide answers, but being more open than fully structured interviews it can also provide new insights or gateways in order to find unknown variables (Louise Barriball, 1994). Using semi-structured interviews in this thesis is therefore of great use as it is exactly what we need to do, to discover the effect of variables on the relation between LEADER and local empowerment.

For a reliable research a certain amount of interviews is needed. For this research we will conduct about 9 interviews, mostly with Local Action Group coordinators, but also one with a participant and 1 with a national policymaker. Choosing mainly coordinators of Local Action Groups as the main group

of respondents is a smart choice. Being a coordinator they have up-to-date knowledge about LEADER and its workings. Because they work at Local Action Groups they are close to the local community. This is useful to obtain insights in the effects of LEADER on local level and local empowerment. But these coordinators are also close to the actors as the national, regional and local government which makes them knowledgeable enough about formal regulation and policy concerning LEADER and European funds. Their tasks involve e.g. applying for funding and recruiting participants from the local community. This makes coordinators of Local Action Group extremely suitable to interview, because of their great knowledge and ability to put things in a perspective in LEADER.

Interviews alone are not nearly enough to come to a decent amount of data. The time set for data collection for this research is limited and the topic is of great complexity. Therefore the time and opportunities for interviews should be used very effective by really diving into the dept and trying to unravel complex matters. In that case desk research is a useful additional qualitative research method. It provides in a solid foundation of general knowledge to be fully equipped to address the more complex matters in the interviews. Desk research also helps to save interview time by researching topics that can also be found in a report or document. Additionally, desk research helps to get confirmation on new information. Desk research will contain primarily policy reports from the European Union, national governments and local actors. Scientific papers can serve as a theoretical framework during the research. Interviews and desk research also help us to check data collected with another research method or to raise new critical questions (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 1995). Desk research for this thesis will mainly consist of policy documents issued by the European Union, like guidebooks, manuals and reports about Local Action Groups and LEADER. A fair amount of papers is also necessary to understand the theory behind the neo-indigenous approach, empowerment and local development. Documents produced by Local Action Groups themselves will prove to be valuable in determining key elements for Local Action Group dynamics.

Data analysis will be done mainly by coding. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions then will be coded manually. The resulting code book will be analysed in order to present meaningful results and eventually answer the main and sub questions.

7.   Results

This chapter contains the results of a qualitative research conducted among eight randomly selected Local Action Groups in The Netherlands in the form of semi-structured interviews (see attachments for the interview guides). The results contain the experiences of coordinators of eight Local Action Groups, a participant and a policy maker active in an national LEADER network. The results are categorised in the same order as the sub questions, but start with some general information about LEADER and Local Action Groups in the Dutch context. It is important to note that these results are the perspectives and ideas of respondents in Local Action Groups. The results therefore represent the experiences and understandings of Local Action Groups towards LEADER and national/regional governments.

The results are deducted from the answers of the respondents by coding transcripts of the interviews (see attachments). The coding is done manually due to the reasonable information density in the interviews and the limited amount of variables in this study. Manual coding was also preferred by the author, as it gave him more control and better oversight during coding than using specific coding software.

I.   LEADER and Local Action Groups in The Netherlands

Although The Netherlands is one of the smaller countries in Europe it is an interesting example for this study. The Netherlands joined the European Union in 1952 (actually its predecessor, The European Coal and Steel Community) making it one of the first members. The Netherlands participate in the LEADER programme since the beginning. Anno 2019 the country contains 20 LEADER areas, mostly located in regions where rural liveability is under pressure. Either because there is emigration due to economic downfall or because the rural liveability is threaded by urban expansion and overpopulation.

Every LEADER area has its own Local Action Group (LAG) and Local Development Strategy (LDS). And every Local Action Group has a board with members with a certain expertise. Locals can submit a project plan at the Local Action Group. When the project turns out to be compatible with the themes from the Local Development Strategy the board will rate the projects with points. The projects with the most points are granted funding and can be carried out. Locals become than participants. A list of all the Local Action Groups in Holland is added as an attachment to this thesis. The Local Action Group codes in the attachment correspond with numbers in the map below.

(Netwerk Platteland, 2010)

Since 2007 LEADER is categorised under the national Plattelands Ontwikkelings Programma (POP), this is the Dutch Rural Development Programme (RDP). The POP focusses on the Dutch rural development in general and contains five themes, LEADER being one of them. Because LEADER is part of the POP the national government is responsible for it. The national bureau in charge of the assessment of the projects, granting funding and monitoring the outcomes of LEADER is the Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland (RVO), this bureau is responsible for carrying out all national policy regarding entrepreneurship in The Netherlands. Because LEADER is categorised under the POP all projects must meet the requirements set by the RVO. Although these requirements are based on European regulations, they have been adapted to meet also Dutch national standards. For example the requirements for the project administration from local projects from LEADER are the same for multi-million projects performed by national organisations or the Dutch state itself.

Besides the national government also the Dutch regional and local governments take part in LEADER. Regional governments can adopt certain responsibilities from the national government, for example the monitoring of the project administration from local participants at Local Action Groups. Regional and local governments are also involved in co-financing the local projects. In the Netherlands the agreement is that regional or local governments pay up to 25% of the project costs, the local participant pays 50% and 25% is paid by the European Union/LEADER. Respondents made me clear that LEADER is no funding programme, it is more like a method. A method to take control of your own local development. The funding is a meant to execute a strategy, a tool to reach local development.

Because LEADER is more a method than a funding programme there is a great deal of freedom for Local Action Groups in the way they conduct their activities. It is actually part of the method that Local Action Groups and local development are different from each other in every LEADER area. Of course there are guidelines issued by the European Union regarding certain procedures in Local Action Groups, but LEADER intentionally leaves Local Action Groups a great deal of freedom. The belief is that Local Action Groups can serve local needs best if they have the space to adapt to the different rural challenges in every LEADER area. This freedom is also inherent to the bottom-up approach of LEADER. Local Action Groups can for example determine which themes of LEADER they want to focus on, and how they recruit for participants. This way the European Union tents to optimize the utility of LEADER in every local situation in every member state. It underlines the bottom-up approach and tents to meet local needs best.

II. Power relations in Dutch Local Action Groups

Local Action Groups also have a large freedom in the way they compile their board. A Local Action Group consists of several board members, usually consisting of some public people from the local government and the rest are private actors with big networks and an area of expertise. Their expertise concerns the topics in the Local Development Strategy and assures that the board is competent enough to rate and evaluate possible projects submitted by locals. Local Action Groups are free to determine the balance between public and private actors in the board. Some Local Action Groups choose to have no public actors in the board, although most Local Action Groups choose about 4 public members and then around 6 private members. Private members of the board of the Local Action Group are selected on the basis of their network and expertise on the topics chosen in the Local Development Strategy. They must understand the projects and be able to properly evaluate applications from locals. Their task is to evaluate how the applications meet the Local Development Strategy. Applications which meet best the Local Development Strategy will be rated with the most points by the board. These projects prove to meet best local needs. These knowledgeable board members serve an important role in taking locals and their ideas serious. Locals can rely on these expert board members as their large networks assure that Local Action Group members won't speak on their own behalf or experience, but are willing to serve the interests of the local community. However, their precise function is not important for the Local Action Group, some of them are psychologists, entrepreneurs, farmers or active volunteers. Private board member are chosen by their strong connection with the local community. Experience with LEADER is neither a requirement. Some of the Local Action Group members participate in LEADER for about 12/10 years, others only for a couple of years.

