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Local Actors in Mandated Governance Networks
A case study of EU's LEADER program in Cantabria, Spain

Laro Gonzalez Canoura

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Abstract

This case study examines the role of local actors in the design of a mandated network (which is a collaborative arrangement instigated by some external third party) and how their choices affect subsequent network dynamics. The analysis focuses on two such networks: Saja Nansa and Ason Aguera Trasmiera in the Spanish Autonomous Community of Cantabria. These had similar contextual conditions at the onset, but different dynamics when exposed to the same mandate (EU´s LEADER program). Mandated networks generally leave ample room for local variation within the imposed constraints, which draws immediate attention to the dynamics and role of local actors in the establishment of a specific configuration. Building on previous research, this study relies on two theoretical frameworks: mandated network formation and organization theory.

Consistent with insights from instrumental approaches of organization theory, it found four mechanisms at play affecting internal dynamics: Membership, Structure, Leadership and Location. Membership refers to both actors' attributes and the ability to restrict or promote access to decision-making processes to other actors. Structure denotes the formal organizational framework which defines decision-making bodies, processes and goals, and the ability to shape and frame decisions. Leadership includes both individual and institutional capacity to generate and facilitate decisions within the network. And Location focuses on the relationship between the network´s physical space and how it relates to networks members in terms of participation and access to decision-making bodies.

Keywords: mandated networks, local governance, organization theory, LEADER, Cantabria

Chapter 1: Introduction

Networks – defined as a "group of three or more legally autonomous organizations that work together to achieve not only their own goals but also a collective goal" (Provan & Kenis, 2008, p. 231) – have recently been gathering substantial academic attention in political science and public administration (Ansell & Torfing, 2016; Sorensen & Torfing, 2016; Ansell, 2019). This is due in large part to their increasing prominence across many policy areas. Broad-based multisector governance networks have in recent years indeed been central to, for instance, tackling the refugee crisis within and across European countries (Geuijen, Oliver, & Dekker, 2020), instigating climate change adaptation strategies (Wamsler, 2017; Lubell & Vantaggiato, 2019) or natural resource management (Sayles & Baggio, 2016). Policies ranging from the provision of social services to combatting prostitution and trafficking, likewise tend to involve multiple levels of government, private-sector organizations (hotels, taxi companies) and civil society (NGOs, individual experts) (Erikson & Larsson, 2019; Uster, Beeri, & Vashi, 2019). Many other examples are available in the extensive network governance literature. As a result, networks are more and more recognized as an "important form of multi-organizational governance" (Provan & Kenis, 2008, p. 229).

Within the field of public administration, the study of networks has sometimes been termed as Governance Network Theory (GNT), in which there are three main research traditions (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). The first of these involves research on policy networks, which primarily looks at the relation between the state and interest groups and focuses on policy decision-making and power. For example, the role of economic and environmental policy networks in coordinating EU´s mercury policy (Adelle, Jordan, & Benson, 2015). The second research tradition covers research on inter-organisational service delivery and implementation, which is concerned with coordination problems for service delivery in fragmented settings. The study of implementation structures as multiorganizational administrative units by Hjern and Porter (1981) falls under this research tradition. The third and final research tradition deals with the management of networks meta-governance and directs attention to coordination issues and decision-making processes *within* networks. An example of this is Sorensen and Torfing´s (2017) study of the role of meta-governors in promoting collaborative innovation in Danish elder care.

This Master Thesis places itself in the third research tradition. It particularly aims to study the role of local actors in the design of a mandated network, and how their choices affect subsequent network dynamics. A *mandated* network is a collaborative arrangement instigated by some external third party (i.e., a higher level of government) to attain a specific goal, and is required to meet at least some

predefined series of characteristics set by that third party (often in exchange of incentives and/or penalties) (Segato & Raab, 2019). This stands in sharp contrast to *emergent* networks, which arise in a voluntary, informal and natural manner without external requirements or constraints. Emergent networks thus are "locally initiated and arise from the needs of network participants" (Boje & Whetten, 1981, p. 379). Clearly, the requirements imposed from outside on mandated networks can, potentially severely, affect local actors' autonomy in configuring the network as well as their subsequent network dynamics. Such constraints may arise along one of four dimensions (Segato & Raab, 2019): mandated purpose (i.e. goals, prioritization), access to resources (i.e. funding lines, technical expertise, access to policy processes), structure (i.e. membership, inclusivity, legal structure), and timing (i.e. funding cycles, agreement and reporting deadlines, incentives or penalties). Nonetheless, mandated networks generally leave ample room for local variation within the imposed constraints, which draws immediate attention to the dynamics and role of local actors in the establishment of a specific configuration. Although emergent networks have thus far attracted the majority of academic attention, this thesis will contribute to the knowledge of network design processes and structures by focusing on local actors in the context of a mandated governance framework (in a setting where said governance model is also new; Cantabria - Spain). Hence, providing a more detailed view on "the effect of [mandated] networks on network members" (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 119), this Master Thesis contributes to the Governance Network Theory (GNT) research tradition on within-network decision-making processes.

Narrowing down my research topic, the thesis' central research questions relate to two separate but connected dynamics within a mandated network: an external push to create and design the network, and an internal dynamic to make it operative. The first research question is:

RQ1: What is the role of local actors in mandated network design?

Here we explore the level of autonomy local actors have in the process of designing a network that has exogenous incentives and limitations. Despite external constraints, local actors may still take leadership roles in the initiation stage of the network and play their part in configuring the network themselves, in a manner that was not coming about organically. The analysis here first of all addresses the potential for local autonomy available within mandated networks. This is arguably a necessary condition for local actors' influence on the network design process, and will, by definition, be specific to the setting at hand. Then, the analysis moves on to assess the exact role – if any – of local actors.

The second research question is:

RQ2: How do local actors engage with each other once the mandated network is launched? This research question explores local (endogenous) within-network interaction processes once the new mandated network is up and running. While networks tend to be, at least notionally, egalitarian in its internal dynamics, members may bring out-of-network asymmetries into their relationships with each other. Moreover, this may be compounded by network´s structural design choices which entail privileging certain actors, functions, processes and topics over others. All these dynamics are still tempered by the external influence of the mandate, but the primary agents are local members themselves.

To answer my research questions, the primary theoretical model employed is Segato and Raab´s **mandated network formation conceptual framework** (Segato & Raab, 2019). This framework applies a three-stage approach for the process of network formation. The first stage – *negotiation* – is where actors identify each other and the pre-conditions for formalization. This effectively corresponds to my RQ1 on network design. The second stage – *commitment* – covers the creation of stable and formal structures, while the third stage – *execution* – concerns the operationalization of the network where the "collaborative outcomes… are produced" (2019, p. 194). These last two stages correspond to my RQ2 on within-network interaction processes. Segato and Raab's framework was originally developed for analysing a mandate's impact on network formation. I take their framework a step further by analysing the role of local actors on network formation and interaction within that mandate. I thereby also rely on a second theoretical framework, namely **organization theory**. Organization theory provides key concepts and tools to understand how structural constraints – such as changing network mandates, the timing and formalities of network design processes, and so on – affect actors' influence over decision processes and action capacity (Trondal & Egeberg, 2018, p. 5). The introduction of organization theory concepts thus allows deriving some empirically testable predictions with respect to, for instance, which local actors can be expected to become key decision-makers during the main stages in the process of network formation outlined above (more details in Chapter 3).

My empirical analysis rests on a **mixed methods** research approach in a **comparative case study** design (Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2011). More specifically, this study investigates an increasingly popular set of networks: mandated Local Governance Networks (LGN) which combine local authorities and civil society organizations with goal of promoting rural development. For the purpose of this study, mandated Local Governance Networks will be understood as legally formed entities, joined voluntarily and primarily by autonomous organizations at the municipal level with notional voting

equality, incentivized by an external third-party (non-member) for the purpose of promoting local socio-economic development with a supra-municipal area-based approach. The growth of these networks within the European Union is related to the promotion of participatory models in policy-making (Agenda 21, participatory budgeting, consultative assemblies, etc…) and active support through European Commission programs (Perez Fra, 2004). The analysis will thereby focus on two such LGNs: **Saja Nansa** and **Ason Aguera Trasmiera** in the Spanish Autonomous Community of Cantabria. These had similar contextual conditions at the onset, but their different dynamics when exposed to the same external shock – i.e. the mandated requirements of the EU´s **LEADER** program in the 1990s – provide an ideal setting to explore the role of local agents (such as local authorities and civil society organizations) in mandated networks.[1] The dataset for this analysis includes interviews, archival and statistical data, collected by the author in the field.

With respect to RQ1, my findings show that local actors – perhaps unsurprisingly – play a relatively minor role in the first stage of mandated network formation (in this context). The European Union as originator creates a series of conditions to be fulfilled in order to access a specific set of resources, while the Regional Government *de facto* establishes network boundaries on the ground and interprets the EU conditions. As a result, local actors have limited space to act. Even so, local differences arise since territorial boundaries can be negotiated in one of the two cases, and distinct management structures were implemented across both cases. Given the importance of network structures for subsequent behaviours (Trondal & Egeberg, An Organizational Approach to Public Governance, 2018; Egeberg M. , 2003), local actors thus do continue to play an important role even in mandated network design. With respect to RQ2, my findings provide a richer perspective. Once the networks are created, many of the dynamics are driven locally although there remains the external influence of changing mandate requirements and the oversight of the Regional Government. Consistent with insights from organization theory, I can identify four mechanisms at play affecting internal dynamics: **Membership**, **Structure**, **Leadership** and **Location**. Membership refers to the ability to restrict or promote access to the network and decision-making processes to other actors, and to the members´ attributes which allow them to engage. Structure denotes the formal organizational framework which defines decision-making bodies, processes and goals, and the ability to shape and frame decisions. Leadership includes both individual and institutional capacity to generate and facilitate decisions within the network. Lastly, location focuses on the relationship between the network´s physical space and how it relates to networks members in terms of participation and access to decision-making bodies.

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[1] LEADER is the name of both a local development approach (currently encompassed under the Community-Led Local Development-CLLD label) and several EU programs promoting community-led rural development through grant funding as well as improvement of rural communities' organizational capacity. It is funded jointly by the EU and member states. In-depth discussion of this program is included in Chapter 2.

These findings have both academic value and practitioner importance, as the study of network design can have important policy development effects (Segato & Raab, 2019). This is true for future establishment of mandated networks as a policy tool within the European Union, but also as a participation-promotion model in other policy areas, such as, for instance, international development cooperation. In terms of academic value, the thesis provides further insights on mandated networks, and the ongoing challenge of "explaining how composite and hybrid organizations based on mixed political orders and partly competing organizational principles can be contextualized and understood" (Christensen & Laegreid, 2018). Moreover, it addresses the limited number of empirical studies researching organizational factors and meta-governance (Trondal & Egeberg, An Organizational Approach to Public Governance, 2018). Finally, it also expands the existing body of data (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994) in two ways: a geographical location which has not been studied in depth, and a longitudinal view, which has been missing in network research (Hu, Khosa, & Kapucu, 2016). .

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 Research Context; Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework; Chapter 4 Research design, method, case selection and data; Chapter 5 Findings; Chapter 6 Conclusion. Bibliography and Annexes with data and analysis are provided at the end.

Chapter 2: Empirical research context

This chapter provides a general discussion of the administrative, geographical and institutional context in which my analysis is embedded. The first section relates to the history and central aspects of the Spanish administrative framework. Then, I provide a brief discussion of the Spanish region of Cantabria, which is the location of my empirical research. Finally, the EU's LEADER program – which is central to my two empirical cases – will be brought forward with particular attention to its principles, structure, and implementation in Cantabria.

2.1 The Spanish administrative framework

The historical roots of the current Spanish administrative structure can be traced to the 19/20th century for the autonomous communities (decentralization, autonomism and independence movements), and the 17/18th centuries for the municipal and provincial system (centralization, hierarchical and administrative rationalization/bureaucratization) (Ferreira 2000). It is with the end of the Franco regime in the 1970s that centralizing-hierarchical tendencies are countered by the 1978 Constitution and the arrival of democracy, with an administrative structure moving towards decentralization and regional autonomy. Participatory local governance has increased over time, especially since the Spanish democratic transition in the late 70s, transforming for neighbourhood political activism into formalized sectoral structures (Navarro Yañez, 2007). However, its evolution has been uneven along three dimensions (Goma & Font, 2007): focus on associations over individual participation, different geographical consolidation across Spain, and more common in large and medium municipalities.

Today, Spain is structured as a multilevel parliamentary democracy. There are four administrative levels (art. 137 Spanish Constitution) with their own elected officials and primary competencies: central government, autonomous communities (Eurostat NUTS 2[2]), provinces (Eurostat NUTS 3) and municipalities (Eurostat LAU 2/NUTS 5)[3]. The binary of municipality-province has remained strong, and, while local authority competencies are well defined (Law RBLR 7, 1985), top-down hierarchical relations persist at the local level. This is reinforced by the need of fiscal transfers from Regional and Central Administrations, between a quarter and 1/3 in many municipal budgets (Gobierto, 2020).The constitution (art. 141) also allows the creation of municipal groupings different to that of the province

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[2] NUTS (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) is Eurostat´s hierarchical system for dividing up the territory of the European Union. It has been included here to help readers identify equivalence with other EU territories. LAU are local administrative units (formerly NUTS 4 and 5) Http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/home
[3] Spanish islands (cabildos and consejos) and the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla have a separate specific structure which is not applicable in the case study area.

