

Trust building and social capital as development policy tools in rural areas.

An empirical analysis: the case of the LAG CDNISAT

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1. Social capital as strategic resource for the development of disadvantaged rural areas

Various studies have shown that social capital is an essential factor to starting and maintaining durable economic development processes in globally depressed areas (Granovetter, 1985; Coleman, 1988, 1990; OECD, 1991; Putnam, 1993, 1996, 2001; Fukuyama, 1999; World Bank, 2001). As a result, there has been an increased interest by political institutions in economic development policies aimed to enhance the growth and distribution of such resource.

The EU disadvantaged rural areas, which strongly feel the need to reduce the growth gap separating them from rich and industrialized areas, have implemented local development policy tools such as the community initiative named P.I.C. LEADER¹ since the first structural programming stage (1989-2003). These tools have been promoted

Abstract

Over the last few years, the literature on rural development has widely demonstrated that social capital is an essential factor to starting and maintaining durable economic development processes especially in disadvantaged rural areas. Indeed, the Local Action Groups (LAGs) elaborate and implement Local Development Plans (LDPs) aiming at involving socio-economic bodies and local communities in a relational network based on trust so that social capital may be built and/or increased and virtuous development mechanisms triggered.

The empirical model thus defined was applied in order to investigate the relational process and trust-building dynamics implemented by the LAG Consortium for the Development of the Northern Ionian Sea Area of Taranto (CDNISAT). The aim of this research is to verify the capacity of LAGs to contribute towards the creation of social capital in rural areas where it is scarce by means of developing a fiduciary relationship network.

The applied methodology allowed us to measure the level of trust created by the LAG within the relationships among socio-economic bodies that benefited from the measures implemented through the Local Development Plans (LDPs) as well as to identify what factors -more than others- influenced the process of achieving adequate levels of trust within the action strategies of LAGs.

The results were very significant as they highlighted how the LAG's good performance on building trust-based networks was limited only to the beneficiaries of the Development Plan, whereas its action proved to be only partially effective in creating an atmosphere of collective trust at local level.

Keywords: rural development, social capital, fiduciary relationships.

Résumé

Ces dernières années, la littérature sur le développement rural a largement démontré que le capital social est un élément d'importance primordiale pour lancer et maintenir un développement économique durable surtout dans les zones rurales désavantagées. A cette fin, les Groupes d'Action Locale (GAL) élaborent et réalisent des Plans de Développement Local (PDL) pour activer un réseau relationnel basé sur la confiance entre les organismes socio-économiques et les communautés locales, de manière à créer ou augmenter le capital social et/ou déclencher des mécanismes de développement vertueux.

Le model empirique ainsi défini a été appliqué afin d'étudier le processus relationnel et les dynamiques de construction de confiance mis sur pied par le GAL du Consortium pour le Développement de la Zone au Nord de la Mer Ionienne de Tarente (CDNISAT). Cette recherche vise à vérifier la capacité des GAL de contribuer à la création du capital social dans les zones rurales où il est insuffisant, à travers le développement d'un réseau relationnel basé sur la confiance.

La méthodologie appliquée nous a permis de mesurer le niveau de confiance créé par le GAL au sein des relations établies entre les différents organismes socio-économiques qui ont bénéficié des mesures prises grâce aux Plans de Développement Local et d'identifier les facteurs les plus importants qui ont permis d'atteindre des niveaux adéquats de confiance dans les stratégies d'action des GAL.

Les résultats obtenus s'avèrent très significatifs parce qu'ils mettent en évidence comment les GAL ont été à même de créer des réseaux basés sur la confiance impliquant seulement les bénéficiaires du Plan de Développement, tandis que ses actions se sont avérées partiellement efficaces dans la création d'une atmosphère de confiance collective à l'échelle locale.