The only requirement from the European Union is that the public members do not exceed 50% of the board in numbers. According to respondents the philosophy behind this rule is to prevent too much power to local government at the expense of locals. As mentioned some Local Action Groups have a board without public members, while others have around 4 public members. I interviewed several Local Action Groups with no public members in their board and one with 4 public members in their board. According to the respondents Local Action Groups with public actors tent to focus more on the results and are more formal during meetings, but this had no negative influence on the inclusion of the private board members in the policy design and implementation of local development. This serves local authority and legitimacy well. The ambient is perceived equally as transparent in Local Action Groups with and without public members, which serves the autonomy of the local community. In the

Local Action Group with four public members in the board private members still felt taken very seriously and there was room to be critical and to discuss policy openly. This has a positive effect on the social capacity of the local community. Private members and locals did not feel the public actors having a secret agenda or secret election purposes. According to the respondents the local government is mostly involved in local development and in Local Action Groups by co-financing, thinking along and in some ways in the implementation. The local government is experienced as closer and far more reasonable by the respondents than the regional and national government. Probably because the local government has not only a formal, but also an important informal role in local development. The formal role is set in the co-financing the local projects. It varies greatly among the different LEADER areas how much the local government co finances, but usually up to 25% of the total project costs. Because the inclusion of private members in Local Action Groups is good, funding is not solely in control of the local government but also in hands of representatives of the local community. This way Local Action Groups and LEADER provide in financial capital for the local community.

The informal role of the local government is set in the many networks the local government brings in into the Local Action Groups. These networks and contacts in the local communities are of crucial importance for the success of Local Action Groups and their projects by providing the local community with social capital. Respondents explain private members feel free to take advantage of these networks from the public members and these networks are used to facilitate local development based on the projects from locals. Respondents conclude that without the large networks from public and also private members it would be significantly harder or even impossible to realize most projects from locals. The good inclusion of private members in Local Action Groups and the large networks result in an transparent and cooperative atmosphere that facilitate locals to take responsibility, to discuss and to be taken serious by accomplishing their local projects.

The freedom towards Local Action Groups does also extend to the organizational structure. One Local Action Group for example choose to split up the area an make two subgroups due to the big size of their area. The subgroups monitor the projects and the Local Action Group focusses more on the board issues, like approval of new projects. In this way projects can take better advantage of the resources and energy of the Local Action Group. The Local Action Group is happy with this choice as it is much easier now to keep track and to address local needs. This freedom in organizational structure equips the local community with organizational capital, as locals have more chance to successfully accomplish their projects by changing the organizational structure for the good of local development.

Locals experience the large amount of freedom in setting up a Local Action Group, Local Development Strategy and board as very comforting. The mix of actors represented in the board of Local Action Groups results in a very dynamic and diverse network of local and lesser local people. Cooperation among the different actors is described by respondents as pleasant and straightforward. Locals feel taken serious by an involved board and make good use of the large networks provided in the Local Action Group. Locals do not perceive a project class as described by Pechrova (2014) and Konach & Kucerová (2006). Local Action Group coordinators consider themselves in service of locals and are willing to invest in a personal relationship with locals, to submerge themselves in local situations and to coach locals through the process of appliance and administration of projects. Although it differs from Local Action Group to Local Action Group, most Local Action Groups include locals since the very beginning in the process of local development. For example by organizing meetings where locals can help develop a Local development Strategy. Locals experience the social equality in cooperation and

relationships in Local Action Groups as essential to enforce their local voice and to be in charge of their own environment.

LEADER also stimulates the cooperation among locals. A nice example are the excursions abroad. According to the European Union an important task of Local Action Groups is to arrange excursions abroad. In this way participants learn from other projects and social cohesion is achieved. However, not many Local Action Groups in The Netherland seem to have this cross border excursions as a high priority. Most Dutch Local Action Groups keep their excursions on national level. They visit other (finished) projects for example. Only one Local Action Group among the interviewed visited an actual project abroad. The outcome was very positive in terms of transfer of knowledge and networks.

III.   The representation of the Dutch local community in Local Action Groups

The importance of representation of the local community in LEADER and Local Action Groups is underpinned by all respondents during the interviews. The benefits of LEADER above other Dutch state funded subsidy programmes is that LEADER stands closer to the locals, instead of in a faraway government. A coordinator explained that a while back their LEADER area was using both LEADER and a programme from the regional government. After a while it appeared that LEADER projects scored way better than projects under the provincial programme, simply because LEADER is bottom up. LEADER projects are also way more efficient as there was much more accomplished by volunteers with less money and it suited better the local needs. And really important, there was much more ownership. Ownership is crucial for local development. According to one coordinator locals have to feel ownership in order to believe in something and therefore it is a serious issue to arrange meetings in the very beginning to create ownership among these locals.

Coordinators expressed the belief that true representation of the local community in Local Action Groups will result in more of this ownership and in local empowerment. If a representative group of locals participates in Local Action Groups the local community is able to access financial and social capital by using funding and networks provided in Local Action Groups. Funding, networks and projects done by locals help the local community to take control over its own environment and boost autonomy in its local development. The strong and large networks provided by Local Action Groups help locals to build social capacity to stand strong in their local development against elite actors as companies and governments. Coordinators responded therefore Local Action Groups spend time and effort to build up a pool of participants that really represent the local community. The recruitment of local participants must achieve an most accurate representation of locals as possible. Among the interviewed every local group recruits in a very different way. Some groups tent contact the local community directly by advertising in local newspapers. Others Local Action Groups have a more indirect approach and use networks from key figures at the government, key companies or key figures in the local community as a pastor. In some areas LEADER is already well known and Local Action Groups don't see the need to actively recruit anymore. Their image and network is so well developed that locals find their way to the Local Action Group. The interviewed coordinators acknowledged that it is impossible to reach every single member of a local community and that the local participants in a Local Action Group are not a perfect representation of the local community. A Local Action Group simply has not enough financial and human resources to target every single person in a local community. Targeting key figures with a large network has the best results according to the

respondents. Coordinators mention the problem that individuals are socially active on different levels, resulting in some people not being part of any network. This makes those individuals very hard to recruit and represent in Local Action Groups. It tuns out to be especially difficult to recruit marginalized groups of society, as those groups often lack the basic social and organizational resources to be part of a network.

To meet local needs at the fullest and give locals a voice in their local development Local Action Groups have three different ways to represent the local community. The first way concerns local projects. Locals can submit an appliance for their own project. This project must be in agreement with the Local Development Strategy, but locals have a great deal of freedom regarding the content and implementation of their project. Participants are happy with the freedom in their projects. Once their projects got through the board and is granted funding participants have a large degree of freedom in conducting their project. Coordinators explain that by letting locals come up with their own ideas and projects LEADER enforces local empowerment. As locals address local needs in their own way and obtain the necessary financial, social and organizational resources from LEADER to accomplish their projects. Coordinators reason that projects are the most direct way to represent the local community in Local Action Groups and in local development. At first glance these local participants and their projects seem to represent the local community well in Local Action Groups. Some Local Action Groups claim their group is very divers and is open to everyone with an interesting idea for local development. But after some deeper questioning it seems this is not entirely honest. When taking a closer look at the representation of the local community in Local Action Groups by project participants some interesting details emerge.

First of all the age category. Among the participants the vast majority is above 30. Young people are rare. In some Local Action Groups even extremely rare. It also depends on the type of projects. Projects with the focus on liveability tend to be submitted by people above 50, while projects about sustainable energy tend to draw more younger people (but still 30+).

Secondly not everybody with interesting projects has the same chance to participate. Of course projects must be compatible with the themes in de Local Development Strategy. But further questioning revealed some more interesting criteria. Apparently people are not only recruited by their value to local development, but also by their administration skills, at least in some Local Action Groups, due to the high bureaucratic pressure. Some coordinators admit they discourage people to submit a project if they think the person in question is uncappable of running a proper project administration. But a lot of interested people with good ideas for local development projects drop out themselves the moment they get to know the high administrative demands and long waiting times for approval and subsidies. Respondents argue that people should drop out because of that their ideas do not fit in the Local Development Strategy. However, now people with promising ideas drop out because of the complex regulations and difficult financial position. In this way LEADER works against local development conclude some respondents.

Thirdly a majority of the participants have roughly the same background. They have some previous experience with LEADER, they are part of a big local network or they are some sort of entrepreneur in their daily life. Examples of participants are farmers, entrepreneurs, members of the Local Action Groupe council or active members in a rural partnership. It seems people with certain skills are more motivated to submit a project. According to a participant experience is of the utmost importance when doing a project with LEADER. Not only are the regulations regarding the project administration very

complex, but you must be creative in collecting you financial resources as the waiting time for receiving the actual funding is up to half a year. A participant went almost that far by comparing the access to funding to the lottery.