(Congreso de los Diputados, 2003). One of these constellations is the "mancomunidad" (translated as "commonwealth" or association of municipalities). This is an institutional legal entity created by voluntary agreement of municipalities for the purpose of joined implementation and delivery of services (Law RBLR 7, 1985) and is also considered Local Administration (Asubio , 2019). While its legal origins in Spain can be traced to the 1870s, as a tool to overcome small municipality constraints (Ferreira Fernandez, 2000), inter-municipal cooperation has not been in more common usage until relatively recently. Another mechanism for re-structuring the territory, of relevance to this case[4], is the *comarca*, which can be translated as "county" or "district". As Ferreira (2000) highlights, this has only been envisioned in Catalonia (also connected to its own internal political dynamics). The remainder of Spanish regions has either not developed the concept or legislation, or has envisioned *comarca* as simply an upgraded *mancomunidad*. The *comarca* is then still understood in much of Spain as a geographical term (an area with a shared set of attributes: history, geography, etc..) rather than an administrative term (in many ways the reverse to the word *Región*), leading in many cases to confusion given its common usage.

Finally, it is important to mention village councils ("Juntas Vecinales [5] "). These are local administration units below the municipality, although legislation and legal status varies within Spain as they are regulated by the Autonomous Communities (Law RBLR 7, 1985; Law Cantabria 6, 1994). There are 3,719 still existing in Spain, although not evenly distributed across the territory as 521 (14% of the total) are in Cantabria (Asubio , 2019). Their decision-making body is directly elected, and sometimes key decisions require a direct democracy model (in some cases to the extreme of requiring full agreement in a village assembly). Their primary purpose (Law Cantabria 6, 1994) is to manage the local commons (forest, pastures, etc..), local infrastructure (rural schools and other assets), and it provides a direct historical link to the medieval "concejos". *Juntas vecinales* are very dependent on local resources (both human and physical) for being operational, and we encounter a wide variety in terms of leadership and capacity. Moreover, not every village has a *Junta Vecinal*, be that due to historical reasons (it was not established or the way the village was settled/founded), lack of local resources and/or municipal take over (in some cases because nobody stands for election (Martinez, 2019)). Their persistence (and relative low attrition) in face of hierarchical and centralizing/rationalizing policies (Law 27, 2013), and diminishing resources, indicates the historical roots of village administration, and the resilience of self-management of communal assets.

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[4] Metropolitan areas are not applicable to this case, and municipal consortia are not recognized as Local Entity in Cantabria (Law Cantabria 6, 1994).
[5] Terminology varies within Spanish regions, being analogous to *pedanias, concejos, parroquias*, etc… *Junta Vecinal* is the term used in Cantabria.

2.2 The geographical context: Cantabria

Cantabria is among the smallest regions of Spain in terms population, ranked 16th out of 17 with 580,000 inhabitants (Decree 1458, 2018). More than half of the population is based around the capital city (Santander) and the increasingly urbanized corridor to the second biggest city, Torrelavega. The remainder of the population is more dispersed along small towns and villages, mostly by the coast. Already by the 90s, when LEADER arrives, there is a notable population loss in the rural mountainous areas, with migration towards coastal and urban/industrial areas, and more dynamic regions like the neighbouring Basque Country. This is compounded by the relative loss of value for the primary economic sector, which had been the basis for rural economies with nearly 40% of active population employed in the agriculture in 1991 (Corbera Millan, 2006), and the reduction of public and private services (i.e. number and frequency of bus routes, bank branches, concentration of health and education services in towns).

The Autonomous Community of Cantabria was formally created as part of Spain´s new constitutional framework in 1982 over the territory of a single province (*Provincia de Santander*). The province administrative level is taken by the regional government, therefore erasing one intermediate level still present in multi-province autonomous communities. The functions and competencies of the Regional Government are, in general, divided by sectors each under the management of a *consejeria* (translated as regional ministry or department) and apportioned by the elected regional government. In this case, the relevant department for the period in question was *Consejeria de Ganaderia* (Department of Livestock), which is currently named *Consejeria de Desarrollo Rural, Ganaderia, Pesca y Medio Ambiente* (Department for Rural Development, Livestock, Fisheries and Environment) (Gobierno de Cantabria, 2020).

From medieval times, Cantabria´s basic unit was the village and the corresponding locally elected *concejo*, or village council, through *derecho de behetria*, right to choose its own lord and have self-standing (Asubio , 2019). Villages coordinated and cooperated along *Valles* (valleys) as the geography of the area (south to north rivers surrounded by high mountains) would make communication and economic relations along river basins much easier. This traditional system of administration would over time diminish with the encroachment of royal and/or aristocratic domains, until liberal and rationalizing administrative reforms (Bourbon and post-Napoleonic) would lead to the, top-down, pooling of villages into municipalities, and valleys into provinces (Law RBLR 7, 1985). The small size of many municipalities is not unique to Cantabria, but rather a model promoted across Spain by the 1812 Constitution (Ferreira Fernandez, 2000), and with very few variations since.

Mechanisms of inter-municipal cooperation are now quite common, with 20 *mancomunidade*s overall in Cantabria (Asubio , 2019). Twelve of these lie in the case study territory. This substantial degree of inter-municipal cooperation reflects both a practical factor (small municipalities pooling limited resources), but also a throwback to the historical *valles*. However, it is important to note that these inter-municipal cooperations begin to develop only around the beginning of the 1990s (i.e. roughly the same time as the LEADER program, see below).

Table 1 Registered Mancomunidades in the case study territory (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Publicas, 2019)

Area	Name	Date of creation
SN	Mancomunidad de Servicios de los Valles del Saja y Corona	19/02/91
SN	Mancomunidad de los Valles de San Vicente	06/09/91
AAT	Mancomunidad Oriental de Trasmiera	02/08/93
AAT	Mancomunidad "El Brusco"	08/06/94
SN	Mancomunidad de Ayuntamientos "Reserva del Saja"	18/11/98
AAT	Mancomunidad de Municipios Sostenibles de Cantabria	02/01/01
AAT	Mancomunidad de Municipios del Alto Asón	17/04/01
AAT	Mancomunidad de Servicios Sociales de los Ayuntamientos de Ampuero, Limpias, Liendo, Guriezo y Colindres	09/01/02
SN	Mancomunidad "Saja-Nansa"	24/10/03
SN	Mancomunidad de Municipios "Nansa"	11/01/05
SN	Mancomunidad del Bajo Deva	24/02/06
SN	Mancomunidad de Servicios Costa Occidental	13/12/11

While a late 90s Cantabria Autonomous Community reform (Law Cantabria 8, 1999) anticipates the creation of *comarcas* as a supra-municipal framework, the legislation has not been developed and none has yet been formalized.

There is, however, a *de facto* overlapping "comarcalization" by different agencies and departments of the Cantabria Regional Government, like tourism (*comarcas turisticas*) or health service delivery (*hospital comarcal*), with no equivalent local administrative structure. An approach that can be termed de-concentration rather than devolution or empowerment of local structures.

Juntas vecinales, on the other hand, are very common and deeply rooted in Cantabria´s village governance, especially in rural and mountainous areas (Asubio , 2019). Village councils in Cantabria tend to be small settlements although the range is quite wide, from the smallest Otero del Monte, having two inhabitants, to the largest Muriedas with 12,362 inhabitants (Martinez, 2019). It is not uncommon, in the case study area, to find *juntas vecinales* in every settlement aside from the municipal seat in a given municipality. Many of these manage important local commons like forests and pastures, but also community buildings like schools, meeting halls and housing. While their importance has been diminishing, there is still strong local attachment to this traditional institution and a specific regional law (Law Cantabria 6, 1994) was developed to complement the national one (Law RBLR 7, 1985). Only nine *juntas vecinales* have been dissolved in Cantabria in the last 20 years, with two more in the process (Martinez, 2019), in spite of increased administrative burden (Law 27, 2013) and pressure to be absorbed by municipal governments.

Overall, local administration in the early 1990s is characterised by defined distributed competences combined with a more traditional top-down policy approach by regional government (Gil de Arriba, 1999). While the new Spanish Constitution of 1978 brings a process of autonomy and decentralization/devolution, this mostly accrues to the autonomous communities (from Central/Madrid towards Region/Santander) rather than municipal authorities, bringing decision-making closer but short of full decentralization. Moreover, Cantabria´s rural areas had been little affected by the previous "waves" of local participatory processes. The historical experience of participation in *juntas vecinales* may be placed on the positive side to a very limited extent. The EU's LEADER program (see next section) would therefore bring to the area a very innovative approach (arguably a paradigm shift) in both inter-municipal relations and participation, for which there was little previous local experience (CEMAC, 1999).

2.3 LEADER program

2.3.1 What is LEADER?

LEADER is the name of several EU programs promoting community-led rural development. It corresponds to the French acronym "*Liaisons Entre Activités de Developement de L'Economie Rural*". It is currently jointly funded through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD - DG AGRI) and EU member state national/regional Rural Development Program (RDP)[6].

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[6] The proportion of fund provision has been changing over time, from the EU´s initial 50% to currently being up to 80% by regional governments.

The LEADER approach has more recently also been extended to three additional EU funds: European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (DG MARE), European Regional Development Fund (DG REGION) and European Social Fund (DG EMPL), under the term Community-Led Local Development -CLLD. A single action can receive resources from multiple funds (ENRD, 2019)

LEADER is the result of a shift at EU level from agricultural development to rural development (Perez Fra, 2004) in which a set of ideas are given priority: first, diversifying incomes as agriculture is not considered the only economic activity; second, endogeneity or the need to focus on existing resources; third, sustainability not only in understanding the environment but also conservation measures; and fourthly, local agency and bottom-up approaches. It coincides in time with Local Agenda 21, a participatory sustainable development framework born out of the Rio United Nations Conference in 1992. Some of the concepts and approaches overlap (Font & Subirats, 2007), although there is little cross-reference between the two initiatives.

The primary objective of LEADER has been to support (through grant funding) local actors in rural settings to develop their territory in a sustainable manner. Additionally, it also aims at improving organizational capacity of rural communities, employment creation and innovating in natural and cultural heritage management. LEADER approach can be identified by seven characteristics (RCDR, 2019):

- Territorial approach. Each strategy is based on local resources and clearly bounded geographically.
- Bottom-up. It aims at engaging the population and seeking solutions and decisions from a bottom up approach.
- Local Action Groups (LAG). The primary cooperation, implementation and networking element is the LAG. There is a requirement for the presence of different sectors in the decision-making bodies of the LAG, ensuring wider representation and common strategy and action.
- Innovation. Greater emphasis on innovative actions and adding value to more traditional approaches. New solutions that can also be transferred to other locations.
- Integrated approach. All sectors of the economy, society and local resources are taken into account.
- Financial decentralization. It is the LAG that decides the final beneficiaries of funding or support and not the source of funding.
- Network. Exchanges good practices and success cases through networks and cooperation across regional and national boundaries.

These seven characteristics constitute the backbone of the requirements imposed on the mandated networks developed under the LEADER program (LEADER European Observatory, 1999). I will come back to these characteristics in more detail in section 5.1, since the extent to which these mandates are followed in my case study areas gives a direct indication of the stringency of the imposed mandate – or, reversely, the leeway available within the program for local actors to influence network design. Such leeway is critical to the analysis of my first Research Question RQ1, since local actors would naturally not have any role to play in mandated governance networks' design if the imposed mandates are encompassing as well as fixed. Hence, establishing the *potential* for local actors to play a role in the process of designing a mandated network (by exploring the level of autonomy local actors have) is a first step towards understanding the role of local actors in such processes.

LEADER´s perceived success led to the creation in 1996-7 of the *Programa Operativo de Desarrollo y Diversificacion Economica de Zonas Rurales* (PRODER). This program was implemented in Spanish regions/areas under EU´s Objective 1 that were not already recipients of LEADER funds (MARM, 2011). It follows LEADER principles, but it is not a Community Initiative, therefore a twin parallel program. For the purpose of this study, although there are some administrative and oversight differences, LEADER and PRODER are considered equivalent. Overall, they would cover more than 90% of the Spanish territory, proof of its mainstreaming within the national policy context (MARM, 2011)

The key management component for implementation of the program are the Local Action Groups (LAG; GAL in Spanish). In the latest cycle of LEADER, LAGs are public-private bodies (Tirado Ballesteros & Hernandez, 2019), which in the case of Spain are usually formalized as associations, with both local authorities and civil society organizations as members. Membership composition varies but the current[7] EU requirement for funding is that no more than 49% can be local government institutions or a single sector. While the membership composition was a recommendation in earlier LEADER, it would become a funding requirement in 2000 (LEADER + and PRODERCAN), as an attempt to prevent that "associations become merely formal" (Perez Fra, 2004). In terms of program funding, LAGs are selected and approved by the regional authority (in this case the Cantabria Regional Government) and the EU[8], although, as associations, they are also free to seek other sources of funding (including their own). Aside from conditions set by funding

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[7] This requirement has also evolved over the different iterations of the program.
[8] As noted earlier, the budget proportions between funders have been varying over time, with the regional government increasing and the EU decreasing

requirements, associations are fairly free to structure themselves internally according to Spanish legislation[9]. Although the Spanish Law of Associations (1/2002 of March 22) already considers the assembly the "supreme governing body" (art. 11), the board can fully act on its behalf unless otherwise stated. This gives the board a great measure of autonomy if the assembly is not very active, although some authors have raised both legal and programatic concerns on how this was interpreted in some LAGs (MARM, 2011)

An extra requirement, set by Spanish public administration framework, due to the nature of disbursing public funds, is to have the provision of administrative-financial oversight at the local level by a certified civil servant. This is usually resolved by designating a certified civil servant from one of the municipalities (as municipalities were already required to have one).