Mots clés: développement rural, capital social, rapports de confiance.

and managed by the so-called Local Action Groups (LAGs) which are public-private partnerships elaborating and implementing Local Development Plans (LDPs) in order to involve the local population and, more specifically, economic actors in a trust-based network of relationships. In this way, such LAGs create and/or increase social capital as well as trigger virtuous development mechanisms based on the promotion of endogenous territorial resources and the participation of local communities in drawing up sustainable and shared development strategies.

The Leader Community Initiative has come into being as a demonstrative tool with a pedagogic function seeking to introduce relational innovations in difficult areas characterized by a development approach that is predominantly followed by single individuals.

Such relational innovations are capable of giving rise to favourable conditions in order to improve social capital in a dynamic way. Social capital is, in fact, deemed to

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¹ PIC LEADER: Programme Initiative Communautaire - Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale.

be one of the most relevant factors of local development, which, however, rural areas (as the purpose of this initiative) seem to be very short of.

Although there is no common and shared definition of *social capital*, scholars fully agree that at its basis there are trust and relationships, which are strongly and dynamically intertwined between each other. As a matter of fact, social capital is composed of fiduciary relationships which get the network actors to recognize one another, understand and help each other as well as exchange information and cooperate in order to achieve common goals. This network of relationships is the result of (whether intentionally or not) social investment strategies orientated towards building and rebuilding trust relationships over time, which are durable and useful to generate tangible and intangible profits. In this way, fiduciary relationships are capable of improving the action skill of the single individual or collective actors, and if such relationships were spread widely enough, they could also augment the action capacity of the social system as a whole (Coleman, 1990; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Triglia, 1995; Smith and Barclay, 1997; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Adler and Kwon, 2002).

The aim of this research is to identify those factors that, more than others, have an impact on achieving adequate levels of trust within the action strategies of LAGs.

Various evaluation analyses of Leader experiences in Italy produced not fully satisfying results in terms of social capital creation.

Due to the slender financial and human resources made available to LAGs and, above all, because of the intrinsic features of trust, which takes time to be created and strengthened, LAGs could not cover the entire territory of application with a network of fiduciary relationships. Their action has been rather limited to form only the central core of a network of fiduciary relationships which have involved only few social and economic actors (i.e. beneficiaries of the measures of the Local Development Plan) and few institutional bodies (i.e. the LAG's partners).

On the other hand, if the LAG manages to strengthen its leadership and maintain its reputation in the long run so that the fiduciary relationships thus created may turn into social capital, it is very likely that the latter will necessarily have to be expanded onto the entire territory and the local community of reference. However, this will depend on the reputation and leadership that the LAG is able to acquire within its social, economic and institutional scope.

Our research, which is being herein presented, has been conducted on the Italian case study referred to as "GAL, Consorzio per lo Sviluppo dell'Alto Jonico Tarantino (C-SAJT)" (LAG, Consortium for the Development of the Northern Ionian Sea Area of Taranto) (CDNISAT). The fi-

duciary relationships between the economic and social actors of a local community have been investigated via the relationship marketing approach. This approach considers such relationships as a dyadic rapport among actors who exchange goods and services with the ultimate goal to create common trust (Grönroos, 1991, 1995; Ferrero, 1992, 2000; Grandinetti, 1993; Shehota and Tunisini, 1993; Iacobucci, 1996, 1998).

2. Building trust in relationships between economic and social actors

Trust seems such a difficult construction to be defined that it has given rise to a number of different meanings as well as several types of analyses. Its conceptualization has mainly been focused on three factors: *expectation, belief and willingness*.

The first term is referred to the willingness shown by the trustee to keep its promises and fulfil its obligations (Dwery, Shurr and Oh, 1987; Hagen and Choe, 1998). In this way, the trustor² (Robinson, 1996; Bhattacharya, Devinney and Pillutla, 1998) may expect that its counterparty has an easily expectable, coordinate, collaborative and morally correct behaviour, which would lead to favourable results in the trustor's opinion. At the same time, certain actions may be prevented from occurring and taking expediently advantage of the vulnerability condition of the trustor in which it would deliberately find itself (Bromiley and Cummings, 1995; Sako and Helper, 1998).