The last point of interest deals with negative popularity. Being an European programme, LEADER is not always popular in the local community. The prejudices against LEADER and all European programmes result in the situation that some people need to be convinced to participate in a Local Action Group.

Antoher way the local community is represented in Local Action Groups is by the board. Every Local Action Group has a board consisting of public members from the local government and private members. The board evaluates if the submitted projects meet the Local Development Strategy and appoints the most promising projects to be granted with funding. The Local Action Groups have the freedom to choose their own board members, as long as not more than 50% are public actors. Some Local Action Groups choose for no public actors in their board at all, some choose for several public actors like from the local government in their board. So there is a high degree of autonomy in compiling the Local Action Group board.

The mix of public and private boars members influence the representation of the local community in the board according to respondents. Private board members are people with large networks and strong connections with certain groups of the local community. Private board members could be a chairman from the local farmers' association or a member of the local environmental group. These private board members represent these groups from the local community. To ensure sufficient local representation at least 50% of the board of a Local Action Group must consist of private members. Respondents explain that the more private members in a board, the better the representation of the local community is in a Local Action Group. Because the board supervises projects and is in charge with assigning funding to these projects more private members in the board means more autonomy and control of the local community over resources.

However, coordinators argue that the representation of the local community by private board members is weaker than by the project participation. Private board members are partially selected by their large networks, a requirement that is not needed to participate with a project. Private members also represent only a certain group in the local community, mostly groups with strong networks. Because marginalized groups in particular lack the social networks, they risk to be underrepresented in the board of a Local Action Group. Marginalized groups being excluded from representation in a Local Action Group could lead to exclusion from financial, social and organizational resources and thus to less local empowerment. According to coordinators marginalized groups have more change to be represented by local project participants with small networks and direct links to the community.

The third way Local Action Groups represent the local community is by including locals in the pre-design and evaluation of local development. Originally LEADER meant to involve local people from the very beginning into their own local development by involving them in the Local Development Strategy (LDS). The Local Development Strategy is set up on the forehand to map the local needs. Project appliances by locals are required to meet this Local Development Strategy, this is tested by the board members of the Local Action Group. However in the Netherlands the practice evolved to first finish a Local Development Strategy and afterwards to form the Local Action Group. This does not apply to all LEADER areas in The Netherlands, but certainly to some of them. The problem with his practice is that there is a lack of ownership among local actors in regards to the local development strategy, regardless

if the topics in the Local Development Strategy meets the local needs. If locals are not involved in drafting the Local Development Strategy they are unable to take responsibility over their own environment a respondent claims. Furthermore, when locals are not involved in developing the Local Development Strategy they miss the social capacity to pressure elite actors for their own local needs and their local development is handed down to institutions like governments. There is also a lack of cooperation between public actors and locals.

But this certainly does not apply to all groups. When setting up the local development strategy (LDS) some Local Action Groups initiated meetings, so called LEADER cafés, with locals and used their input to accomplish several concept versions of the Local Development Strategy. Locals could then choose between these different concepts. Later on some local groups invite all interested locals for an evaluation on the projects and process. The Local Action Groups themselves use all different methods for evaluation and monitoring. Some Local Action Groups arrange periodically meetings with all participants to evaluate the process and receive feedback. Others connect a Local Action Group member to each project to keep in touch with the projects. In doing so coordinators are convinced that Local Action Groups create more awareness, more projects with access to financial and social resources and in doing so keep the program alive.

Local Action Groups that have involved the local community in the process from the early beginning on have proven to be the most successful in terms of future survival and local development they claim. One of these groups has members that feel so associated with their local development and the LEADER programme that they help anybody with a promising project, weather it meets the official LEADER criteria or not. If not then this Local Action Group helps projects in finding other funding or with general advice. Even if European funding would stop, the group could proceed purely based on their voluntary efforts and feeling of ownership. According to respondents a good representation of the local community in Local Action Groups is crucial for the inclusion of locals in their local development, to give locals a voice against elite groups and give responsibility to the local community.

IV. The effect of regulations on the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment

A great benefit of LEADER is the focus on the rural liveability and social cohesion, most Dutch national programmes do not do that. National programmes tend to focus much more on the innovation of companies. LEADER has a softer approach and sees local development not purely from an economic viewpoint. But respondents also coined some serious negative remarks about LEADER. On the level of the Local Action Group the transparency of LEADER is perceived as good. All people interested in doing a project know on the forehand what criteria they have to meet. But once they set up a project plan and submit this to the Dutch national and regional government for the final approval LEADER for funding LEADER becomes very complex. According to all respondents the bureaucracy and administration in LEADER are way too complex and time consuming.

The complexity in LEADER origins in different levels of government which are involved in different ways. This is a real problem because LEADER involves also the regional and local government paying a cut of the total project costs (besides the European Union and the project participant), so participants have to justify their project at different actors with different standards in order to receive and maintain funding. This results in different interpretations of regulations, regional differences in practices and different financial sources for participants in LEADER.

The first level respondents need to deal with is the European Union. Regulations surrounding the appliance for European funding are notorious for their complexity and bureaucracy state respondents. Although the European Union is perceived as a very distant actor to Local Action Groups, most respondents see Europe as one of the problematic actors. They conclude that a great deal of the complex funding rules are partially issued by the European Union. Respondents feel wronged by the European Union as the amount of European funding does not outweigh the bureaucratic struggles for small Leader projects they think. In The Netherlands only about 25% of a project is financed with European money, in contrast to other countries where European funding can pile up to 80% of the total project costs. Dutch Local Action Groups are therefore unhappy that they have to meet the same requirements as the LEADER projects in other countries, while receiving substantially less European funding. Surprisingly all the interviewed Local Action Groups that complain about the bureaucracy in the LEADER programme, nevertheless accept it knowing it is a standard complication that comes with all European programmes and subsidies. Coordinators of Dutch Local Action Groups take the complex European issued rules in LEADER as part of the job, something you cannot change or alter. Coordinators state navigating through complex legislative material is inherent to European funding and programmes. Participants in Local Action Groups do experience some non-transparency by European rules in LEADER, but coordinators fulfil their role in coaching participants through relevant regulations in order to accomplish their projects successfully. Thus although European regulations are complex and demanding, they do not endanger the initiation and progress of projects from locals at Local Action Groups.

The second level of involved governments consists of the Dutch national government. The national government appointed a special bureau for the supervision of LEADER projects, Local Action Groups and the European funding. This bureau is called the Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland (RVO) and is in charge of stimulating sustainable entrepreneurship on all levels on Dutch territory. One way for the RVO to stimulate entrepreneurship id by issuing funding to projects on Dutch territory. This also includes projects for rural development in The Netherlands. Especially for rural development the Dutch government developed the Plattelands Ontwikkelings Programma (POP) or Rural Development Programme. The RVO also has the responsibility over this Rural Development Programme. The Dutch national government choose to incorporate LEADER in this Rural Development Programme, making the RVO also responsible for LEADER and in charge of the accessory European funding. Local Action Groups are therefore obliged to submit all projects to the RVO for final approval. Also the project administration of every project must be checked and approved by the RVO. The RVO is the highest authority on LEADER on Dutch national level and only responds to the Dutch government and the European Union.

According to the respondents the regulations of the European Union regarding the administration of local projects at Local Action Groups leave some room for national interpretation and implementation. This way every European Union member state can adapt LEADER better to the national climate to optimize the use of funding for local development. Thus the European regulations concerning LEADER are interpreted in a specific way by the RVO. According to respondents the interpretation of the RVO leads to an even more complex and time consuming bureaucracy and administration in LEADER. Respondents turned to be very negative about the RVO, addressing it as a problematic bureau. According to the respondents the RVO is responsible for the high administrative pressure in LEADER. The RVO also struggles with organisational problems, has no clue what is going on on local level and

abruptly cuts the funding on projects when they spotted a mistake in the project administration or in an invoice.