Given the administrative, implementation and compliance requirements, it is quite common that LAGs have a technical team fully dedicated to the program (CEMAC, 1999) as an essential component for success (OIR, 2003).

The LEADER program places a significant number of requirements for a participating network along four network specifications (Segato & Raab, 2019): mandated purpose (i.e. goals, prioritization), access to resources (i.e. funding lines, technical expertise, access to policy processes), structure (i.e. membership, inclusivity, legal structure), and timing (i.e. funding cycles, agreement and reporting deadlines, incentives or penalties). As discussed in Table 2, these mandates appear strict in terms of timing and purpose, but (much) less stringent when it comes to structure and resources. As mentioned, a more in-depth analysis of this important issue will be developed in section 5.1 below.

Table 2 Mandated network specifications of LEADER. Based on Segato and Raab (2019)

Network specification	Mandated	Details
Timing	High	Established deadlines for competitive funding cycles and program reporting
Purpose	High	Implementation of LEADER funds/program, and promotion of local development. Based on a designated territory. LEADER approach required
Structure	Low-Medium	Formalized entity, but initial low requirements. Over time increased requirements on decision-making

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[9] The basic legal requirements are: a name, an address, at least three founding members and documented Articles of Association. Registration is required in order to become a legal entity.

		membership (civil society inclusion)
Access to Resources	Medium	Imposed financing framework for LEADER funds. Local actors are left free to distribute resources within the framework. Other sources of funding can be used and allocated.

2.3.2 Previous research on LEADER program

Regarding the LEADER program, scholarship has been primarily driven with a policy and practitioner focus. There is a fair amount of (EU mandated) evaluations, and studies looking into impacts and goal attainment of the networks. Comparative exercises tend to be across regions and countries, rather than within regions, as there is already a high degree of diversity in Europe for LEADER implementation (Esparcia, Escribano, & Serrano, 2015; CEMAC, 1999).

A common theme is that LEADER has challenged traditional boundaries, both in vertical administrative relations, and in sectoral divisions (CEMAC, 1999). The bottom-up approach and the creation of LAGs are identified as among the most powerful components of LEADER in challenging existing structures (CEMAC, 1999), although implementation sometimes falls short of the spirit of the approach (OIR, 2003). LEADER programs, and more specially the Local Action Groups, have been strongly perceived as instruments of power and mechanisms for clientelist networks (Esparcia, Escribano, & Serrano, 2015; OIR, 2003), where local elites and/or existing power structures co-opt the networks for their own purposes by restricting access to other actors. In the first round of LEADER there were little restrictions or unified understanding regarding structure (CEMAC, 1999) which led to significant diversity in composition and the identification of three structural logics (Perez Fra, 2004): public administration (led by local authority interest), private (led by private promoter and sectoral interest) and civil (closer to LEADER logic of encompassing the civil society). The most common initial model in Spain would be that of local authority led (CEP, 1995; OIR, 2003; MARM, 2011). The introduction of LEADER+ brought an increase of public-private structures, nevertheless local administration (elected officials) has remained the most influential actor in local networks as both leaders and intermediators (Caravaca & Gonzalez, 2009; OIR, 2003). Questions of optimal territorial size in relation to the objectives and local context are also frequently raised, favouring smaller grouping when there is little local cohesion (CEMAC, 1999; OIR, 2003; MARM, 2011).

The program was well received in Spain (CEMAC, 1999), identified as one of the main innovations in rural development policies (Esparcia, Escribano, & Serrano, 2015), and expanded through

PRODER (MARM, 2011). Nevertheless, power tensions coexist alongside economic development and democratization conceptualizations of the program, and it has varied across the different phases of LEADER over time. Three types of specific discourses (Esparcia, Escribano, & Serrano, 2015) in power relations have been identified: First, the representation of different stakeholder groups that may be less interested or not sufficiently organized (OIR, 2003). Secondly, the territorial distribution of power, where a small number of dynamic municipalities concentrate more power. And finally, the power tensions between LAGs and regional/national governments (Tirado Ballesteros & Hernandez, 2019; OIR, 2003), reflected "in the reluctance to allow local actors to take on public fund management" (Esparcia, Escribano, & Serrano, 2015)

2.3.3 LEADER in Cantabria

In the Autonomous Region of Cantabria there have been four LEADER programing cycles (plus one currently ongoing), although the approach has also been applied to the PRODER program. Selection of areas is somewhat competitive, with the regional, national and EU levels separately involved in the selection process (CEMAC, 1999). In the pilot phase, LEADER I, only one area was selected in Cantabria (Saja Nansa), with 53 areas in Spain (out of 108 proposals) and 217 in total for the whole Europe (MARM, 2011)

Table 3 LEADER programing cycles in Cantabria (RCDR, 2019)

LEADER programing cycles	Period	Local Action Groups
LEADER I	1991-1994	1: Saja-Nansa
LEADER II	1994-1999	2: Saja-Nansa; Campoo
PRODER	1996-1999	3: Liebana; Valles Pasiegos; Ason, Aguera
LEADER +	2000-2006	3: Saja-Nansa, Campoo-Los Valles; Pais Romanico[10]
PRODERCAN[11]	2000-2006	3: Valles Pasiegos; Liebana; Ason, Aguera, Trasmiera
LEADER	2007-2013	5: Campoo-Los Valles; Saja-Nansa; Liebana; Valles Pasiegos; Ason, Aguera, Trasmiera

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[10] Cross-border network with the neighbouring province of Palencia (Castilla y Leon Autonomous Community)
[11] A continuation of PRODER although the criteria were expanded to include areas not under EU's Objective 1

With LEADER 2007-2013, PRODER and LEADER "merged" and became the only rural development program, stabilizing the number of areas to 5 (in Cantabria): Campoo Los Valles, Saja Nansa, Liebana, Valles Pasiegos and Ason Aguera Trasmiera. The current iteration (LEADER 2014-2020) culminates the transformation from a targeted program to an institutionalized policy framework. The five areas and mechanisms are now fully integrated in the Rural Development Plan of the Autonomous Region of Cantabria, managed by the Department for Rural Development, Livestock, Fisheries and Environment (Gobierno de Cantabria, 2020).

Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of the 5 LAGs as of 2019[12]. The two selected areas for the thesis are Saja Nansa (Dark Green, on the left/west) and Ason Aguera Trasmiera (Dark Blue, on the right/east)

Figure 1 Map of Cantabria with Local Action Groups territories (RCDR, 2019)

Designated areas under a LAG, in some cases, do not match up previous inter/supra-municipal cooperation agreements, economic catchment areas (well-off urban areas were purposefully excluded) or 'natural' boundaries (multiple valleys and basins lumped together). While some boundaries are due to EU funding requirements, others seem to be more related to other factors (as fluctuating boundaries over time show). This is not unique to Cantabria, as it was also common across the EU since the very first LEADER (CEMAC, 1999)

Most of the involved municipalities are rural, dispersed (multiple small villages in one municipality) with populations, on average, under 2,000 people each. Cantabria LAGs are relatively small in terms of population, in comparison with LEADER I´s EU average of 52,000 inhabitants (CEMAC, 1999) Civil society organizations are small in size and number, translating into a below Spanish average representation in the networks (MARM, 2011), and historically have not been very engaged in political processes or development planning (Asociacion de Desarrollo Rural Saja Nansa, 2015).

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[12] Boundaries of LAGs have changed over time, the trend being to include more neighbouring municipalities.

Even Local Agenda 21 processes, which could have played both a complementary and experiential role, arrive in Cantabria in 2004 (Corbera Millan, 2006)[13], when LEADER is already consolidating its processes and structures. Participation in the program of more urban, affluent municipalities was been excluded or very limited[14]. Table 4 provides a summary of key attributes of the five LAGs as of 2019.

Table 4 Key 2019 data on Cantabria Local Action Groups in Cantabria (RCDR, 2019; Instituto Cantabro de Estadistica, 2019)

2019 LAG key data	Ason Aguera Trasmiera	Liebana	Campoo Los Valles	Saja Nansa	Valles Pasiegos	TOTAL
Population	34.600	6.000	30.000	32.000	27.500	134.100
Size km2	870	572	1.800	995	620	4.857
Municipalities	17	7	16	18	16	74
Member NGOs	40	14	14	25	22	115

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[13] Cantabria published the regulating decree in February 2004
[14] This goes to selection criteria. Portugal, for example, chose to integrate urban areas in their LAGs from the very first LEADER, but were not eligible for funding (CEMAC, 1999)

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

While much scholarly research has focused on network performance, an area that has not received as much attention is network formation and how the internal governance mechanisms are designed (Segato & Raab, 2019; Hu, Khosa, & Kapucu, 2016). "Decisions about network governance do not simply emerge out of thin air…they are determined by decision makers" (Provan & Kenis, 2008, p. 236) and shaped by organizational factors (Trondal & Egeberg, An Organizational Approach to Public Governance, 2018). The selection of a specific governance form "can have critical implications for overall network effectiveness" (Provan & Kenis, 2008, p. 248) and create organizational biases in processes. The resulting structure will "regulate actor´s access to decision processes… define goals to be pursued and establishes action capacity" (Trondal & Egeberg, An Organizational Approach to Public Governance, 2018, p. 5)

This study aims to both describe and explain (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994) such organizational factors in an empirical setting. In order to achieve this, two theoretical frameworks have been used. First, Segato and Raab´s mandated network formation framework provides a descriptive structure which has been specifically developed for mandated networks. Second, Organization Theory provides an explanatory framework, and the basis for some predictive hypotheses based on existing empirical evidence regarding organizational factors.

3.1 Segato and Raab's (2019) mandated network formation framework

This study's theoretical framework starts from Segato and Raab´s mandated network formation conceptual framework (Segato & Raab, 2019), as empirically applied by them to four networks of healthcare providers in Italy. This framework applies a three-stage approach (negotiation, commitment and execution) to the process of network formation. The first stage, **negotiation**, is where actors identify each other and the pre-conditions for formalization (corresponding to my RQ1). While network membership and other characteristics may be pre-defined to some extent by the mandate, in this stage, actors are introduced to the mandate requirements and goals, and get to know each other in terms of resources available, the understandings about mutual collaboration and an outline of the decision-making process. While this may be initiated by the external actor who generated the mandate, local actors or other third parties may share in some leadership activities (Saz-Carranza, Salvador Iborra, & Albareda, 2016). If there is a broad agreement, the actors move to the next stage, where the network is formalized (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

The second stage, **commitment**, represents the creation of the network structures into a formalized entity recognizable by outsiders. It is at this stage that the network focuses on building legitimacy, trust and leadership (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006). Legitimacy is to be built both internally (among network members) and externally (among external stakeholders) as an entity that can be a source of value and fulfil its mandate (Segato & Raab, 2019). Trust among members is a key ingredient in enhancing legitimacy, reducing uncertainty and potential conflict (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). In networks where members have different status and goals (e.g. non-profits, public administration, private sector), building trust and legitimacy is even more important (Segato & Raab, 2019). Leadership is now an internal dynamic (and not necessarily an external actor like in the negotiation stage), in which member leader(s) *orchestrate* (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013) arriving at decisions on formal structure, goals and strategy.

The last stage, **execution** makes the network operative, and is where the "collaborative outcomes… are produced" (Segato & Raab, 2019, p. 194). The network then becomes a running concern, and, at the same time, generates its own internal emergent dynamics as a process of interpretation and implementation of goals, roles and responsibilities. While commitment stage straddles RQ1 and RQ2 (as the mandate still has an effect on formalization), the execution stage is firmly within RQ2 (as it reflects internal dynamics among network members once the network has been established).

While analytically sequential, in practice there is sometimes an overlap between the stages, since network formation is not always linear (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012) and some components are relevant across stages (e.g. trust). Nevertheless, Segato and Raab (2019) highlight the analytical usefulness of sequentiality since, in mandated networks, the timing between stages is defined by the policymakers and the mandate.

Segato and Raab´s framework was originally used for researching mandate impact on network formation with a collection of actors operating with different status and operational logics. Here I take it a step further by analysing how local actors *interact* with each other within that mandate and subsequent internal structural dynamics. Based on their three-stage approach descriptions (both in the theoretical and empirical components of their study), a set of themes were developed in order to guide data collection and analysis.

Table 5 Ex-Ante themes based on the three-stage framework (Segato & Raab, 2019)

NEGOTIATION STAGE	COMMITMENT STAGE	EXECUTION STAGE
Context	Convening	Internal groupings
Initiation	Leading network formation	Structural changes
	Decision-making	Structure perception
	Office location	Participation
	Models	
	Reasons to join	

The negotiation stage covers two themes: Context and Initiation. In **Context**, pre-network existing conditions are explored to ascertain the experience and degree of coordination among members, the presence of similar overlapping networks and initial goal alignment with the mandate. Under **Initiation**, external and/or local leadership regarding the introduction of the mandate is considered, together with identification of potential network members

The commitment stage has been divided in six themes: Convening, Leading Network Formation, Decision-Making, Reasons to Join, Office Location and Models. **Convening** reflects on the process of bringing and formalizing membership into the network. **Leading Network Formation** identifies local leaders in the network design and early evolution. **Decision-Making** considers the formalized network structure which allocates roles and responsibilities among network bodies. **Reasons to Join** relates to the goals for joining the network among different actors.