As in the expectation case, the term *belief* is related to the trustworthiness of promises made by the counterparty and to the fact the latter honours the commitments undertaken so that easily expectable future behaviours (Brockner and Siegel, 1996) are initiated. Therefore, these behaviours are supposed to favour a positive outcome for the trustor in the long run and, however, it is excluded that they may generate negative consequences for the latter. Such convictions may result from a pure calculation of the economic advantage (Dasgupta, 1989; Gambetta, 1989; Colemann, 1990) or from a general sense of confidence towards the trustee, who is free from any specific contexts and behaviours (McKnight, Cummings and Chervany, 1998).

Finally, the term *willingness* mainly applies to a party's availability to make itself vulnerable to its counterparty or, more in general, to get exposed to risky situations (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995) as they may result from the opportunistic behaviour of the trustee.

With regard to the analytical dimensions of trust, there are at least three fundamental types of dimensions: *cognitive, emotional and behavioural* (Bagozzi, 1999).

The *cognitive* dimension refers to the rational element of trust which, however, cannot be brought back only to a pure economic calculus (calculus-based trust) but also to the knowledge of skills and competences of the other party (knowledge-based trust) as well as to the identification and

² The terms *trustor* and *trustee*, which are widely spread in the marketing literature, shall be used hereinafter in order to indicate the actor placing its trust in someone and the other actor representing the objective of a fiduciary expectation, respectively.

personal values (identification-based trust) (Shapiro, Shepard and Cheraskin, 1992). Such classification provides the basis for the creation of a developmental model which assigns the three types of trust to three stages with an increasing time sequence so that only when the lowest level of trust is achieved, the next stage may be moved onto (Lewicki and Bunker, 1995, 1996).

The first stage is known as the calculus-based trust. In this case, one is spurred to behave in a fiduciary way not only because of the punishments for certain behaviours that may threaten trust, but also because of the awards that may result from preserving such trust. In this light, the value of trust is established by comparing the results from continuing such relationship and the costs for maintaining the same. During this stage, trust is quite fragile and the relationship develops gradually, it may come to a stop or even get worse if a negative event occurs.

The second developmental stage corresponds to the knowledge-based trust, which is how predictable the counterparty's behaviour may be, which depends on the information acquired on the counterparty and the continuous interactions based on a regular flow of communication.

The last stage is represented by the identification-based trust which occurs when there is a full identification with the wishes and intentions of the counterparty up to the point where the other party acts on account of such counterparty in an even more scrupulous way than such counterparty would be able to demonstrate.

During this phase a particular form of learning is established through which one party understands -even if no precise information is available- what the other party is really interested in and attaches the same importance to those behaviours as they are deemed relevant for that counterparty.

The *emotional* factor is somehow related to the feeling that is generated between the parties and that may even turn into an emotional relationship.

The *behavioural* component relates, on the other hand, to the willingness to act and the transformation of trust into a behaviour that is consistent with that has been mentally conceived. The proposed classification is clearly very valuable in that it keeps those antecedent elements of trust distinct as they may vary in relation to the analysis dimension. Consequently, not only may any misleading confusion be avoided, but also, and above all, any action may be better orientated in such a way that trust may grow between the parties involved in a relational dyadic rapport.

Conceptualization of trust and its analysis dimensions, which have been developed by sociological, psychological and organizational sciences, have been widely revised by and reused in relationship marketing. In particular, this methodological approach has mainly analysed the cognitive dimension of the trust construction so much as to lay down an evolutionary theory thereof. As previously stated, trust relies on the changes of its characteristics which, over time, will determine its qualitative level. The fiduciary relationships shall, therefore, be investigated within a dynamic

temporal dimension, which is best capable of defining the changing aspect of trust.