Coordinators acknowledge one of the main causes lies in the great lack of transparency. Not only is it hard for Local Action Groups and their participants to understand the regulations around the project administration and admission of projects issued by the RVO, but it also hard for the RVO to fully understand what is going on local level. Monitoring results from Local Action Groups is for example hard for the RVO, simply because every Local Action Group uses different indicators. LEADER is originally meant to control itself. The idea was that participants won't commit to fraud because of the social control in their local community. This idea did not work in practice in several European countries, bringing up fraud as a real threat to LEADER. The European Union responded in tighten their fines and sanctions. In fear of these sanctions The Netherlands choose to hand over the responsibility of LEADER to a national bureau as the RVO and introduced a 0% flaw policy. Because the RVO operates on a large distance from the local projects a vast amount of project data is necessary to ensure control. This results in highly complex and time consuming regulations for the Dutch LEADER programme. To grant funding and to preserve the 0% flaw policy the RVO needs to now in detail what is happening at local projects, this inevitably results in a vast quantity of paperwork and official forms. Participants have to administrate for example even the smallest things, like parking tickets in specific accounting systems requested by the RVO. The monitoring is so tight at the moment that sometimes projects are fined because of a wrong receipt about a simple waterpipe or other small material. All this controlling by the RVO results in long waiting times before participants get their projects approved and eventually paid with European funding. Waiting around 6 months to receive a funding is no exception. In the meanwhile participants have to finance the project partially from their own money or loans.

The RVO applies the 0% flaw policy to all projects in the Rural Development Programme. As LEADER is incorporated under the Dutch Rural Development Programme (POP), therefore all projects regardless their seize or amount of funding must comply to the same regulations. Resulting in small local projects filling in the same amount of paperwork as regional projects counting millions of euros. Respondents argue that all the money wasted with this kind of bureaucracy could have better been spend to local development and local projects. Indeed, as handling the administration and monitoring of a project at the RVO costs a lot of money, amounts of 10.000 euros per project are no exception. Respondents argue that this money could also have been used for local development by financing local projects.

Nowadays the contact between the Local Action Groups and the RVO is slightly better tell respondents, but the Local Action Groups accuse the RVO of randomly rejecting projects without any arguments in the past. Although Local Action Groups acknowledge this is no longer the case, it is still very complicated to submit a project and manage the project administration properly they state. One coordinator described the RVO as a black box, sometimes the RVO would grant funding, sometimes the RVO would reject the project. This was so heavy for the first three years that she thought about quitting her job as a coordinator for the Local Action Group. According to the Local Action Groups the problems are far from solved at the RVO. The RVO struggles with organizational issues, has a lack of capacity and does not has up-to-date knowledge. Worse of all they interpret the European regulations in an inconsistent way. This makes it hard for Local Action Groups to determine the chance of success when submitting a project or project administration.

The second level of involved governments consists of the regional government. The position of the regional government within the LEADER programme is clear regarding its financial role. The regional

government passes the funding from the RVO on to the Local Action Groups. Local Action Groups(and mostly the participants) in return have to justify their spending also to the regional government by keeping track of a certain project administration. Their projects must be thoroughly documented. According to the respondents the administration that comes with the projects is not only highly time consuming, but also very error prone and complex.

Among respondents the role of the regional government in the administration and regulations is debatable and very differently perceived. The regional government can choose to delegate the whole administration to the Dutch national government (the RVO) or to take care of at least a part of the administration themselves. Interesting is that in both cases the regulations regarding the project administration are perceived by the participants as equally as complex and heavy. Respondents working under a regional government that took care of a part of the administration themselves complained about the heavy regulations, these regulations are interpreted even harsher than by the RVO and thus making it more complex and time consuming for participants to manage a proper project administration. Respondents working under regional governments that outsourced all the administration to the national government also complained about the complexity of the regulations. They also pointed out that a substantial part of the funding was payed to the national government to carry out the full administration, money that could have been used for local projects. So respondents are negative about the role of the regional government in LEADER.

This high bureaucracy and tight rules with zero flaw tolerance resulted in additional tasks of Local Action Groups which are not set by the European Union at all. As mentioned before Local Action Groups have the task to help participants to find their way in the complex regulations from the European Union and the RVO. But Local Action Groups go even further and assist participants in managing a correct project administration. Coordinators believe this is an unintended, but crucial task of the Local Action Group. Otherwise many good projects will fail approval or lack financial capital over time. One coordinator states that she is like trainer for participants in how to fill in forms and to explain the tot them the different interpretations used by the different governments. She is also afraid that something goes wrong in the project administration and therefore controls all the administrations of all participants due to the high penalties from the RVO. She argues that all this time and effort could also have been spent on local development instead. A coordinator came up with the plan to ask the local government to take over the appliance of a project from local participants. However, after the local government applied itself for one of its own projects and experienced the high complexity of their appliance, it simply refused to take over from locals. It is meaningful that even a local government with expertise and networks has difficulties with the regulations concerning the project administration in LEADER.

At the moment some Local Action Groups see themselves obliged to take measures in order to prevent the projects already running from being cut down from subsidies by flaws in their project administration. Some Local Action Groups reserved money to pay an accountant for the first 8 hours of a project, others advise participants to take an accountant themselves. In Local Action Groups coordinators try to help participants with the project administration as much as possible, but this is only a temporary solution. Another Local Action Group has set his own minimal requirements for a project, for example projects only above a certain budget are approved by this Local Action Group. Simply because otherwise the administrative efforts don't pay off compared to the project.

Even when a project is approved by the RVO and funding is granted it can take a while before participants actually receive the funding. Some Local Action Groups arranged that the co-financing from the local government starts from the early beginning. This is really helpful for participants as usually the have to wait for European funding and pay the project costs first themselves. This is not possible for every participant, early funding from the local government is therefore important to focus on the best projects for local development.

The high bureaucracy leads to more problems in Local Action Groups. The time consuming administration of projects results in some local groups in a lack of time to arrange an excursion abroad to another Local Action Group, although this is an important feature of LEADER. To have a cross border exchange of knowledge and build networks becomes too time consuming and expensive for most Local Action Groups.

The bureaucratic and administrative pressure on Local Action Groups and their local participants has led to a critical awareness in the direction of LEADER. Local Action Groups question themselves if European funding is the right way to accomplish local development. They believe that using only regional and local funding is much easier and therefore serves better the local development. Due to les demanding administrative regulations the chance local projects are funded is higher and locals get selected based on their projects for local development rather than their administrative capacities. Although the Dutch Local Action Groups combined their issues and feedback in a position paper they do not believe the bureaucratic pressure will diminish in the upcoming period. They conclude that European funding in LEADER will never become flexible. Lots of the interviewed Local Action Groups have the idea to stop with European funding and continue with the more easy accessible regional subsidies while keeping the LEADER method and Local Action Group structure in use. This is possible they say. LEADER can live on without European funding, as the LEADER method is much more than providing subsidies. The LEADER method is actually not even bound to local development they say, but is applicable on everything, it has nothing to do with the European Union and local development exclusively.

V.   The role of resource dependency in the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment

Local Action Groups receive an substantial amount of funding from the European Union to accomplish projects concerning local needs and to establish networks for local development. According to the critical literature review external funding of local development, as in the case of LEADER, could lead to resource dependency. A situation wherein Local Action Groups could feel obligated or even forced to comply to the agendas of their donors, the European Union or RVO. When discussing this topic with the coordinators of the Local Action Groups they first brought up the huge amount of freedom Local Action Groups have in spending assigned funding. The problem lies not in the destination of the funding, but in the access of funding. As mentioned previously the strong bureaucracy and demanding administration at mainly the RVO seriously endangers the access to funding by locals. Once funding is granted Local Action Groups and locals can spent the funding as they desire. Respondents assure there are no agendas to be followed but their own and locals are very satisfied with their end results. An interviewed local accomplished a care farm thanks to LEADER and European funding. He was very pleased the way his ideas worked out in the eventual project, as it stayed close to his goals and beliefs

concerning local needs. Thus funding in Local Action Groups does not serve any other purpose than being used for the local community for local projects and setting up networks as the Local Action Groups.