The two remaining themes were not originally considered by Segato and Raab. However, I believe they fit the criteria for being included in this stage, which this provides an extension of Segato and Raab's operationalization. **Office Location** refers to the design choice of physical location of the network meetings and office, and the potential effects it may have on member engagement. While the physical dimension is generally not emphasized in research (Trondal & Egeberg, An Organizational Approach to Public Governance, 2018), the networks under study have an area-based goal within an already acknowledged territorial imbalance. Adding this theme thus accentuates the spatial dimension and provides a direct bridge to the importance of 'organizational locus' in organization theory (which I rely on as my second theoretical framework, see below). **Models** considers (both internal and external) knowledge, guidelines and other experiences that may have served in structuring and formalizing the network. These are out-of-mandate influences (not formal requirements) that network members may have evaluated and applied.

The execution stage has four themes: Internal Groupings, Structural Changes, Structure Perception and Participation. **Internal Groupings** investigates the formation of internal block or groups within the network and how they operate. **Structural Changes** refers to both internally and externally initiated reforms to the network´s structure and the corresponding adaptation process. **Structure Perception** considers the views of different actors on the existing network structure and how it aligns with their expectations. And **Participation** identifies engagement by different actors and within network decision-making bodies.

Overall, Segato and Raab provide a useful descriptive conceptual framework that works well in the context of my analysis. The sequential nature of the framework allows to separate the two key dynamics over time: the external mandate (primary focus of RQ1) and the internal developments (primary focus of RQ2). Given that the external mandate is modified/re-applied at LEADER program cycles, the framework can be re-used in a partially overlapping circular manner (the execution stage of previous funding cycle becomes the negotiation stage of the next funding cycle) as there are new members and territories to be included.

3.2 Organization theory

To supplement the descriptive three-stage framework discussed in the previous section, I also rely on a second, explanatory theoretical framework, namely organization theory, to derive testable predictions about the role of local actors in mandated network creation (RQ1) and subsequent network interactions (RQ2). Organization theory is mainly concerned with explaining organizations as distinct units, their structure, evolution and performance. However, organization theory is not an integrated field (Perrow, 1973; Christensen & Laegreid, 2018; Rhodes, 2011; Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2009). From the founding steps of the scientific management perspectives of Henri Fayol and Luther Gulick (Gulick, 1937) in late 19th and early 20th century, to the subsequent human relations, mechanistic, and behavioural schools (Perrow, 1973) as well as the more recent wave of institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996; March & Olsen, 2011), organization theory has abounded in diversity and complexity.

Within this diverse field, my thesis will be using Egeberg´s (2003; 1994) analytical framework as further expanded in Trondal and Egeberg (2018). This framework focuses on formal structures and the bounded rationality of agents (in the sense of Simon (1976)) to help understand how organizational structures determine attitudes, identities and decision-making behaviours. More specifically, the central argument is that individuals cannot possibly attend to all available information all the time. To deal with this, an organization's structures act as a 'guide' towards what information

is (ir)relevant, what conflicts should be (de-)emphasised, and what decision-making premises are most/lest important (Egeberg, 2003). This, in turn, will affect in a systematic way how people think and act within those structures. Organizational structures thus "provide cognitive and normative shortcuts to guide agents' choice of behaviour" (Trondal et al. 2015, p. 253; see also Simon, 1976; Egeberg, 2003; Trondal & Egeberg, 2018), such that this behaviour is expected to depend on how exactly the organisation is formally structured (e.g., by sector, function, geography or clientele; Gulick, 1937; Egeberg & Trondal 1999; Egeberg, 2006; Trondal, 2006, 2010).

This framework is of particular interest to my analysis because it is not only relevant to questions about how actors behave within *existing* structures (my RQ2), but also to questions about how new structures are *designed* (my RQ1). As argued by Olsen (2006), organizational design choices can in an organization theory perspective indeed be understood as being aimed at influencing individuals' decision-making behaviour in a pre-determined direction. Structures are "a rationally designed tool, deliberately structured and restructured in order to improve the ability to realize externally determined goals" (Olsen, 2006, p. 12; Weber, 1978). Consequently, this framework provides key concepts and tools to understand how structural constraints – whether imposed from *outside* or developed from *inside* an organization – affect decision processes and action capacity (Trondal & Egeberg, 2018).

As discussed in more detail below, I specifically focus on three classical organizational factors: structure, demography and locus. These organization theoretical concepts allow deriving several empirically testable predictions with respect to the role of local actors in mandated networks (both related to RQ1 and RQ2).

The **organizational structure** refers to the organization´s goals and priorities, rules, and allocations of functions and tasks (Egeberg M. , 2003). The structure reflects design choices as a *mobilization of bias* (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 30), where issues and dynamics are addressed, framed, *nudged*, and communicated (Simon, 1976; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) in specific ways, or even simply ignored. This provides better positioned actors an advantage in mobilizing power and access design choices (Rodríguez, Langley, Beland, & Denis, 2007); however, the ability to address power imbalances within network through the organizational structure is a success factor in collaborating networks (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006). Ultimately, structure defines the manner in which decisions are to be arrived, in terms of processes, stages and actors, whether it is top-down hierarchical or arrived in a more collegial manner through debate, negotiation or voting (Egeberg M. , 2003). These design choices not only allow for decision-making and control to be structured horizontally, vertically or through a strong shared vision (Gulick, 1937; Pfeffer, 1992), but also

induce specific approaches and understandings along sectors, geography, function or clientele (Gulick, 1937). In relation to RQ2, I expect that:

H1: Network´s structural design and changes are biased towards actors better positioned within existing structures.

The early stages of network formation may require flat structures and inclusive processes (Bryson, Crosby, Stone, & Saunoi-Sandgren, 2009), in order to reach the necessary compromise and consensus. However, especially when the organization becomes larger and more complex (Gulick, 1937), more active network management is necessary to improve performance (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012), in what is seen as an advantage of a vertical hierarchy with a dedicated management team as primary structure (Trondal & Egeberg, 2018). This leads me to elaborate the following hypothesis linked to RQ2:

H2: Increased complexity (size, network pluralism) will lead to vertical, hierarchical network structures.

In the case of mandated networks, certain structural aspects are determined by the external mandate, while others are produced by network members themselves. The incentives provided by the external mandate may not be enough to align key components of collaborative networks like trust, vision, shared goals and legitimacy (Segato & Raab, 2019), therefore creating potential issues of mandate compliance and commitment. The following hypothesis (related to both RQ1 and RQ2) is introduced:

H3: Mandate requirements further removed from current local structure and goals will trigger more resistance.

Identifying the role played by local actors in designing the initial structure (Research Question 1), and the later management and adaptation to further requirements (Research Question 2) is a fundamental task for this thesis.

The **organizational demography** deals with the basic attributes of the actors and the extent to which "background factor have an impact on actors´ decision behaviour" (Trondal & Egeberg, 2018, p. 12). While Egeberg (2003) focuses on attributes of individuals within an organization, like sex, age or length of service, the inter-organizational network nature of this thesis leads us to look at

organizational attributes such as the types of organization, length of membership in the network, clusters or membership in other networks, size, resources, etc… It is thereby important to note that the impact of demography is contingent on the space that organizational structure provides (Trondal & Egeberg, 2018), as one can easily imagine a membership requirement (structure) shaping the range of actors that engage in the network (demography). That being said, based on previous research we can formulate two testable hypotheses that mainly help in addressing Research Question 2. The first of these relates to the number of members in a mandated network. Network size is sometimes seen as a measure of influence or resources of a network from the outside. However, network size is often believed to have a negative relationship with internal problem solving (Jacobsen, 2015). Larger membership also makes it harder to find common ground (Provan & Lemaire, 2012), and the resulting network pluralism has been linked to lower levels of trust (Jordana, Mota, & Noferini, 2012). I thus expect that:

H4: Increase of number and type of network members will be a source of internal conflict as it increases network plurality and diversity of goals.

The second aspect of organizational demography that is of particular interest in my setting relates to clusters or membership in other networks. Members of one network often also interact in other settings. Such pre-existing relationships among members (Heffren, McDonald, Casebeer, & Wallsten, 2003) allow them to collaborate in a network setting. This could induce power asymmetries between clusters or blocks of network members, whereby members that have out-of-network interactions gain more leverage also over the decisions made within the network. This leads to the expectation that:

H5: Out-of-network interactions between members provide within-network power imbalances even if all members are notionally equal.

The **organizational locus** refers to the physical dimension, the location and space occupied by organizational life. This factor is probably the most under-researched of the three, with scant empirical evidence both from network and organizational theory perspectives. Yet, physical space segregates or concentrates functions and activities, which in turn can generate perceptions of roles and identities, or create "boundaries that focus decision makers´ attention" (Egeberg M. , 2003, p. 118). Empirical research has found that physical distance influences both contact and coordination behaviours (Egeberg M. , 1994; Caravaca & Gonzalez, 2009), with special importance for face to face meetings (Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013). This distance-contact relation does not

necessarily become reflected in formal arrangements but rather through the increased likelihood of unplanned meetings (Trondal & Egeberg, 2018; Hunter, 1995). While the networks under study are geographically constrained during its formation phase (Research Question 1), the weight of organizational locus falls mainly on Research Question 2, and the effects location choices (internally made by the networks) have on network members´ activity. This discussion leads to the following two hypotheses:

H6: Distance (from network office location) has a negative association with member participation.

H7: Distance (from network office location) has a negative association with decision-making roles taken up by members.

Chapter 4: Research design, method, case selection and data

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of my (empirical) research design. I start out with a general discussion and defence of the research design and method(s) chosen. Then, I turn to a description and discussion of the two cases selected. Next, the chapter presents the data sources exploited in the empirical study. This includes qualitative data (mostly interviews and networks' meeting minutes) and quantitative data (mostly official statistics). Finally, at the end of the chapter, I discuss issues related to research as well as a description of ethical issues and compliance with data and source protection protocols.

4.1 Research design and method

Mandated networks are increasingly common, and their hybrid inter-organizational collaborative nature presents a rich set of challenges. This thesis explores the agency of local actors in a mandated environment through the lenses of an organizational theory and mandated network conceptual framework. In order to answer the stated research questions, a mixed methods case study design has been chosen.

A case study investigates a limited number of cases – in this thesis, two spatially delimited units of a mandated governance network (see section 4.2 below) – observed over a defined period of time in an intensive manner (Gerring, 2011). The thesis thereby aims to explain how organizational factors (grouped under organizational structure, demography and locus) affect the role played by groups of actors within the mandated network. The depth of the analysis in a naturalistic setting (events that actually took place with actors who took part) has produced a "thick" description of events (Gerring, 2011; Creswell, 2013), allowing to identify specific features of the mechanisms at play from primary sources.

A mixed method approach brings the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in both sources and methods (Creswell, 2013). While the study was not originally intended to be a sequential explanatory design (Agranoff & Kolpakov, 2020), access to quantitative sources happened before qualitative, and some of the analysis has spilled over from one to the other (i.e. findings of the quantitative analysis being included as part of interview questions). Nevertheless, the overall structure of the approach has remained parallel with convergent lines of enquiry (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2013) and allowing for triangulation (Gerring & Christenson, 2017). The use of the mandated network framework and the corresponding themes has been invaluable in identifying data convergence,

establishing side by side comparison of datasets (Creswell, 2013) and providing an integrated narrative.

Process tracing method has also been of critical importance to this case study research given the large amount of data collected for multiple sources (Tansey, 2007), the focus on mechanisms for decision-making, the longitudinal nature of the study covering a period of nearly 20 years and the "theoretically driven interrogation of the chain of events involved" (Keast, 2020, p. 142). As George and Bennet describe: "in process tracing, the researcher examines histories, archival documents, interview transcripts, and other sources to see whether the causal process a theory hypothesizes or implies in a case is in fact evident in the sequence and values of the intervening variables in that case" (2005, p. 6).

The initial timeframe was initially established from 1992 (launch of LEADER I in Saja-Nansa) to 2000 (end of LEADER II/PRODER in both locations), corresponding to the period of network formation. However, it was quickly realised that the networks underwent important structural transformations, with the arrival of LEADER+/PRODERCAN and the formal requirement of integrating civil society organizations in the decision-making bodies in the year 2001. To better reflect this, the timeframe was expanded to 2010. This new time period of study then shows the early structure with local authority only, the introduction of civil society, and then the period afterwards of "settling in".

The study also follows a "bottom-up" approach and primarily focuses on data generated on perceptions, agency and actions at the local level. This means that the focus of data collection has been placed at two levels of analysis (Gerring & Christenson, 2017), first on the local governance network as its own entity, and second on municipal level actors and organizations. A third level of analysis has been generated by consolidating individual organizations into municipal territorial units, in order to provide a geographical perspective and enhance organizational locus analysis. Regional government, national or European level actors have not been targeted for interviews or archive review, and their data is sourced from official publications already in the public domain. This is not to say those actors above the municipal level are not relevant in a mandated local network formation within the LEADER case study, but to place a magnified lens on the actions and autonomy of local actors.

4.2 Case selection and description

In order to study the research questions previously indicated, the location of the Autonomous Region of Cantabria in northern Spain has been selected. More specifically, the two areas selected as case

study are Ason, Aguera, Trasmiera (AAT) and Saja Nansa (SN).