Relationship marketing first identifies the principal determinants of trust and then it creates a range of models based thereon to determine factors to work on in order to implement strategies for enhancing the relationship resources of enterprises. With special focus on market relationships and among the determinants of trust making up the cognitive scheme which is at the basis of the construction of trust, there are:

- Past experiences;
- Skills and competences of the counterparty;
- Motivations to a certain conduct of a party and in particular, the absence of opportunistic behaviours;
- Value sharing.

Knowing the behaviours of counterparty is one of the main prerequisites to building fiduciary resources. In order to foresee the future behaviours of the trustee in an effective way, a party must take into account the way such trustee had behaved in similar and past situations.

In case such behaviours were repeated in the past, in that the counterparty had always met the other party's expectations and kept its promises, the conditions for trust creation appear. Trust is, therefore, a definitely future-oriented concept even though it is related to past events. This element is directly connected with and partly superimposable on another fundamental and trust antecedent, that is satisfaction. One of the major trust antecedents is the perception that the trustee has the necessary competences to best carry out the actions appointed by the trustor to the trustee and to guarantee that such expected performances are executed. All experiences, which reinforce the trustor's conviction in relation to the knowledge possessed by its counterparty, contribute significantly to the development of the implied cognitive scheme (Mayer, Davis and Shoorman, 1995; Sirdeshmukh Singh and Sabol, 2002).

As to opportunistic behaviours, an opposite correlation with the level of trust has been obviously proposed. The relevance of such antecedents directly results from the same definition of trust, which, as previously stated, implies a state of vulnerability to opportunistic behaviours of the trustee. If there is a threat of opportunistic behaviours, a party has to protect itself and draw up very detailed (and expensive) agreements in order to govern all transactions in an efficient way. Should circumstances be so complex as to make it impossible to enter into agreements envisaging all and any instances that might occur among the parties, it would be necessary to resort to hierarchical mechanisms to govern all business transactions efficiently.

Trust-based models assume, on the other hand, that the parties may build relational forms based on informal mechanisms which are able to govern the uncertainty generated by the complexity of the information exchanges, relationships and the environment. In order to create a network of fiduciary relationships which would allow the enterprise to

perform its business transactions under a controllable level of uncertainty, it is necessary that the counterparties are not perceived as motivated by opportunistic reasons but driven by positive reasons resting on benevolence. When values are shared, the most profound fiduciary relationships can be achieved. In this case, trust may reach high levels of abstraction permitting the trustee to free the relationship from specific objectives and performances and to amplify the scope of the relationship. As a result, enterprises, for example, can broaden their fiduciary relationship with their client/customer to other types of business within market fields that may be very different from the ones such relationship had been built upon.

3. Fiduciary relationships in relation to the experience of I.C. Leader II: the case of the LAG “Consortium for the Development of the Northern Ionian Sea Area of Taranto”

3.1. The empirical analysis model

In order to test the capacity of local organizations (LAGs) within the Leader initiative to promote the development of rural areas by building fiduciary relationships with local social-economic actors, a theoretical model described above has been adopted. This model links trust to its antecedent factors such as *fiduciary relationships*, *past experiences*, *opportunism*, *competences*, *value sharing*. The assumptions resting on the proposed model are summarised as follows:

- Adopting the cognitive dimension of fiduciary relationships which characterise the methodological approach of relationship marketing. This conceptualization may be extended expediently to the relationship between the LAG and the beneficiaries, as they are involved in a dyadic transaction whose means are utility goods (services);
- Building trust-based dyadic relationships between socio-economic operators and institutions which are in charge of implementing the rural development plans;
- Creating trust relationships between operators and institutions by means of development services supplied by the latter;
- Developing fiduciary relationships *ex-ante* as they are determined by independent variables (contents) according to a cause-and-effect relationship.