The critical literature also mentioned electoral purposes as a possible risk concerning local funding by LEADER. Public board members could grant locals funding in return for electoral support. In Local Action Groups this is prevented by a board consisting of mostly private members rather than a majority of public members. According to coordinators the power relations in Local Action Groups are in favour of the local community, as private board members are chosen on behalf of their large local network and strong connection to the local community. It seems the theory of Cesar (2012) concerning locals honouring electoral interests form donors in return for funding does not apply to the Dutch context.

Resource dependency could also affect a critical attitude from locals towards their donors, like the European Union and the RVO. Respondents assure this is not the case concerning Dutch locals. Recently Dutch Local Action Groups combined their issues regarding the European Union and RVO in a position paper. Although coordinators do not believe this critique will help diminishing the aforementioned bureaucratic pressure in the upcoming period, it is clear locals are not constrained by European funding in criticising the European Union and the RVO. This proves the ideas of brown et al (2002) wrong concerning the Dutch context.

An important condition for resource dependency is local lack of financial capital. This way donors can make locals dependant on their funding in return for their own interests and agendas. All interviewed Local Action Groups claim there is no lack of financial capital on local level if European funding would be absent. Although most locals struggle with financing their local projects, respondents point out LEADER demands locals to pay half of their own project. Besides, there are other sources for financial capital. Regional and local government can also fund local development and in fact the local government already does. Local governments pay about 25% of the costs for local development. This leaves the European Union funding about 25% of local projects, which is a very small contribution compared to ratio in other European member states (where European funding in LEADR can reach p to 80% of the total funding). According to respondents the contribution of the European Union to local projects is simply too low for resource dependency. Coordinators also admit local projects could also be financed only by the locals and the local government. If the bureaucratic pressure keeps on for the next years and the RVO does not simplify the administration of projects Local Action Groups will dispose from European funding and continue with funding from the local government only they answered. Other Local Action Groups started a cooperation with a development bureau. This enhances the capacities of a Local Action Group as it grows more knowledgeable and with a bigger network. It makes it easier for them to help projects to get funding besides European funding.

Local Action Groups have a big responsibility in local development. They hear first-hand which local needs there are in the rural community and have both the capacity and freedom to act on it. At the same time the Local Action Groups have the network to contact regional and local governments. Local Action Groups function therefore as a catalysator between the needful local community and the financial capital found at donors as the European Union and governments. But many Local Action Groups do not regard funding as important for local development as the European Union implies. According to one of the coordinators funding is only a tool. It has no substantive value. The power of LEADER is the method itself and not the funding. Coordinators tell for example that the role of the Local Action Group is not in the first place to channel European funding to the projects, but to search

for new ideas, to assist projects, to expand knowledge, to help locals to build networks and search for new projects. The respondents are very enthusiastic about the LEADER method. The bottom-up approach works really good and local people have a great deal of freedom in conducting their project. Although LEADER provides in funding, it does much more than granting subsidies. LEADER helps locals with knowledge, networks and advice. And by helping people that way LEADER actually saves money. Coordinators highlight that money can be a tool for local development, but money is not always necessary. By networking and transferring knowledge Local Action Groups already helped many local projects become successful. Some Local Action Groups eventually evolved in something much bigger and grew beyond the expectations of LEADER.

Some groups literately outgrew the need of funding. One of these Local Action Groups, De Kracht van Salland, committed to the task to help everybody with a project that fits in the Local Development Strategy, even if it does not meet the official requirements of LEADER to receive European funding. This Local Action Group assists those projects in finding other funding and providing in the right contacts. The coordinator explained that European funding is just one of many tools and that local development can actually be achieved without any financial means at all. It seems Dutch Local Action Groups do not experience a lack of financial capital and some do not even experience a need for financial capital at all. If so, than there is also no financial dependency on institutions as the European Union or governments.

Still a lot of recent projects are funded partially by European funding, meaning locals have to comply with the regulations and project administration imposed by the RVO and European Union. If locals do not conduct a proper project administration they risk being cut off from European funding and fail their local project. So locals are dependant from European funding in a certain way. This proves there is a small degree of resource dependency visible in Local Action Groups. Not complying to the regulations set by the European Union and the RVO leads to unfinished local projects. Although respondents claim Local Action Groups can help locals to access alternative funding or funding is redundant for local development, the success of most local projects is partially dependent on European funding and the fulfilment of RVO regulations. On the other hand Dutch locals are not receptive for electoral intentions nor secret agendas from public actors. Dutch locals are also perfectly comfortable in openly criticizing and discussing LEADER, the European Union and the RVO. Thus resource dependency in Dutch Local Action Groups concerns only the regulations set by the RVO regarding the project administration. These findings are in accordance with the ideas of Fagan & Zech (2005) and Beyers & Karremans (2007) who believe that a lack of financial capital leads to resource dependency.

VI.   The effect of preconditions in the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment

The tremendous bureaucratic and administrative pressure experienced by Local Action Groups and their participants results in a lot of problems concerning local projects. The chance that the RVO cuts the funding on a project is substantial. The smallest mistake in the project administration could mean the end of financial support or a huge fine from the RVO. And even when participants hand in all the required information on time and manage to maintain a flawless project administration, the waiting times for approval from the RVO and the actual grant of funding are very long, half a year is standard. It is required that participants pay their project in advance. This is problematic as many participants don't have the savings to financially support their project. Some people even took a mortgage on their

house to pay their project. A participant told he was once at a point to give up and leave his project. But having prior experience with LEADER saved him and was a great advantage he explained.

This was a recurring statement form respondents. The administrative rules concerning a local project are so complex and demanding, that a local without any knowledge of bookkeeping or any experience in a project administration surely risks a failed project. Coordinators from Local Action Groups took on the task to coach locals in this complex project administration, otherwise most projects would fail. Due to mistakes in the project administration the RVO would simply not grant funding or even worse, cut running projects off from funding. Leaving locals with all costs to bear. Some locals were forced to take a mortgage on their house to pay off their project after the RVO cancelled funding because of mistakes in the project administration. Some Local Action Groups hire an accountant to assist locals in their project administration to prevent sudden withdrawal from European funding and failed projects. Other Local Action Groups select locals on their administrative skills rather than their potential for addressing local needs. Simply to avoid local projects failing on the forehand or during the long run. This has a negative impact on the representation of the local community in Local Action Groups. Respondents complain that even with the coaching the project administration is still very complex to manage and the zero tolerance policy from the RVO discourages running a LEADER project. Only locals with prior experience in LEADER or administrative knowledge are able to produce successful projects.

It seems experience in LEADER and administrative knowledge determines whether locals will be successful in addressing local needs or not. A local participant that set up a care farm explained how difficult and slow the process of appliance was. Without his prior experience with LEADER is would have been impossible to complete his care farm he stated. His experience helped him to conduct a proper project administration in time. This helped him to apply in time for his project and to access European funding. He told many other interested locals ended up with a denied application because of a reject project plan. Many of them lost interest and disappeared, taking their great ideas with them. The respondent claimed that without his prior experience in LEADER he would never been able to submit a proper project plan and to run a project administration.

Even when locals manage to get their project plan and project administration approved by the RVO, the are confronted with long wating times before the funding is actually granted. Waiting times up to six months are no exception. Coordinators of Local Action Groups warn locals on the forehand about the excessive waiting times. Coordinators state many locals become disappointed and lose interest in doing a LEADER project, as most locals do not have the financial capital to pay complete projects in advance. Locals already need to pay 50% of the project costs themselves. Taking the long waiting times for European funding into account locals need to pay at least 75% of the project costs. This strongly discourages locals with low financial capital (often marginalized groups in the local community) or locals planning projects costing over a million. Problematic situations emerge when projects are cut off from European funding during their implementation, as easy mistakes in the project administration quickly result in a loss of funding. Costs made in advance become entirely at the expense of locals, resulting in serious debts and a failed project. As mentioned before, some locals had to take a mortgage on their house to finance their local project after being cut off from European funding by the RVO. This case is not an exception as many Local Action Groups experience similar problems with their projects. It appears these findings support the ideas of Pechrová (2014), Pelcl et al (2008) and Bailey & De Propris (2002) who claim that prior knowledge and prior experience affects the empowerment of locals in a positive way.