These two have been selected with a *most-similar method* (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). These local governance networks (LGN) have an initial set of similarities (such as population size and number of member municipalities), were created under the same mandated framework (EU´s LEADER approach) and have the same oversight and administrative mechanisms (Cantabria Regional Government). Yet, they have had different trajectories in terms of structure and civil society membership.

Another factor considered is the rarity of the variation (Gerring, 2011), in this case temporal, through instances of mandate introduction and change. Among the objectives of the said EU program is the promotion of bottom-up participatory governance, in a designated area which does not necessarily match existing economic, administrative or historical patterns. This was a very innovative approach in the study area. Moreover, a hybrid network of local authorities and civil society is a required output; however, this requirement is only made mandatory when the networks have already been set-up and running. This provides for a second difference relative to most existing work where hybrid public-civil society networks have received limited longitudinal attention.

A final reason is background knowledge, logistic convenience and potential ease of data access (Gerring & Christenson, 2017), as the author is originally from Cantabria and has lived within the boundaries of the one of the designated areas.

The remainder of this section discusses both selected case areas in more detail. These descriptions also use archival data collected as part of the research (while originally intended for the empirical analysis, this information has been used here to provide a better contextual understanding of both cases).

4.2.1 Saja-Nansa

Saja Nansa currently unites 18 municipalities and 25 NGOs, with 32.000 inhabitants and 995.5 km2 (Saja Nansa, 2019). There are three distinct areas: the coastal area, the Saja river valley and the Nansa river valley (GAL Saja-Nansa, 1994). This network is the only one among LEADER LAGs to have significant coastal communities (originally 3, now 5 municipalities). Its main office is in Roiz (Valdaliga).

Table 6 2019 member municipalities of Saja-Nansa, with 1991 population (Instituto Cantabro de Estadistica, 2019)

Municipality	Pop 1991	Original member	Zone
Alfóz de Lloredo	2778		Coastal
Cabezón de la Sal	6789		Saja
Cabuérniga	1091	X	Saja
Comillas	2461		Coastal
Herrerías	798	X	Nansa
Lamasón	406	X	Nansa
Los Tojos	404	X	Saja
Mazcuerras	1857		Saja
Peñarrubia	329	X	Nansa[15]
Polaciones	258	X	Nansa
Rionansa	1481	X	Nansa
Ruente	937	X	Saja
Ruiloba	731		Coastal
San Vicente de la Barquera	4349	X	Coastal
Tudanca	255	X	Nansa
Udías	843		Saja
Val de San Vicente	2487	X	Coastal
Valdáliga	2618	X	Coastal

There are seven Mancomunidades operating within the territory, some with specific focus on delivering social services, others with more generic/overlapping objectives to that of the Saja Nansa network. Some of the member municipalities are part of two or more *mancomunidades* (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Publicas, 2019). There is one Mancomunidad that completely overlaps with the network, mainly as it was created as the municipality-only counterpart to the network.

When LEADER is launched, the local context is marked by economic and population decline. The local economy was very tied to livestock, dairy on the coast and meat in the interior (Delgado Viñas, 2002). Depopulation is reflected by the fact that only two municipalities had more population by 1994

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[15] Peñarrubia is geographically part of the Deva river basin, however to the west and north there is a different Autonomous Community (Asturias), and to the South a more defined territory (Liebana).

than in 1900 (GAL Saja-Nansa, 1994). Moreover, most of the population was concentrated closer to the coast with very stark differences in population densities, San Vicente de la Barquera with 106 residents per km2 and Polaciones with 2,9 residents per km2 (Delgado Viñas, 2002). Most of the roads were secondary and along difficult geography with infrastructure considered inadequate for half of the settlements[16] in the territory (GAL Saja-Nansa, 1994).

This LAG is the senior of them all in Cantabria, as it started with the original LEADER, as a pilot European Community Initiative with 12 local governments in 1992. It is in this early period that most of the investments will be allocated to rural tourism projects, accruing to coastal municipalities and, to a lesser extent, lower valley ones (Gil de Arriba, 1999). It is with the arrival of LEADER + (and the requirement/restriction of 50% for public administrations), that a new set of Articles of Association are drawn[17] in 2001 (Saja Nansa Archives, 2001). LEADER + is significant not only by full membership inclusion of civil society in the network, but also three new municipal members joined: Cabezon de la Sal, Mazcuerras and Udias. This territorial increase would bring more Saja valley municipalities, but also Cabezon de la Sal, the largest local government in the area both in population and economy (Instituto Cantabro de Estadistica, 2019).

The latest territorial expansion, with three coastal municipalities (Comillas, Ruiloba and Alfoz de Lloredo) has taken place in the latest LEADER iteration, and therefore out of the timeframe of this thesis.

4.2.2 Ason-Aguera-Trasmiera

This LAG currently includes 17 municipalities, 34.632 inhabitants and 870.60 km2 covering three historical/distinct valleys: Ason - nine municipalities- , Aguera[18] - three municipalities- and Trasmiera - five municipalities- (GAL Ason Aguera Trasmiera, 2019; Instituto Cantabro de Estadistica, 2019). The main office is currently located in Ramales de la Victoria, although originally was based in the village of Udalla (Ampuero Municipality). Membership is currently composed of 17 local governments and 40 NGOs. There are five *mancomunidades* also operating in the current territory (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Publicas, 2019).

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[16] Out of 177 settlements identified in the report.
[17] Among the changes it is also a new name: Asociacion de Desarrollo Rural Saja Nansa.
[18] The Spanish name is *Agüera*, but for ease of language Aguera is used throughout the document

Table 7 Member municipalities of Ason-Aguera-Trasmiera in 2019 with 1991 population (Instituto Cantabro de Estadistica, 2019)

Municipality	Population 1991	Original Member	Zone
Ampuero	3324	X	Ason
Arredondo	670	X	Ason
Bárcena de Cicero	2283		Ason
Entrambasaguas	2539		Trasmiera
Guriezo	1715	X	Aguera
Hazas de Cesto	1269		Trasmiera
Liendo	787	X	Aguera
Limpias	1170	X	Ason
Ramales	2481	X	Ason
Rasines	1030	X	Ason
Ribamontán al Monte	2002		Trasmiera
Riotuerto	1542		Trasmiera
Ruesga	1327	X	Ason
Soba	1856	X	Ason
Solórzano	1022		Trasmiera
Valle de Villaverde	426	X	Aguera[19]
Voto	2546	X	Ason

Ason Aguera LAG (Trasmiera would be a later addition) is launched under PRODER in 1996 with 11 municipalities. At the time, the area is suffering similar issues to other rural areas in Cantabria: depopulation and dependence on declining agricultural sector. Nevertheless, its economy is more balanced than Saja Nasa, with relatively larger industry and service sectors (Delgado Viñas, 2002) While PRODER, in its inception, has some technical differences with the Community Initiative LEADER, both programs are practically equal in terms of administrative framework for network formation (MARM, 2011). Same as with Saja Nansa, the arrival of LEADER+/PRODERCAN, meant a fundamental change of operating due to the requirement of including civil society. In this case, they reform rather than draw new Articles of Association, with a wide range of proposals regarding the structuring of the managing board, ending with a board of 10 members (5 municipalities and 5 associations) (AAT Archives, 2004). A later change, outside the timeframe of this thesis, would

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[19] Villaverde is an exclave, completely surrounded by the province of Biscay (Basque Country Autonomous Community)

increase the board to 11 (5 municipalities and 6 associations) in order to accommodate a more restrictive requirement regarding inclusion in decision-making (no sector can be more than 49%). This LAG has also been "creeping" territorially into another area, with now 5 municipalities belonging to the area of Trasmiera, hence the name change from Ason-Aguera to Ason-Aguera-Trasmiera.

4.3 Data

Data sources are both qualitative and quantitative, with each section below describing sampling and collection approaches (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). Table 8 below provides an overall summary of data collected for the empirical study.

Table 8 Summary data sources

Type	Quantity	Origin	Notes
Interviews	17 (700 minutes)	Key local actors	Recorded and transcribed
Network meeting minutes	276 documents	SN and AAT network archives	Coding *in situ* due to copy restrictions
Other Network archive documents	1 LEADER application 7 LGN charters 1 assessment report 2 membership rolls	SN and AAT network archives	Coding *in situ* due to copy restrictions
Statistical datasets and registries	3 datasets 2 registries	ICANE, Regional Government and National Ministries	Publicly available online
Evaluation and other reports	2 EU-wide ex-post evaluation reports 1 Ministry report 1 social capital study	Consultants, foundations and other external bodies	Publicly available online

4.3.1 Qualitative Sources

As part of the initial research design, the target of 14 **interviews** was established: half from each network, 2/3rds from the earlier stages of network formation and primarily board members (6 vs 4 from technical team and 4 others). From early data analysis, the author realized that an added layer

of targeting was required so more diverse viewpoints could be captured: 3 geographical sub-sets for each network, and regional actors have been added, adding an extra layer of stratification (Creswell, 2013). Table 9 reflects the distribution of interviewees.

In the end, primary data was collected through 17 semi-structured face to face interviews with people involved with the networks. Sampling has followed a non-probability approach, as the aim has been to identify the key actors and obtain information about specific events and processes (Tansey, 2007; Hunter, 1995).

Sources have been identified through a mix of purposive and quota sampling ensuring that both key actors and a diverse set of representatives were present (Tansey, 2007). This initial sampling was done based on data obtained from public records and network´s archival documents and using positional criteria (Tansey, 2007). Of those identified, 11 were contacted, available and interviewed. Moreover, snowball sampling has also been applied by following up on recommendations from key informants and other actors, and based on reputational criteria (Tansey, 2007). Six people not originally identified were then also interviewed.

Table 9 Key demographics of interviewees

Label	Distribution
Gender	Male (13) Female (4)
Network[20]	Saja Nansa (9) Ason Aguera Trasmiera (6) Other/Regional (3)
Role[21]	Technical Team[22] (4), Local Elected Official[23] (2) Local Elected Official and Board Member (4), Civil Society and Board Member (5), Civil Society (3) Experts[24] (3)
Zone	Coastal (4), Saja (1), Nansa (2), Ason (3), Aguera (1), Trasmiera (1), Other/Regional (5)
Period[25]	90s (6), 00s (14), Current (9)
Sample	Purposive (11), Snowball (6)

Compared to the initial target the following changes happened: firstly, an increase of the number of total interviews from 14 to 17, mostly from Saja Nansa area. Second, the bulk of the interviews have shifted from target 2/3rd from the 90s period, to ½ from the 2000s. This is mainly because of the

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[20] Some interviewees have been active in more than one network
[21] Some interviewees have played different roles over time
[22] This includes managers, technical specialist and other network technical team members
[23] This includes local elected officials that have engaged the network as such but held no formal position in the network, like village council representatives and municipal council members
[24] Experts includes academics, consultants and civil servants
[25] Some interviewees have been active in multiple periods

increase of civil society actors (they couldn't be members in the 90s) and reflects better the 2001/2 changes due to the arrival of LEADER+/PRODERCAN. And finally, there has been an increase of non-board members (either rank-and-file network members or external actors)

On the issue of representativeness of the sample, to note the following points:

- The sample´s gender imbalance reflects, to a great extent, the membership and leadership distribution of the network. In the earlier years all the mayors were male, and while there has been an increase of female mayors since, the imbalance remains. Civil society and technical teams are the main source of female respondents.
- Saja-Nansa network is over-represented because of proximity to the researcher´s base of operations, and earlier access to the archives and respondents. Nevertheless, Ason-Aguera-Trasmiera network sources are considered enough in number (within the original target range) and diverse in nature to provide quality data.
- Sources from the Coastal area in Saja Nansa are also over-represented and it reflects the network dynamics in terms of participation and leadership (as will be seen later in the findings)

The interviews followed a predefined interview guide (Creswell, 2013), with questions about the context before network formation, interviewee's motivations and actions in the network formation process, and subsequent changes regarding structure (Annex 5 Interview Guide). The interviews took place in Spanish language, in a location of their choice, and usually lasted between 30-60 minutes each (more than 700 minutes of interviews in total). They have been recorded and transcribed verbatim (with support of NVivo 12 software) in Spanish language, and with written consent[26]. As some of the questions have asked the subjects about events in the past (up to 30 years), there is a risk of both recall bias and that an explanatory narrative may have been built in the meantime. Triangulation between subjects and between types of sources has been used to minimize these risks. Saja-Nansa related interviews were, in the main, conducted earlier (October-November 2019) due to easier access and availability, Ason-Aguera and regional ones were conducted in December 2019 and January 2020. Interview data also provided for the direct quotes inserted in the findings. All the included quotes were individually validated by the respondents in May 2020. When the respondents were in doubt of the context of the quote or exact wording, a copy of the recording was provided. They also had the chance to edit the phrases to adapt them from spoken to written form. No editing has been done by the thesis´ author.

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[26] One interview was under verbal consent, as the interviewee forgot to sign the form.

Network meeting minutes have also been a key source of qualitative data. Access to the archives was formally requested to the two networks and granted. Focus has been on Assembly meeting minutes, while using Board´s minutes for cross-referencing on themes of membership, internal structures, and rules and regulations. The kind of data to be collected from the minutes is limited by the style they are drafted in: they mostly record vote results without disaggregating, and the description of themes discussed are not enough to identify alternative discussion points to those agreed. In total 276 separate meeting minutes for the period 1992 to 2010 have been reviewed and coded. Given that no copy was allowed to be made of archived minutes, all of them were coded in place at each network´s offices.