Such an empirical model has been applied to analyse relational process and trust-building dynamics as implemented by the LAG “Consortium for the Development of the Northern Ionian Sea Area of Taranto” (CDNISAT). The rural area of the Consortium under review comprises the municipalities of Massafra, Palagiano, San Giorgio Jonico, Statte and Cristiano that all belong to the province of Taranto. According to this model, a questionnaire has been prepared and handed out to the 11 beneficiaries of the measures provided by the Local

Action Plan. The questionnaire was divided into five sections, each of which had a variable number of 2 to 4 semi-open questions. The aim was to investigate into the various components of trust as listed above, discover any fiduciary ties with the LAG and evaluate the major factors involved in the building of trust. Said questions allowed the interviewee either to agree or disagree to a statement, which, however, was adequately explained by the interviewer. In this way, the responses could be construed with a higher degree of correctness with a mark being assigned to each response.

In order to assess each trust determinant, some multiple-choice questions have been prepared using a 4-point Likert scale (3 = high, 2 = medium, 1 = poor, 0 = null) that was applied to each trust determinant. The total score was obtained by multiplying the modal value by the maximum frequency. This methodological analysis compared the diverse impact of such five fiduciary factors on trust building occurring in the relational performances of the LAG under review, as well as how determinant each of them was on building durable and shared collective fiduciary networks.

3.2. Main results from the empirical analysis

Each of the main trust determinants thus investigated are analysed below in detail so that the LAG’s possibilities to build local collective trust-based networks can be better highlighted.

Fiduciary relationships. After defining trust as one’s feeling of certainty that the others will do what one is expecting from them to do, three questions have been placed. The first question aims to evaluate the level of trust that the LAG has obtained for its capacity to supply services of quality. The second and third questions seek the same evaluation which, however, relates to public and private services. Such performance evaluation of institutional actors similar to LAGs is useful as it allows checking the impact that the external environment has on the dyadic inter-organisational relationship between a LAG and the beneficiary. The figures in table 1 below show a good tendency on the part of the beneficiaries to trust local institutions (a little more trust is given to private institutions) as to their capacity to work in an overall satisfactory way. The high degree of trust reposed on the LAG (70% of the beneficiaries showed a trust of medium-degree) is, therefore, very likely to be partly the effect of such belief. However, the performance of such LAG should not be underestimated. The results show quite clearly that if a local fiduciary network between socio-economic actors (and not only public ones) is pre-existing and when services are supplied, the building of unidirectional relationships is facilitated also with organisations that operate from the beginning, especially when the latter are a cluster of institutions which have been established on the territory for a long time.

It is therefore quite reasonable to believe that the type of trust so identified is a knowledge-based trust which rests on the reputation and knowledge -even though indirectly- of the trustor. As a consequence, the LAG in question might

already play a role within the evolutionary cycle of trust, even though it would certainly not be a preliminary one (see Table 1, Figure 1).

Past experience. In relation to this component, only 63% of beneficiaries obtained public funding in the past and only one of them benefited from the technical assistance by public bodies. On the other hand, the majority of them addressed to private bodies such as professional practice of-

fices. Apart from any positive evaluations on the performance of such bodies, the important factor is the beneficiaries expressed belief in the importance of professionalism when selecting one of these bodies. Therefore, it can be inferred that the component “Skills and competences” gathers here more prominence, as it is better explored below, rather than the positive result obtained in the past relationship. Although the component “Past experience” has gained a high

score, its significance should be reassessed in the light of what has been just stated (see Table 1, Figure 1).

Skills and competences. The component “Skills and competences” has been explored through questions that have evaluated the ability of technicians and executives working with the LAG to manage the relationships with the beneficiaries on all and any issues related to the project implementation for which they had obtained a financial support. The results have shown a high degree of satisfaction with the personnel qualities not only in terms of professionalism and skills but also the timeliness at which information had been delivered, which could always be easily verified. In accordance with relationship marketing studies, our research has also recognized the fundamental role played by the perception on the level of competence the interlocutor possesses, especially in the business of utility goods delivery.