Locals with enough financial capital on the other hand are able to make costs in advance and thus to invest in a LEADER project. Coordinators state that successful local projects often depend on the prior experience, administrative knowledge and financial capital of locals. Although this highly differs between Local Action Groups. Some Local Action Groups outgrew the need of European funding and experience much less financial problems. De Kracht van Salland for example build such a large network over time that projects are financed by other sources or are accomplished entirely by networks of volunteers. Of course this network was build during the LEADER period and partially with European funding. But it teaches that preconditions like experience, knowledge and financial capital of locals affect local empowerment more in young Local Action Groups then in older Local Action Groups. Older Local Action Groups have access to a larger and more evolved network than younger Local Action Groups. This helps older Local Action Groups to access alternative financial capital and knowledge to help locals in accomplishing a successful project. As younger Local Action groups miss these alternative resources they depend much more on European funding and resources, resulting in preconditions being much more dominant on the success of local projects.

8.   Conclusion

This chapter will answer the mean question: *How does LEADER affect the local empowerment in Dutch local development?".* To do so in a consistent and clear way the chapter is divided in several paragraphs. The chapter starts with the conclusions concerning the place of LEADER in the Dutch context, followed by the conclusions on the sub questions. The chapter will close with answering the main question.

Using multi-level governance the European Union produces advanced forms of (transboundary) cooperation and policy with significant territorial impact. One of these advanced forms of policy is the Common Agricultural Policy. The CAP provides a legislative and financial framework for agricultural and rural development. The rural development policy is given form by Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) which are designed by national governments of the member states. To assure the multi-governance in European rural development, the RDPs are embedded in a certain method, LEADER. This method assures that the policy design, policy context and the impacts and outcomes of the RDPs serve the multi-functional local needs.

The LEADER method is established in the early 90s. The aim of the programme is "to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas." (ENRD, 2017). In order to reach the aim of the programme about 2600 Local Action Groups are formed (LAGs). Each group covers one or more projects in a certain local area. The Local Action Groups consist primarily of local actors as inhabitants, the local governments, local companies, local NGOs and other stakeholders. Local Action Groups are funded by the European Union using the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The European funding co-finances the projects done by locals in the Local Action Groups. European funding also makes the Local Action Groups possible. These networks are of great importance as they improve the ability of local communities to steer for local development and obtain empowerment.

In European evaluation reports the effects of LEADER on local development are always approached from an economic and territorial viewpoint. This results in incomplete evaluations as LEADER tents to achieve more than economic output, namely to give local communities control over their own local development. Scientific research did focus on the social outcomes of LEADER but only in an Eastern European context and this resulted in inconclusive findings. This thesis addressed how LEADER affects local empowerment in local development and is rooted in a Dutch context.

The Netherlands has an extensive history of cooperation with the European Union and is familiar with LEADER from the very beginning. This means LEADER has been active in The Netherlands for almost 30 years. The Netherlands participate in the LEADER programme since the beginning. Anno 2020 the country contains 20 LEADER areas, mostly located in regions where rural liveability is under pressure. Either because there is emigration due to economic downfall or because the rural liveability is threaded by urban expansion and overpopulation. Every LEADER area has its own Local Action Group and Local Development Strategy. And very Local Action group has a board with members with a certain expertise. Locals can submit a project plan at the Local Action Group. When the project seems to be compatible with the themes from the Local Development Strategy the board will rate the projects with points. The projects with the most points are granted funding and can be carried out.

Since 2007 LEADER is categorised under the national Plattelands Ontwikkelings Programma (POP), this is the Dutch Rural Development Programme (RDP). The POP focusses on the Dutch rural development in general and contains five themes, LEADER being one of them. Because LEADER is part of the POP the national government is responsible for it. The national bureau in charge of the assessment of the projects, granting funding and monitoring the outcomes of LEADER is the Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland (RVO), this bureau is responsible for carrying out all national policy regarding entrepreneurship in The Netherlands. Because LEADER is categorised under POP all projects must meet the requirements set by the RVO. These requirements are based on European regulations, but altered to meet also national standards.

Besides the national government also the Dutch regional and local government take part in LEADER. Regional governments can take over certain responsibilities from the national government, for example the monitoring of the project administration from local participants at Local Action Groups. Local governments are involved in co-financing the local projects. In the Netherlands the agreement is that local governments pay up to 25% of the project costs, the local participants pay 50% and 25% is paid by the European funding.

Although the LEADER method is in widespread use by different local communities in the Netherlands and results in successful local projects, some problems with LEADER an local empowerment emerged in the critical literature review. The interviews with coordinators from Dutch Local Action Groups clarified sub questions concerning the power relations and representation of the local community in Local Action Groups and the effect of Dutch national regulations and preconditions on the relation between LEADER and local empowerment in Dutch local development. This part of the chapter contains the conclusions on the sub questions and will close the chapter with answering the main question of this thesis.

Power Relations in Dutch Local Action Groups are non-hierarchical an do not endanger the voice of locals. The clue lies in the composition of the board of Local Action Groups. Every Local Action Group is supervised by a board. The board also evaluates and chooses promising projects of locals to be funded by European money. LEADER provides Local Action Groups with the freedom to choose its own board members. The board may consist of only private members, but public members are also allowed, considering the European rule that the board may not contain more public members than private members. Some Local Action Groups maintain a board with a 50/50 rate between public and private members, others chose zero public members in their board. This assures the local interests will never be oppressed by the public interests and the board remains transparent for locals at all times. As private members are chosen for their large networks and strong ties to the local community, they are capable of representing the local community in the board. This is extremely valuable as the board is in charge of evaluating the project applications. With a board containing at least 50% private members the interests of the local community can be taken serious, an important factor for the autonomy of the local community. This arrangement with private members in the board of Local Action Groups also provides locals with indirect financial capital as the board grants funding to the projects. Public members also provide locals with access to their networks which results in the transfer of knowledge and cooperation, providing locals with social capital. The relations in Dutch Local Action Groups are non-hierarchical and locals are free to discuss and criticize the board, which boosts the social capacity of the local community.

Thus the power relations in Local Action Groups are considered to have a positive effect om the local empowerment. The freedom communities are offered in compiling the board results in a board filled with private members representing the local community. This freedom in organizational structure equips the local community with organizational capital, as locals have more chance to successfully accomplish their projects by changing the organizational structure for the good of local development. The power of private board members in granting funding to locals and evaluating projects empowers the local community with financial capital and autonomy. The non-hierarchical power relations in Local Action Groups invite locals to use the large networks from both private and public bord members and to be critical against the board, providing locals with social capital and social capacity. Because private board members represent the local community and are involved in the decision-making processes concerning local development the local community is taken serious and indirectly included in the policy design and implementation of their own environment. The non-hierarchical, open and cooperative relations in Local Action Groups truly equip locals with control over their own environment and have therefore a positive effect on the local empowerment.

A good representation of the Dutch local community in Local Action Groups is essential for the local empowerment. If a representative group of locals participates in Local Action Groups the whole local community is able to access financial and social capital by using funding and networks provided in Local Action Groups. Funding, networks and local projects help the local community to take control over its own environment and boost autonomy in its local development. LEADER tents to secure the representation of the local community in three different ways. Private members of the board of Local Action Groups are chosen on behalf of their large networks an strong involvement in the local community. Private members are successful in representing groups in the local community, resulting in a representation of the local community in local decision-making, project implementation and financial management. Although the private members represent a large part of the local community by using their large networks, marginalized groups seriously risk being underrepresented as they lack social capital as networks.