Table 10 Breakdown of meeting minutes reviewed

Network	Meeting minutes analysed
Saja Nansa 1992-2010	- 71 assembly minutes - 88 board minutes
Ason Aguera Trasmiera 1996-2010	- 49 assembly minutes - 67 board and commission minutes

Other documents that have been collected and/or reviewed include a) Membership rolls (2), where each accepted member has been registered including basic details (name, date of joining, address and date of leaving -if applicable), available at network´s archives; b) Network charters (2 SN, 5 AAT) reflecting the documented structure at its moment of approval, available at the network´s archives; c) LEADER II application to the EU by Saja Nansa, providing background and context of members relations, available at network archive; d) Ex-post evaluations (2) of LEADER I and II conducted on behalf of the European Commission and covering the whole program, available online; e) Spanish Ministry of Agriculture assessment report of LEADER I, providing an national overview, available at Saja Nansa archive; Ministry of Environment report providing an overview of LEADER 1991-2011; f) Social capital study (1) commissioned by both networks.

The author also took notes from public statements by local officials (including members of LEADER LAGs) and experts at the 1st National Forum on Depopulation and Rural Tourism (2019) in Cabarceno (Cantabria).

4.3.2 Quantitative Sources

Official municipal statistics on population, area, municipal budgets and income have been obtained from the *Instituto Cantabro de Estadis*tica (ICANE, 2019) and *Gobierto – Presupuestos Municipales* (Gobierto, 2020). Data on *mancomunidades* has been obtained from the Registry of Local Entities (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Publicas, 2019), and data about associations from the Association Registry (Consejería de Presidencia, Interior, Justicia y Acción Exterior, 2020). Electoral data has been sourced from *Infoelectoral* (Ministerio de Interior, 2020)

Data on distances and times from/to network offices has been obtained from Google (Google Maps, 2019). The shortest route and the fastest time (not always on the same path) were taken into account on a set day and time. While travel times have been reduced since the 90s due to heavy investment in road infrastructure since then, distances have remained similar as the road trace have not had major changes (highways were not used in the calculation as they were not operational in 1991 in the target area). Town-hall location was used as proxy for office location for all organizations located in the same municipality.

4.4 Data Analysis

As a guiding structure and help to the analysis of the various data sources, a codebook was developed for both quantitative and qualitative data. This was continually updated during the data collection period. The codebook contains the description of the thematic coding labels and reference for all the actors´ acronyms (especially invaluable given the large amount of civil society organizations coded). In the remainder of this section, I will describe how the data from the interviews (section 4.4.1), meeting minutes (section 4.4.2) and other sources (section 4.4.3) was used throughout the analysis.

4.4.1 Interviews

Regarding the interview data, the coding was started using NVivo 12 software. However, it was soon realised that this process was generating too many labels and hampering grouping and consolidation. In light of this, coding was re-started with the more traditional pen and paper tools. This coding and analysis was conducted in a three-phase approach:
- first, each interview was analysed, and each single theme coded,
- second, the coding labels were grouped under a set of themes and sub-themes separately for each network. As the end of the second phase, sub-themes were assessed on the amount and

quality of responses and some changes took place. This led to the merger of several categories and the movement of some themes into other stages of the network formation process. Each remaining theme/label was then analysed to see how widespread among respondents it was.

- third, after a first draft of the findings based on the developed coding scheme, I realized that the large number of themes (12) was hampering the adequate presentation of the analysis. Moreover, there was still some overlap within different themes. A further, and final, round of consolidation then took place to reach the final arrangement of (now 7) coding and analysis groups presented in the table below.

Table 11 Coding groups after review of data collected.

NEGOTIATION STAGE	COMMITMENT STAGE	EXECUTION STAGE
Initiation	Leading network design	Decision-making
Convening	Office location	Participation
		Sustainability

The interview data were subsequently used for two elements in the empirical analysis. On the one hand, they provided critical input for the analysis of the seven LEADER approach characteristics (Territorial approach, Bottom-up, Local Action Groups, Innovation, Integrated approach, Financial decentralization and Network). As these seven characteristics constitute the backbone of the requirements imposed on the mandated networks developed under the LEADER program, analysing the extent to which they are followed provides a perspective of the stringency of the mandates. This is crucial to understand the amount of leeway available to local actors within the program. First, each characteristic is linked to relevant component of the theoretical framework (structure, demography, locus), then a description is provided for the related (composite of the two networks) situation before LEADER, in the 1990s (local authority only membership) and the 2000s (hybrid membership). Actual change is rated Low-Medium-High by comparing pre-reform status against LEADER approach aims. Table 12 below provides an analytical schema.

Table 12 Analytical framing LEADER and divergence

LEADER APPROACH	Status Pre-LEADER	Networks in the 90s	Networks in the 00s	LEADER Aims	Actual change
Characteristic #x Theoretical Framework: x	Description of context before arrival of LEADER / PRODER. Status quo	Description of the networks after the launching LEADER / PRODER. Status quo +1	Description of the networks after implementing civil society inclusion Status quo +2	Description of characteristic #x	From Pre to 90s: From 90s to 00s: Degree of change for each reform on the previous

On the other hand, the interviews provide the framing for the main set of descriptive findings regarding network formation and design in Chapter 5. The initial correspondence between Research Question 1 (network design) and the Negotiation Stage, as well as between Research Question 2 (network interactions) and the Commitment and Execution Stages remains as discussed before. Naturally, the interview data were also critical for the explanatory aspects of the analysis linking key findings back to the concepts from organization theory set out in section 3.2 above.

4.4.2 Meeting minutes

Network meeting minutes were coded directly in Excel during fieldwork in Spain, as original documents could not be copied. This has restricted my analysis to the information coded *in-situ* and therefore limited the potential for alternative coding framework and analysis afterwards. As a direct result, meeting minutes provide information on the topics covered, decisions taken and the decision-making process (consensus, majority, weighted voting, etc..), but the amount of information on what was said during the meetings – to the very limited extent that this was originally in the documents – is highly constrained. That being said, the information brought together from these meeting minutes allows documenting several important characteristics of the networks as well as how these characteristics developed over time. Although the data sources themselves are qualitative in nature, the coding process during my analysis of this information transformed them into a number of quantitative measures for each network. Specifically, I generated seven basic variables from the meeting minutes that are important input for the analysis of research question RQ2.

Effective membership. As networks' membership rolls (AAT Archives, 2019; Saja Nansa Archives, 2019) were not updated on a regular basis, a substantial difference was noted between the official and effective membership levels. Many were still in the membership roll but displayed no active role in

the network in any shape or form. In order to reflect actual members (what I label "effective" membership), a clean-up process was undertaken from meeting minutes data (AAT Archives, 2019; Saja Nansa Archives, 2019): civil society organization that had not any attended assembly meetings by 2010 were removed up to the year after their last attendance. Some municipal councils have likewise not been attending meetings for many years, but these were retained as local authorities are "core" network members (their territory is subject to LAG actions as long as they are nominal members) and they have been paying their dues. Overall, this corrected membership number provides a better perspective of active membership for each year.

Distribution of members per municipality. Using the previous effective membership measure, the headquarters for each organization was identified using Cantabria Association Registry (Consejería de Presidencia, Interior, Justicia y Acción Exterior, 2020) and internet search. Those which were not locally based or their activities were well beyond the networks territory were classified as Institutional Members (agencies, departments and other entities related to regional or national public administration), Professional Bodies (guilds, chartered professional bodies, trade unions, chambers of commerce), or Regional Associations. This provides a view of total (effective) membership by municipality and provides one indication of network activity levels by local actors.

Board membership. I calculate the time spent as board member per municipality (including local authority and civil society) as obtained from meeting minutes (AAT Archives, 2019; Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). First, the total number of potential board membership years is calculated (e.g., a municipality that joins in 2001 only has 9 potential years). Then, every year a municipality is present in the board is counted. The latter is then divided by the former to reach the time as board member as a share of the potential time (i.e. 2 years actual over 10 potential equals 20% of time as board member). In light of the large board in Ason Aguera Trasmiera, an additional analysis was conducted with the same approach, but instead focusing on the four executive positions (President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer). Both measures are informative about network activity levels by local actors as well as their leadership roles.

Assembly meeting yearly frequency. Since the assembly is the only decision-making body where all members have both voice and vote, the frequency of assembly meetings is an important indicator for local actors' possibilities to provide input. The number of network assembly meetings is counted per year as per the meeting minutes (AAT Archives, 2019; Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). This provides an organizational structure indicator, as assemblies are usually organized by the network leadership, controlling timing and topics, with only a minimum requirement set by Charter (usually one per year).

Yearly average attendance of assembly meetings. Yearly potential attendance was calculated by multiplying effective members for a given year and the number of assembly meetings that year (AAT Archives, 2019; Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Then a percentage was calculated on actual physical attendance over potential attendance. For instance, two meetings in a given year with 20 members equals 40 yearly potential attendance. If five showed up in the first meeting and 15 in the second meeting - totalling 20 participants - then the yearly average attendance is set at 50%. This provides an indicator of overall actor participation in assemblies over time.

Vote delegation. To ascertain the prevalence of members delegating their vote to another network member at the general assembly, the total number of delegators and the number of delegated votes are tallied per group (local authority and association) for each network separately. Then the percentage over the total number of effective members and the total number of potential votes is calculated (AAT Archives, 2019; Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Given the fairly large numbers of delegated votes in Ason Aguera Trasmiera, an extra analysis was conducted specifically for this network, in which a calculation is done for the number of yearly average delegated votes and also the yearly percentage of delegated votes over total potential votes. This indicator provides a measure of engagement with decision-making while not directly attending assemblies, and a also a measure of reliance/trust among actors

Distance to coast. Some respondents claimed a divide between coast and interior, and three different analyses were done to verify these assertions. In both networks, I counted the number of municipalities one would need to cross to reach the coast as a proxy for distance to coast (i.e. Rionansa must cross Herrerias and Val de San Vicente to reach the sea, hence a value of 2). In both cases, this distance to coast was plotted in relation to number of members per municipality. The analysis confirmed (Figure 4) what respondents claimed for Saja Nansa and converges on results from parallel analysis. However, in the case of Ason Aguera Trasmiera it remained with no apparent covariance. To further test the claim, it was also plotted against assembly attendance and board executive positions, which provided very weak and mixed signals. Graphs for AAT have not been included in the study as they are inconclusive and did not add to the overall analysis.

4.4.3 Other data

The information extracted from the meeting minutes (as described above) was also combined with the contextual statistical data in a quantitative analysis. This analysis attempts to identify correlations

between important structural variables (derived from contextual statistical data) and network leadership as well as participation outcomes (derived from the meeting minutes), which is important in light of answering research question RQ2. Correlation coefficients were generated using Excel (Annex 4 Correlation Coefficients). More specifically, the dependent variables are:

a) Board membership (percentage of time as board member per municipality, label %BOARD). This is an indicator of leadership and presence in decision-making bodies, and therefore reflects important information about local actors' role in the network (see above).

b) Assembly Attendance (percentage of times attended network assembly per municipality, label %ASSATTEND). This is an indicator of participation, which reflects a weaker form of local actors' role in the network compared to board memberships (see above).

The central independent variable is the time in minutes from municipality to location of office assembly (label OFFTIME). This variable was chosen over distance in kilometres as interview respondents were placing higher emphasis on travelling time. It aims to measure the importance of physical access/proximity, which is directly linked to the theoretical notion of 'locus' in organization theory (see section 3.2).

4.4.4 Analytical paths not taken

Social Network Analysis

Extensive use of social network data collection and analysis was considered, including the use of data already collected by both LAGs as part of their social capital mapping exercise (Asociacion de Desarrollo Rural Saja Nansa, 2015). This is line with an increasing body of research that uses the findings and methods from inter-personal networks to an organizational level (Popp, Milward, MacKean, Casebeer, & Lindstrom, 2014; Hu, Khosa, & Kapucu, 2016). However, the use of this method requires several steps (Lemaire & Raab, 2020) which this study was not able to address. Social Network Analysis (SNA) was discarded for the following reasons:

- (Lack of) Resources: it would have required reaching a wider sample, potentially hundreds of surveys and interviews. A proper SNA can be very intensive not only on the researcher but also on the respondents.

- Boundaries: As a governance network based on a territorial basis, the number of formal and informal actor is difficult to determine, as any organization in the area is a potential member.

- Timespan: the study covers nearly a 20-year period, which would have required, at least, three points of analysis (before 1991, before 2001 and 2010), increasing measurement and

data quality risks. The already developed Social Capital Map does not provide enough data for analysis in terms of the Research Questions, and it is from 2015. Moreover, SNA does not model well along temporal lines (Popp, Milward, MacKean, Casebeer, & Lindstrom, 2014)

- Institutional approach: much of social network analysis is based on individuals, and not as much on whole organizations. Disentangling individual and organizational relations, especially informal ones, degree and directionality would have been quite complicated.

Regression Analysis

Another quantitative tool, regression analysis, was considered as a powerful statistical tool to identify which independent variables have impact and their relative importance to the dependent variable. The approach was finally discarded after running three logistic regression models (thanks to Benny Geys for his support) because the low number of observations (N=29) means the regression analysis would be underpowered. This is particularly true for comparative analyses of each case individually (N=14 and N=15).