Non-opportunistic motivations. This is the case when there are open collaboration and equity attitudes, which, according to most scholars, mainly denote the absence of “opportunism”. Such attitudes have proved to be strongly present within the relationships with the LAG. It was also strongly perceived that all beneficiaries had received exactly the same type of treatment in an extremely balanced way during the implementation of the project. This perception felt even stronger as a result of the LAG’s loyalty on fulfilling its obligations. None of the interviewees regarded the LAG as little or not collaborative at all towards themselves. It had always made itself available by means of its staff in order to solve any problems regarding either the technical-financial management of the project or any issues related to the technical-economic assistance for other activities of the beneficiary’s enterprise.

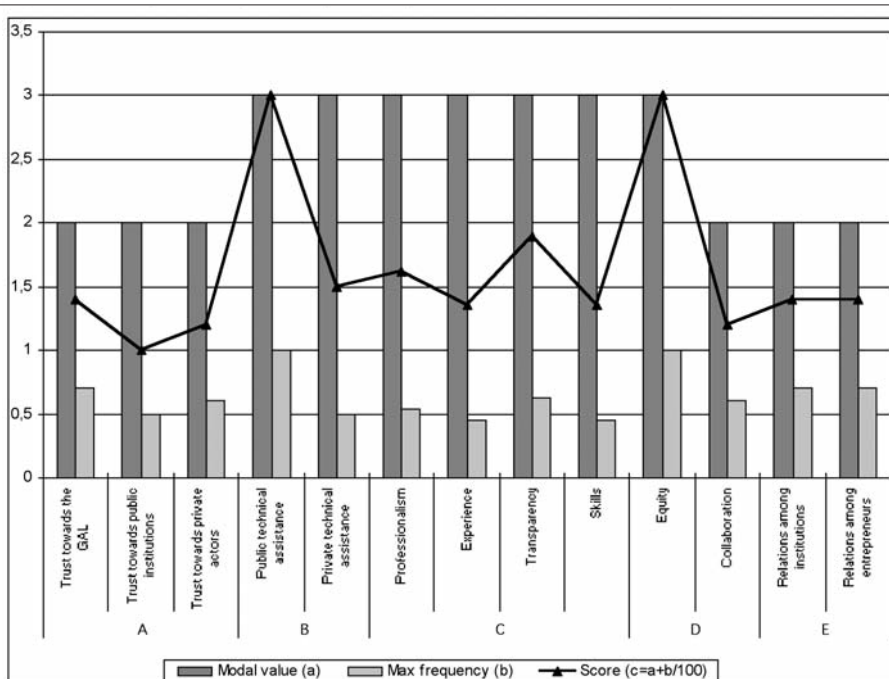
Value sharing. Almost all beneficiaries

Table 1 – Results from the empirical analysis directly measuring trust and its main components.

Antecedent factors of trust		Modal value (a)	Max. frequency (b)	Score (c=a+b/100)	
A	<i>Inter-organisational trust</i>	Towards the GAL	2	70%	1.40
	<i>Institution-based trust</i>	Towards public institutions	2	50%	1
		Towards private actors	2	60%	1.20
B	<i>Past experience</i>	Technical assistance by public institutions	3	100%	3
		Technical assistance by private bodies	3	50%	1.50
C	<i>Skills and competences</i>	Professionalism	3	54%	1.62
		Experience	3	45%	1.35
		Transparency	3	63%	1.89
		Skills	3	45%	1.35
D	<i>Non-opportunistic motivations</i>	Equity	3	100%	3
		Collaboration	2	60%	1.20
E	<i>Value sharing</i>	The GAL facilitates relationships between entrepreneurs and public institutions	2	70%	1.40
		The GAL facilitates relations among entrepreneurs	2	70%	1.40

Source: Our data processing from the empirical analysis

Figure 1 – Results from the empirical analysis directly measuring trust and its main components.