Local Action Groups offer locals the chance to present an idea for a local project and to apply for funding. The Local Action groups are confident these projects and their participants represent the local community well. It is true locals have a large degree of freedom in inventing a project according to their idea of local needs. The Local Development Strategy and the board of Local Action Groups allow a great variety of projects. But locals involved in these projects appear to be mostly above 30 years old. It seems locals in their adolescence and young adulthood are underrepresented in these local projects. Further research showed some Local Action Groups actively recruit locals with administrative skills due to high administrative pressure involved in the projects. Locals with a lack of financial resources and a lack of prior experience with LEADER become discouraged to do a project at a Local Action Group because of the long waiting times for European funding and the complex policy of the RVO. This results in Local Action Groups representing locals with the same background marked by networks and prior experience. Especially marginalized groups are underrepresented in the local projects, due to their lack of financial resources, networks and prior experience in LEADER. Thus it seems local projects do not truly represent the whole local community, leaving marginalized groups in the local community without access to financial, social and organizational resources to control their own environment.

Some Local Action Groups involve the local community in the development process from the early beginning on by inviting all interested locals to collaborate on the Local Development Strategy and evaluation of LEADER projects. These Local Action Groups actively include locals in the policy design and implementation of local development. It facilitates locals from everywhere in the local community to map their local needs and provides them with a voice against public actors at the very beginning of development in their own environment and community. This boosts the autonomy and social capacity of the local community. Because of the open character and direct contacts local in these early and evaluative meetings represent the local community well. Sadly not all Local Action Groups involve locals in setting up a Local Development Strategy, resulting in minimizing the autonomy of locals by public actors mapping local needs. These Local Action Groups leave locals out of decision-making and deny them social capacity.

Although Local Action Groups involve locals in their own local development through private board members and projects, Local Action Groups do not truly represent the whole local community. It tuns out to be especially difficult to represent marginalized groups in the local community, as those groups often lack the social resources to be part of the network form private board members. By not being represented in the board of a Local Action Group marginalized groups miss indirect influence in decision-making and financial management over their local development. Due to a lack of financial resources, prior experience in LEADER and administrative skills some locals find difficulties in realizing their projects and getting access to funding and networks. Besides not all Local Action Groups involve locals in designing a Local Development Strategy, leaving locals without the chance to map their local needs and to criticizes policymaking by public actors . This is a great loss as the open character of these meetings really facilitate a complete representation of the local community. In these cases Local Action Groups fail to represent the local community in a complete way and especially fail to represent marginalized groups in the local community. Marginalized groups being excluded from representation in Local Action Groups could lead to exclusion from financial, social and organizational resources, from social capacity and autonomy, thus resulting to less local empowerment.

Regulations and bureaucracy significantly affect the relation between LEADER and Dutch local empowerment. Local Action Groups and locals experience the regulations set by the European Union as very complex and non-transparent, but they accept it knowing it is a standard complication that comes with all European programmes and subsidies. Local Action Groups manage to build networks. to involve locals in local development and to support locals through European regulations when applying for funding. Thus although European regulations are complex, they do not endanger the access of resources by locals in their local development.

The European Union delegates the implementation and control of LEADER to national governments. In the Netherlands LEADER is housed in the Plattelands Ontwikkelings Programma (Rural development Programme) and is supervised by the Rijksdienst Voor Ondernemend Nederland (RVO) a national bureau responsible for stimulating and funding entrepreneurship in The Netherlands. Local Action Groups are therefore obliged to submit all projects to the RVO for final approval. Also the project administration of every project must be checked and approved by the RVO. Because of the alleged risk of fraud and a lack of transparency on local level the RVO implements a zero flaw policy accompanied with huge fines and a complex project administration. Many locals miss the expertise needed to implement the complex and demanding project administration requested by the RVO, resulting in rejected projects, fines and even locals being cut off from funding during the implementation of their

projects. This is problematic for locals who financed projects in advance (as required by the RVO), leaving locals with depts and unfinished projects neglecting local needs. Local Action Groups have no insight in the decision making process at the RVO. Project applications get rejected and funding is sometimes cut off instantly for unknown reasons, slowing down the implementation of projects. It seems the regulations from the RVO make it really hard for locals to access financial capital. Especially for locals without prior experience in LEADER and knowledge about a project administration. Because of a minimal six months waiting period before funding is payed out, locals have to make great expenditures on advance while risking funding still being cut off. This strongly discourages locals lacking financial resources. It seems regulations for the Dutch national government work against the principles of LEADER by making access to funding harder for locals already lacking financial capital. When the supervision and control is delegated to regional governments the regulations can become even more demanding for Local Action Groups.

Local Action Groups tent to help locals by offering assistance with the project administration or even by hiring accountants. These practices turn out to be extremely expensive and time consuming, resources that could have been spent on local needs. Recently all Dutch Local Action Groups combined their criticism in a position paper addressed to the RVO. But the RVO has no intentions in relaxing the regulations. Local Action Groups strongly tend to stop with European funding and continue with the more easy accessible regional and local funding while keeping the LEADER method and Local Action Group structure in use. LEADER can live on without European funding, as the LEADER method itself is very successful and provides much more than only funding.

The Dutch National Government intervenes in the relation between LEADER and local empowerment with complex regulations. By setting its own demanding rules and conditions the RVO complicates the access to financial capital by the local community, resulting in locals getting disinterested in LEADER, not being able to start or finish their projects and neglecting local needs. This makes it really har for locals to control their own local development and in some cases even obstructs locals from taking care of local needs. In fact the regulations from the Dutch national government concerning LEADER funding violate the basic principles of LEADER itself. LEADER tents to empower locals in their own local development by providing them with resources and self-control, while the RVO shifts the controlling task from the local community to the national government by setting complex regulations and financial centralization. Thus it seems regulations from the Dutch national government affect the relation between LEADER and local empowerment in a negative way.

An important condition for resource dependency is a lack of financial capital on local level. This way donors can make locals dependant on their funding in return for their own interests and agendas. Dutch Local Action Groups are confident there is no lack of financial capital on local level. Although most locals struggle with financing their local projects, there are plenty of sources for financial capital. Like regional and local governments or a cooperation with a development bureau. Some Local Action groups literately outgrew the need for European funding. Also many Local Action Groups do not regard funding as important for local development as the European Union implies. The power of LEADER is the method itself and not the funding they conclude. By networking and transferring knowledge Local Action Groups already helped many local projects become successful. It seems at first glance Dutch Local Action Groups do not experience a lack of financial capital and some do not even experience a need for financial capital at all.

Although this is true, Local Action Groups still do use European funding. But as the power relations in Local Action Groups are in favour of the local community they seem not receptive for electoral intentions nor secret agendas from public actors. Dutch locals are also perfectly comfortable in openly criticizing and discussing LEADER, the European Union and the RVO proving funding does not affect the social capacity. Once funding is granted Local Action Groups and locals can spent the funding as they desire and locals are very satisfied with their end results. Thus funding in Local Action Groups does not serve any other purpose than being used for the local community, for local projects and setting up networks as the Local Action Groups.

However the access of this European funding is problematic. As mentioned previously the strong bureaucracy and demanding administration set by the RVO seriously endangers the access to funding by locals. If locals do not conduct a proper project administration they risk being cut off from European funding and fail their local project due to a lack of financial capital. So locals are dependant from European funding in a certain way. Not complying to the regulations set by the European Union and the RVO leads to unfinished local projects. The success of most local projects is still partially dependent on European funding (which pays at least 25% of the total project costs) and the fulfilment of RVO regulations. This financial control and management of European funds by the national government results in financial centralization, obstructing locals to gain full autonomy over their local development and reach local empowerment. It can be concluded that there is a degree of resource dependency visible on Dutch local level, which affects local empowerment in a partially negative way. Although it does not affect the social capacity, it does affect the autonomy of the local community by financial centralization.

The tremendous bureaucratic and administrative pressure experienced by Local Action Groups and their participants results in a lot of problems concerning local projects. The chance that the RVO cuts the funding on a project is substantial. The smallest mistake in the project administration could mean the end of financial support or a huge fine from the RVO. The administrative rules concerning a local project are so complex and demanding, that a local without any knowledge of bookkeeping or any experience in a project administration surely risks a failed project. Even after Local Action Groups started coaching locals with their appliance and project administration prior experience in LEADER or administrative knowledge appeared to be determining the access of financial capital and the success of projects. This resulted in Local Action Groups selecting locals on their administrative skills rather than their potential for addressing local needs. Many locals without the proper knowledge and experience lost their interest in LEADER and disappeared, taking great ideas with them. This has a negative impact on the autonomy and representation of the local community in Local Action Groups.