4.5 Addressing Concerns of Research Quality

As with all research, it is important to address issues of research quality and validity. Gerring's (2011) 'goodness' criteria are used as a starting point to assess the quality of the research: theoretical fit, cumulation, the treatment, the outcome, the sample, and practical constraints. While some of them may not be as relevant, given the case study method, all will be addressed in order to show that methodological considerations have received due attention.

Theoretical fit refers to the alignment between theory being used and the research design (Gerring, 2011). The thesis has a robust *construct validity*, where organizational factors under investigation are derived from organizational theory and provide answers to the stated research questions. Moreover, the hypotheses and operationalization are generated in line with both theoretical framework and previous empirical analysis (Yin, 2018). Findings have been generated using multiple sources of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, providing convergent lines of inquiry (and triangulation when possible) (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2013). The empirical test´s *severity* is average, as it does not attempt to claim cause-effect, direction and strength, but rather identify correlations within a specific set of networks. *Partition* between theory and design is also average. While initial research design (including approval of protocols) was done well in advance of data

collection and analysis, desk review for case selection already provided indications of theory-results relationships. In addition, theoretical framework was partially shifted, in which contingency theory of organizational change (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012) was replaced with organizational theory (Trondal & Egeberg, 2018). This was done as contingency theory was found to be inadequate in light of the data collected and analysis.

Cumulation discusses the thesis fit with existing academic work and the scholarly utility (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994; Gerring, 2011). Research design is fairly *standardized*, using as point of departure existing conceptual frameworks in mandated network and organizational theory, which can be later consolidated with other studies. Departures from previous approaches have been described and explained. While this specific combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is not necessarily common, the findings can be considered comparable to other empirical studies (Gerring, 2011). Furthermore, *replication* is enhanced at two levels: first, the study confirms previous empirical findings, and second the design can be replicated in the future due to detailed description of sources, data collection and analysis. Moreover, respondents (and the overall population to be sampled) are still alive, both networks are operational and open to requests for access, and don't require any special clearances or contacts. Finally, there is a robust degree of *transparency*. The thesis has been registered at the University of Bergen, and its data protection protocol and interview guide approved by NSD before research was conducted. Findings are described in detail, including sources and methods, with supporting annexes providing some of the tools and raw data. Methodological and analytical changes and shortcomings have been acknowledged, allowing other researchers to directly assess the study´s validity. A limitation remains due to data protection, as interview data has been anonymized. Nevertheless, the author remains available to other researchers that may want to access data or subjects, upon their consent. All other data is publicly available.

Regarding **treatment**, there is previous empirical evidence of *variation* or correlation between identified organizational factors and organizational behaviour. Such co-variation is present in this study, however, given the nature of the most-similar small-N case study, it does not provide for neither the maximum range nor dispersion (Gerring, 2011). The *discreteness* of a treatment is quite high, as there are defined time and geographical boundaries. Data collected is able to establish a baseline and provides for before and after treatment. This is more the case in the 2001 mandate, as before LEADER there was not an equivalent network which could provide a comparable baseline. Both *signal* and *proximity* are reasonably strong. Treatment is directly connected to the actors in the study and the effects are readably noticeable.

When it comes to **outcome**, Y is sensibly free to vary. While there are obvious constrains for local actors autonomy in a mandated network, both ex-ante (Table 2) and ex-post analysis (Chapter 5 and Annex 2 LEADER approach and compliance) indicate an important degree of local agency in organizational decisions.

Regarding **sample**, five measures are assessed (Gerring, 2011): representative, large in number (N), level of analysis, independent, and comparable. The sample´s *representation* can be assessed at two levels. Network-wise, there are only five networks in Cantabria and the degree of variance is large in such small group. Previous research on LEADER indicate that these are not necessarily uncommon cases (they all had to fulfil similar mandated characteristics) but there is great diversity in context both in Spain and in Europe (Esparcia, Escribano, & Serrano, 2015). Regarding within-case sampling, it is representative to a large extent, efforts have been made to interview a diverse set of respondents in terms of organizational background, period of activity and territory. The shortcomings of the interview sample are due to logistical/resource constrains, as it would have required a much larger group to target non-members and actors from more peripheral territories. This is a *Small-N* sample as a comparative case study. However, within-study the number of observations is fairly large in some cases, for example 276 meeting minutes providing observations of individual actors. There are three *levels of analysis*: the network as a whole, individual organizations and the territorial municipality. Individual organizations are eventually merged into the municipality level, in order to provide a territorial perspective (and the importance of organizational locus). While having multiple levels can hinder analysis (Gerring, 2011), the different levels are explicitly indicated in the findings. There may be concerns about the level of *independence*, as both networks are relatively close to each other and have the same managing authority. Potential "contamination" is explored as part of the data collection and analysis (Model theme). Also, given the longitudinal approach some historical path dependence should be assumed, as it seems unlikely that actors are assessing the full range of options in each instance observed. The diversity of the within case sample also ensures some degree of independence and avoids correlation groups (Gerring, 2011). Regarding *comparability*, the two networks where specifically chosen for their initial set of similarities and the mandate has been applied similarly in both cases. There remains the risk of a, yet to be identified, significant confounder which may have introduced a systematic error.

Finally, under **practical considerations**, to indicate the author is originally from the area and speaks the language, hence facilitating access and background knowledge of context and

institutions. The networks have archives containing meeting minutes and other relevant documents, and the potential pool of respondents are still alive and living in the target areas. Nevertheless, the mainly self-funded nature of the thesis and the timing and requirements of the Master has placed some constrains on the scope and depth of the study and data collection.

On top of Gerring´s goodness criteria, the validity and reliability criteria have also been assessed (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). **Internal validity** is grounded on the academic literature and previous empirical research. Hypotheses and conceptual framework are anchored in organizational theory and mandated network formation. While establishing causal relationships is not the primary task of this thesis, some correlations had been established and findings align with previously predicted patterns: *pattern matching* (Yin, 2018). Protocols and codes were defined and reviewed before the research started, and have been applied evenly to data sources over a short period of time, hence minimizing potential instrumental and time biases.

Regarding **external validity**, this study uses existing theory and applies it in a context where said theory has not been used before. Sampling criteria are clearly defined, and even though the research focuses on two local governance networks in a small region in Spain, it can still claim a relevant external validity for two reasons: first, these two networks have been part of a wider EU programme with the same basic framework. Although it can be argued that both national (Spain) and regional (Cantabria) authorities may have had a large influence in the final implementation of the LEADER programme, it also provides an insight into local engagement with an EU policy specifically aimed at promoting local networks. Second, networks that mandate local authority-civil society engagement are increasingly common across sectors and environments. Though the nature of the mandate and local context may be different, previous empirical research has shown already the generalizability of organizational factors highlighted in this study. It then provides a *replication logic* (Yin, 2018) to organizational theory and mandated networks.

Concerning **reliability**, as noted above under Cumulation, the thesis was registered, and key documents approved before research was conducted. All interviewing, coding and translation has been done by the author with a pre-defined protocol and codebook, therefore ensuring consistency across the data. Data analysis approaches are explained in detail, and key tools (interview guide) and analytical outputs (correlation tables, summary tables, graphs) have been attached. Both general statistics and archival data have been referenced and are publicly available. I remain confident a later researcher can replicate the case study using the same procedures (Yin, 2018).

This Master thesis is the result of balancing methodological and practical considerations in order to answer the research question.

4.6 Ethical issues

The *Norsk Senter for Forsknignsdata* (NSD) has reviewed the research design and approved the use of personal data for the purpose of this research (Reference: 312270). This means that the study is compliant with both Norwegian and EU data protection requirement. The thesis has also been pre-registered and cleared at the University of Bergen RETTE system in August 2019.

Most of the people interviewed/surveyed are public figures, either as elected officials or civil society representatives[27]. They were approached because of their involvement with LEADER LAGs. Participation has been voluntary and informed on the purpose of the interview and the study (Gerring & Christenson, 2017). All interviewees gave written consent (aside from one that forgot to sign). Only one person showed (to what I interpreted as jokingly) concerns about anonymity and how it would affect local relations; to the contrary, many participants were outspoken and eager to share their perspectives and opinions, and saw this as an opportunity to express themselves and set the record. Nevertheless, because the relatively small population sizes and that most of the actors personally know each other, efforts have been taken to ensure that data is anonymized and difficult to trace back to individuals. Direct quotes included in the study were validated by respondents, if there was no explicit written confirmation then the quote has not been used. Quotes have remained anonymous (each one being allocated an interview number in the sourcing). The anonymization process protocol was explained again as part of the validation process. The author is the only one that has access to all data and personal details, and has made the commitment to keep it confidential (Gerring, 2011).

Similarly, archival data has been accessed upon written request. Both network managers were personally briefed on the nature of the study, the kind of data required and compliance to data protection requirements. In one case there was a specific request to review before publication.

All other data is already publicly available, and I am not aware on any restriction placed on it.

4.6.1 Disclosures

A grant of 7000 NOK for data collection has been provided by the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Bergen. There have not been any other sources of funding, aside from my own private savings, for either this thesis or the Master in Public Administration at the University of Bergen.

A family member was beneficiary of a LEADER grant for starting a tourism business in Saja Nansa in 1994. This has not represented a conflict of interest, and, if anything, it has provided a deeper understanding of the practicalities and actors.

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[27] Three of the interviewees were academic, local civil servant and consultant respectively

Chapter 5: Empirical analysis: Findings

This chapter is divided in four main sections. The first section provides an analysis of the LEADER approach to the mandated networks. As mentioned before, this is critical to assess the *potential* for local actors to play a substantively meaningful role in network design, which reflects a first step towards answering RQ1. The next two sections then present the findings from both qualitative and quantitative sources for each network separately according to Segato and Raab's (2019) three-stage cycle (negotiation, commitment and execution). The analysis at this point is primarily a first order interpretation -- that is, from the viewpoint of respondents and data (Neuman, 2012) – but also some second order interpretation (i.e. my own analysis) with the aim to answer my two Research Questions as well as assess the hypotheses developed in Chapter 3. The fourth and final section provides a summary comparison of the findings between the two networks.

5.1 Mandate strictness in LEADER program

Given the mandated nature of the networks under study, local actors can only be expected to play any role at all when the mandates of the LEADER program allow at least some level of autonomy during network design and implementation. This issue was already briefly addressed in section 2.3.1 (see table 4). In this section, I return to this important point by looking in more detail at the LEADER approach requirements. The seven characteristics are briefly described before the strictness of each mandate and networks' compliance is rated. This analysis is based on a composite of both networks' collected data. Annex 2 LEADER approach and compliance provides a summary table.

Territorial approach expects each strategy to be based on local resources and clearly bounded geographically with a focus on poorer/depopulated municipalities. The introduction of LEADER brings an innovative supra-municipal area-based approach to a local context that previously had no formal territorial coordination and where the basic operating unit remained the municipality. This part of the mandate is rated as very strict since membership and area of operations have to be territorially defined. Compliance by the networks is also very high since both networks under analysis formally adhere to the approach. The networks cut across valleys and existing economic areas, which diminishes its territorial integrity. The 2001 expansion brings in wealthier and/or outlying municipalities, which leads to an increased territorial imbalance and loss of geographical cohesion, but better access to local resources.

Bottom-up aims at engaging the population and seeking solutions and decisions from a bottom up perspective. Before LEADER, there are no participatory dynamics in the two study areas and little

formal engagement with civil society. The introduction of the program initially does not alter much the *status quo* as engagement with civil society remains very limited. When the formal requirement of including other actors in decision-making is introduced in 2001, participatory processes increase somewhat. Overall, therefore, mandate strictness is initially low, although it markedly increases when the civil society requirement is put in place. The rate of compliance follows that of strictness. Formal requirements are met and implemented, although the quality of participatory mechanisms is in question.

Local Action Groups are to be the primary cooperation, implementation and networking element. It is to be composed of local actors and ensure wider representation. There was no previous similar supra-municipal structure, as *mancomunidades* were in early stages and there was limited engagement with civil society. The program brings a formal structure, but its membership is initially restricted to local authorities. The second reform cycle would bring the inclusion of civil society with a wide range of sectors; however, policy discussions disappear, thereby diminishing the cooperation and networking elements. The degree of mandate strictness is initially low but increases over time in order to ensure inclusion of civil society actors. Changes in the mandate in this case do not reflect in changes in compliance. The formal requirements are met, but this is de facto met with a decrease in the range of topics dealt by the LAGs.

Innovation places greater emphasis on innovative actions and adding value than more traditional approaches. Measuring the strictness of, and compliance with, this characteristic is complicated, as many of the mandate requirements are innovations themselves. The local context before the program entails little innovation, with fairly standard top-down initiatives that had encountered limited success in the area. LEADER was innovative on its own, and its activities focused on sectors which previously had not received much attention (i.e. rural tourism).

Integrated approach where all sectors of the economy, society and local resources are taken into account. The *status quo* was focused on ministry/department lines and sectoral initiatives. The LAGs, in both rounds of reforms, are able present somewhat integrated strategic visions but initiatives remain sectoral, and there are relevant sectors that remain out of bounds for the network (i.e livestock/dairy remains aligned with the Regional Government separate funding line).

Mandate strictness is high. Yet, the Regional Government (as managing authority) doesn't provide the space for an integrated approach. Compliance by the networks is therefore low, but this appears mostly because the autonomy to comply is restricted.