Source: Our data processing from the empirical analysis

have claimed it to be useful and expedient to involve the local population in the decisions affecting the development of their own territory. In this way, they have shown to have interiorized the importance of the sharing of responsibilities which ought to lead to better relationships among the socio-economic actors. By contrast, however, it was noticed that the LAG was not always considered to be able to improve the relational atmosphere within the territory. From this point of view, such LAG did not behave any differently from the other institutional bodies which supply services to businesses. Although the LAG was able to offer technical assistance, which was often of higher quality, it did not succeed in spreading -outside the dyadic relationship with the beneficiary- other values deemed important for the creation of social capital such as feelings of belonging to a collectivity, cooperative attitudes, etc., within the local socio-economic context. This is clearly due to the fact that the impact of the LAG onto the territory is very limited because of the scarce availability of financial resources and also because a longer time span would be needed than that of the real operational time of the LAG in order to reach that identification-based trust level which can contribute to such feelings of collective identity.

4. Final considerations

The argument, which is being herein supported, rests on the assumption that in order to create social capital in rural areas where it is scarce, it is necessary to build fiduciary relationships among the socio-economic actors (people and organisations) operating on the territory. To achieve this, it was analysed how the LAG, that is an institutional body, could be able to promote such relationships, which are based on trust with the recipients or beneficiaries of the intervention measures as provided by the LAG's Local Action Plan. On the basis of a wide literature on relationship marketing, a model on the *ex-ante* link between trust and its fundamental components was developed, which also identified those factors having a chief impact on trust. This is an extremely useful information tool for the LAG by means of which it can monitor the efficiency of its actions over time and steer its own trust management policy accordingly. However, this is clearly a medium-long term process as the mechanisms for mutual learning are complex by themselves. They also involve various aspects of fiduciary relationships as indicated by the evolutionary theory of trust.

The results from the empirical analysis may, therefore, be summarised as follows:

- The overall level of trust thus measured is certainly good compared to that observed in other organisations which operate at local level and supply public and private services;
- The environment which is external to the relationship between the LAG and the beneficiaries has strongly influenced the trust perception of the beneficiary as to the ca-

capacity of the LAG to supply quality services. This suggests that a fiduciary relationship growth policy of the LAG may be conditioned, both positively and negatively, by the LAG's performances as well as the previously existing fiduciary ties and the relationship structure. Therefore, the LAG's strategic objective should be to improve its performing behaviour so that the network of fiduciary relationships with the territory may be expanded;

- The components which have a greater impact on the level of trust thus explored are "past experience", "skills and competences" and "non-opportunistic motivations" of the LAG, whereas the level achieved by the component "value sharing" may not be deemed very satisfactory as yet. This is essentially due to the fact that the relationships built by the LAG with the beneficiaries have been limited to a mere assistance on the technical-financial management of the project as this was caused by the delay in the launching of the Local Action Plan. Nevertheless, if on the one hand, it is true that such preconditions ought to be preserved to improve fiduciary relationships so as not to miss the confidence amount thus created by maintaining -for example- the same technical staff and management, on the other hand, greater efforts should be made towards trust building. This process is to be based on the identification of collective needs. However, as the latter require longer times to be established, the constant presence of the LAG would be needed well beyond the period required for the implementation of the Development Plan.

Despite the fact that the analysis has sufficiently proved the relevance of trust in building relationships between the LAG and the beneficiaries of the Local Development Plan (LDP), there is still a lot to do in order to extend these relationships to the rest of the local community. Even though the LAG has the adequate potential to spread an atmosphere of trust from the dyadic relationship level to that of a network, it does not seem to be able to increase the diffusion of a common sense of belonging to the territory yet. This has impeded both the development of new identification and shared values strategies and the stratification and establishment of "local knowledge" which are considered to be amongst the decisive factors for social capital creation.

The fact that the LAG under review has only been partially effective is certainly due to its limited period of activity and the *unripe* awareness of the LAG itself in regarding the building of relationship networks, which rest on well-established collective trust systems, as a preliminary factor for the success of those tangible and intangible actions as they have been carried out by the LAG through the LDP.

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