Even when locals manage to get their project plan and project administration approved by the RVO, the are confronted with long wating times before the funding is actually granted. Coordinators of Local Action Groups warn locals on the forehand about the excessive waiting times, resulting in locals becoming disappointed and losing interest in doing a local project. This strongly discourages locals with low financial capital (often marginalized groups in the local community) or locals planning projects costing over a million. Locals with enough financial capital on the other hand are able to make costs in advance and thus to invest in a LEADER project. Coordinators state that successful local projects often depend on the prior experience, administrative knowledge and financial capital of locals. Meaning preconditions do have a significant effect on the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. It appears the autonomy and control of a local community over its own local development is not only

dependant from LEADER networks like Local Action Groups which tent to provide the local community with enough resources and social capacity, but also dependent on the experience, knowledge and financial capital locals already have. This can obstruct marginalized groups without this experience, knowledge and financial capital to reach local empowerment.

It is noteworthy that the influence of preconditions on the relation between LEADER and local empowerment highly differs between Local Action Groups. Some Local Action Groups outgrew the need of European funding and experience much less financial problems. Older Local Action Groups have access to a larger and more evolved network than younger Local Action Groups. This helps older Local Action Groups to access alternative financial capital and knowledge to help marginalized locals in accomplishing a successful project. As younger Local Action groups miss these alternative resources they depend much more on European funding and resources, resulting in preconditions being much more dominant on the success of local projects.

With the findings and conclusions on the sub questions the main question of this thesis can be answered: *How does LEADER affect the local empowerment in Dutch local development?* According to the results and the conclusions of the sub questions LEADER affects the local empowerment in Dutch local development in two ways, through the method and through the funding.

As a method LEADER proves to be extremely successful in developing Local Action Groups which enable locals autonomy over their own environment an local development. The transparent, non-hierarchical cooperation between different actors in Local Action Groups provide locals with social and organizational capital, social capacity and a degree of financial control. The organizational freedom results in a representative board with large networks in the local community, capable of taking locals and their needs serious in decision-making. On the other hand this excludes marginalized groups form being represented by the board, as these groups often miss in networks due to a lack of social capital. The LEADER method also allows locals a great deal of freedom in implementing their local projects, making them fit best local needs. However, the local participants are selected on their administrative skills, prior experience with LEADER and financial capital, things marginalized groups lack. Meetings to involve locals in the design of the Local Development Strategy are successful due to their open character, but not all Local Action Groups involve locals in this process. It appears the LEADER method has a positive effect on the local empowerment of only part of the local community, namely locals with the same background. As marginalized groups are not represented in the board and project participation, these groups in the local community are excluded from resources, social capacity and decision-making in local development.

The second way LEADER affects local empowerment in Dutch local development is with European funding. LEADER delegates the financial control and management of projects to national governments. Thus allowing exogenous forces as national regulations to affect the relation between LEADER and local empowerment. The demanding Dutch national regulations concerning the funding application and project administration of local projects result in financial centralization, seriously decreasing the financial capital and financial autonomy of local communities in their local development. The complex regulations of the Dutch national government concerning the funding application and project administration of local projects undermine the bottom-up approach from LEADER too, as these regulations shift the financial autonomy and self-control of local communities to the Dutch national government and make locals dependant from the Dutch national government for financial capital. These demanding and complex Dutch national regulations also undermine the LEADER method by

making the relation between LEADER and local development more sensitive for preconditions like administrative knowledge, prior expertise with LEADER and financial capital of locals. It appears these preconditions are essential for the participation of locals in their local development, leading to the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in local development. At the end the Dutch national government decides which locals participate and intervene in their local development, empowering some of the knowledgeable and experienced locals and excluding the marginalized others.

In conclusion LEADER affects the local empowerment in Dutch local development in a mostly *negative* way by facilitating the Dutch national government in establishing financial centralization leading to 1) a lack of financial autonomy for locals and 2) a poor representation of the local community in local development as marginalized groups are excluded from resources, capacity to act and decision-making.

9.   Recommendations for future research

The study is centred around the Neo-Endogenous approach. Although this approach has proven to be of great use to frame certain concepts and relations, it still has his limitations regarding empowerment. The Neo-Endogenous approach views empowerment as a result of both exogenous and endogenous forces, but does spend too little attention to the social aspects of cooperation in producing empowerment. Further research could for example use a different approach such as the participatory approach to put more emphasis on the local social processes in generating empowerment.

The thesis is embedded in the Dutch context. It is possible that certain results are influenced by the fact that the data collection has been in Holland. Local and national circumstances, politics and culture can have a big influence on empowerment. This thesis only studied more general, known variables that influence empowerment and used the Dutch context to make the thesis feasible. Future research could look into the effect of Dutch culture (like citizen participation) on empowerment in the context of LEADER. Further research could also expand the context of research to other member states of the European Union, like Western and Northern Europe to enrich the study on LEADER and local empowerment.

This thesis namely focussed on the coordinators of Local Action Groups as the source for qualitative data. This resulted in a study about the experiences of Local Action Groups with relationship between European funding and local empowerment. Further research could also involve the experiences and knowledge of other actors such as national and regional governments or the European Union.

10.   Reflection

Conducting a research on a European topic is never easy and in this thesis it certainly has proven to be a real challenge. To write a bachelor thesis about European funding and such an abstract concept as empowerment turned out somehow regretful. The amount of time and resources available for writing a bachelor thesis are not nearly enough to even scratch the surface of the complex concept of empowerment, let alone to study its relation to a European funding system. This thesis certainly brings two difficult worlds together. The amount of papers and informational documents written on LEADER, European funding, local development and in lesser degree empowerment was overwhelming and in order to finish a thesis choices had to be made. Some concepts could simply not be reviewed. To keep the thesis visible and keep the story line clear has proven to be a real challenge. Due to the complexity of the key concepts it was really hard to add visibility to the storyline. This resulted in a thesis that sometimes reads difficult as not all parts have a smooth transition and the discussed matter is complex.

This thesis is the embodiment of the quote: "prepare for the worst, hope for the best". Originally the qualitative data would be collected at one Local Action Group, as a case study. This Local Action Group agreed and promised to make sure several respondents would be available for interviews. However, after a while no arrangements had been made and the Local Action Group never responded again. Without the enormous enthusiasm of other Local Action Groups this thesis would never have been accomplished. Gratefully they were willing to give an interview, even though the summer holidays set in. This occurrence shows how important it is to always keep an alternative behind especially when working with tight deadlines.

The qualitative data could have covered the topic better when different actors were interviewed. Now only Local Action Groups are interviewed. Of course this has also its value as this allowed the study to dive deeper into the problems and viewpoints of the Local Action Groups and to guarantee a more reliable research. Of course the viewpoints of many other actors are not represented in this thesis then.

As said in the conclusion this thesis used the Neo-Endogenous approach to frame the relations between concepts as European funding, local empowerment and local development. Although the Neo-Endogenous approach did a good job in providing a network to make the literature more understandable and to point out the endogenous and exogenous variables that affect local empowerment, it does lack a certain focus on the self-reinforcing capacity of local empowerment and on the importance of participations as a mean to reach empowerment. Originally the thesis would also use the participatory approach to overcome the shortcomings of the Neo-endogenous approach. However, the resources available for a Bachelor thesis are far too few to involve the participatory approach. The participatory approach is vast approach that is best served with a long term ethnographic study.

The last reflection concerns the writing a thesis in the English language. This has proven to be much harder than expected. It slowed down the writing process significantly. It was unpleasant to not be able to translate clear thoughts from Dutch into clear English due to relatively poor skills in academic English. It showed me I still need to some work regarding my level academic English, especially because of the upcoming master thesis.

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