Financial decentralization in which it is the LAG that decides the final beneficiaries of funding or support and not the source of funding. Pre-program local context follows a very centralized, top-down

funding dynamic where key criteria and decisions were made elsewhere. LEADER brings a fundamental change, as the LAG became the entity making most of the decisions regarding specific criteria and individual funding allocations. However, over time, there has been an increase of bureaucratization of the processes and oversight from the Regional Government, steadily reducing the degree of local autonomy. Mandate strictness is relatively high, as it is one of the basic components of the LEADER framework. Compliance is also High as it aligns with the interest of local actors in decision-making and access to resources. Compliance has been eroding over time, not due to network´s own actions but through (primarily external) increased administrative burden

Network is the exchange of good practices and success cases through networks and cooperation across regional and national boundaries. Before the arrival of the program there was some limited number of regional and national platforms promoting exchanges among municipalities. LEADER would bring a set of in-built networking dynamics including a European wide magazine and a LEADER platform. However, there is no indication that the exchanges led to actual changes nor cross-fertilization. It is in the second period (2000s) that there is an increase of visits among LAGs across boundaries, and the creation of regional and national development network due to the LEADER experience. Mandate strictness seems quite low, and compliance has been growing over time to the point in which some of the initiatives are relatively self-sustaining and autonomous.

Based on this analysis of the seven LEADER characteristics, it is clear that they are a mix of basic requirement and recommendations. There thus remains ample space for local actors in the network to have an influence. Interestingly from a theoretical perspective, this degree of leeway also changes over time. The best example of this is the inclusion of civil society in the network. This starts out as a recommendation in the early LEADER/PRODER program but becomes a requirement with LEADER+/PRODERCAN. Overall, however, the analysis here shows that local actors still can play their part in configuring a mandated network, which is important from the perspective of RQ1. Given the existence of such *potential* for local actors' influence within mandated networks, the next two sections analyse each network separately according to Segato and Raab's (2019) three-stage cycle to uncover more about the exact nature of the role played by local actors.

Before we turn to this next step in the analysis, it is of interest to note that local preferences also appear to have played a role in the degree of adherence to mandated requirements. The first LEADER period was welcomed by local authorities because the program increased access to resources, a measure of decentralized control and a platform to establish/reinforce relationships with peer actors (other local authorities). The analysis above indicates that the three LEADER approach components that fit these local authority preferences most closely (Territorial, Financial Decentralization and Local Action Group) appear to have been followed to a larger extent. When the

LEADER+/PRODERCAN requirements decrease local authorities' decision-making autonomy (diluted among a larger membership) and status in the network (now on equal footing to associations), more efforts are made to mitigate the impact of implementing the new mandates (see also below). In light of RQ1, this once more highlights local actors' ability and potential to shape the actual network structures implemented 'on the ground'.

5.2 Saja Nansa

5.2.1 Negotiation Stage

Initiation

In Saja Nansa area, the respondents generally agreed that previous rural development activities had been top-down (either Ministry or Regional Government) and sectoral (mostly focused on dairy/cattle farming, one of the main traditional economic activities). There was also a perception that policies had been decided by people in urban setting, without an adequate knowledge of the rural context, leading to widespread frustration and scepticism. As one respondent pointed out: "*The people was a bit fed up and disappointed of the regional government promoting initiatives, that once joined were later unsupported, if not hindered, by the local authorities*" (R8, 2019).

Also within the early stage of LEADER, respondents agree that the Regional Government is the key actor (R1, 2019; R4, 2019; R6, 2019; R8, 2019). The European Union is acknowledged as being the prime – albeit distant – originator and provider of the funding, but the Regional Government is perceived as the gatekeeper and decision-maker. Although one of the mayors actively lobbied the regional government to bring the pilot LEADER program to Saja Nansa (R4, 2019), local authorities are perceived in the main as passive actors in this initial stage.

This limited role for local actors at the onset of LEADER is also supported by a lack of knowledge and experience at the local level. On the one hand, there existed very little understanding of what LEADER entails among mayors, aside from the funding envelope (R4, 2019; R14, 2019). One respondent argued that "*I think the point that raised the expectations the most was the arrival of concrete activities from Europe, even to the smallest localities and farther away geographically*" (R8, 2019). On the other hand, the highly innovative nature of LEADER relative to previous development models meant that the local municipalities did not have much experience with formal coordination

and planning mechanisms (R1, 2019; R4, 2019; R14, 2019; R8, 2019; R6, 2019).[28] There was also no previous experience in the local administration in managing large programs and approaches reliant on private actors: "*Suddenly there is a large influx of money, amounts never seen by municipalities of this type. Their budgets were very small, and they had to run this project and operate it together with private promoters*" (R14, 2019).

Nevertheless, LEADER is seen by respondents as highly innovative, departing from the previous development model and bringing an integrated approach focused on the territory and local empowerment (R1, 2019; R2, 2019; R4, 2019). While this mitigated local actors' active role, it did create high hopes along two dimensions. Local authorities see LEADER as a program which finally recognizes them as central for local development (unlike previous policy frameworks). Meanwhile, civil society members had a more aspirational vision in which LEADER would bring a new territorial management model as well as European models of democracy and participation. They were "*keen that Europe would reach the citizenry, and that it would become something tangible.*" (R8, 2019).

Convening

The interview data illustrate that there are two distinct processes with respect to how actors/potential members were brought together in the initial stage of LEADER. These processes are primarily defined by type of institution – public administration or civil society organizations – and highlight an interesting divergence in terms of the role of local actors.

Potential local authority members of the network were identified by the Regional Government, with its own set of criteria and boundary definitions (R6, 2019; R14, 2019). Respondents assume that the criteria (focus on depopulating rural areas) were best fitting to the basic requirements set by the European Commission in the first pilot program (91-94), but there are no signs that local administrations were involved in any discussions regarding the criteria, membership and how to articulate the territory: the network area seems a top-down *fait accompli*. This was also reflected in several respondents' critical view on the early selection of municipalities. Particularly the failure to include the main economic pole of the area (Cabezon de la Sal) from the beginning was seen to reflect a lack of vision for rural economic development (R2, 2019; R14, 2019) Subsequent municipal membership expansions have likewise been led by the Regional Government (R6, 2019). While there is no indication in the documents reviewed that any local administration has opted-out of being part of the network (most likely reflecting that the program brings net-positive funding to an already

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[28] Two inter-municipal mancomunidades had only very recently been created (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Publicas, 2019). Both the Mancomunidad de Valles de San Vicente and the Mancomunidad Saja-Corona were founded in 1992.

under-funded territory), the only instance of a local authority requesting itself to join the network in this early stage is Mazcuerras in 1994). It was denied (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019).
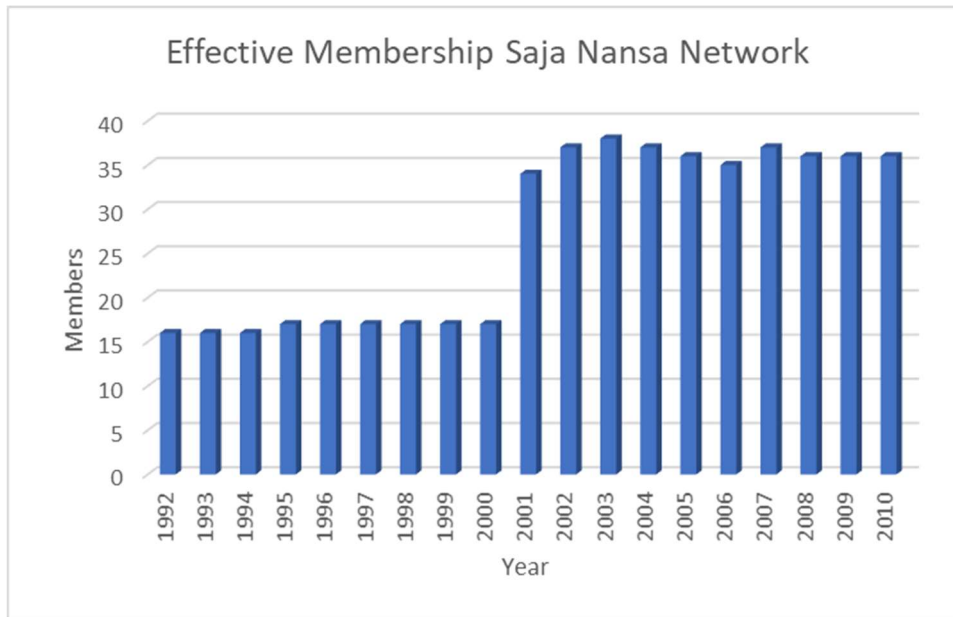

Figure 2 Effective Membership Saja-Nansa Network 1992-2010.

For civil society organizations the situation is different and can be separated in three phases. First, in the early LEADER cycles, civil society organizations could only join on invitation as non-voting collaborating entities (Saja Nansa Archives, 1992). A respondent (R6, 2019) noted that these invitations were extended by the network on functional grounds, either because they bring academic and research skills (University of Cantabria), financial instruments (Caja Cantabria[29]) or labour market/employment resources (Employment Bureau-INEM and the trade union UGT). Hence, local actors appear to have played at least some role in extending the network to 'beneficial' civil society organizations in this initial LEADER stage, even though it remains unclear in the data how far this influence extended.

The second phase is marked by the arrival of LEADER+ in 2001, as civil society membership in decision-making bodies becomes a specific requirement from the EU (Saja Nansa Archives, 2001). The LAG at that point sent a call to all associations in the area registered ("headquartered") in the municipal registries (R4, 2019; R8, 2019). Given that membership was formally restricted to non-profit organizations, a respondent (R6, 2019) noted that an exemption was requested by the network so that three entities could be full members due to their importance and connection to the territory: a bank (Caja Cantabria, which had been previously a collaborating member (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019)), an agricultural cooperative (Cooperativa Ruiseñada) and a hydro-power company (Saltos del

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[29] Caja Cantabria as a community-savings bank had an agreement with the network which provided favourable financial conditions and a credit line. The credit line is of special importance as there were regular de-couplings between funding cycles and grant-giving commitments.

Nansa). According to another respondent (R14, 2019), business associations also joined, reinforcing grant and economic development aspects of the network. Overall, the initiative by local actors to contact potential civil society partners as well as its request to grant exemptions to organisations not fitting the formal requirements suggest that the role and influence of local actors at this point had become much more extensive. It is in this phase that the Saja Nansa LAG doubles the number of members (Figure 2).

The third phase refers to the period after the big enlargement of membership (after 2002-2003). The 2001 charter establishes that potential new members are to request to the Board, then have to be approved by the assembly for a trial period of a year (the requirement being to attend all assemblies in that period), and finally can become full member with the secondment of three other members (Saja Nansa Archives, 2001). Effective membership numbers stabilize, and hover around 36 (Figure 2), as attrition and new sign-ups pretty much cancel each other out in this phase (both average 1.2 per year) (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Civil society organizations that join in this period do it on their own initiative, and there is no specific outreach or support lines to increase membership (R3, 2019; R6, 2019).

It should also be noted at this point that a third set of actors could have participated in the networks: namely, *Juntas Vecinales*. However, local authorities did not envision a place for these village councils, one respondent noting that there were too many and they were too parochial (R4, 2019). Some respondents reflected that the *Juntas Vecinales* could have played a positive role, but that space was never opened to them (R3, 2019; R8, 2019): "*The juntas vecinales didn't have direct participation, and I think it would have been good. In principle participation is a healthy and necessary thing for the socio-economic development of the territory, but it is true that it would have diminished the power base of the mayors*" (R8, 2019). This suggests that the role of local actors – and particularly local authority members – in membership decisions extended beyond that exercised with respect to civil society organizations.

To summarize, RQ 1 enquires about the role of local actors in the initial network stages. Here we have seen that many key decisions are taken at higher administrative levels, such as on network´s purpose (EU) or the territory of application (Regional Government). The decisions were either as part of the mandate or through hierarchical structure. However, we do see that local authorities, as the only local interlocutors to the Regional Government, are nonetheless able to shape certain aspects of membership choices (structure and demography), as with lack of inclusion of village councils and selective inclusion of civil society. While local authorities' influence over membership of civil society

organizations would be formally restricted when the 2001 mandate is introduced (opening up the network to civil society), the procedures introduced at that point to approve new members effectively put local actors in complete control of membership decisions.

5.2.2 Commitment Stage

Leading network formation

From the very beginning the Saja Nansa network opted for a small executive board, led by the President, and for a technical team in charge of program implementation, led by the Manager who reports to the board (Saja Nansa Archives, 1992). For respondents (R2, 2019; R4, 2019), local leadership in Saja Nansa is strongly tied to the role of President of the network, and the leadership style of each president has influenced network dynamics and information flows (R3, 2019). This is a position elected by the network members, and it has always been a mayor of one of the member municipalities (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). There had been an alternance of two political parties (PP and PSOE) in the presidential function reflecting coalitions with third parties (UPCA and PRC) and the municipal elections results across time (Ministerio de Interior, 2020). Respondents noted the mayors of three coastal municipalities were significant actors during the initial stages of the network: Valdaliga, Val de San Vicente and San Vicente de la Barquera (R1, 2019; R4, 2019; R2, 2019).

While the election of the President may be along party lines, many respondents (R2, 2019; R3, 2019; R4, 2019; R6, 2019) agreed that the president and the board are de-politicized and largely insulated from party politics regarding network activities. Respondents (R1, 2019; R6, 2019) also identified the role of the Manager as key in both structuring the nascent network but also serving as a coordinating force among the mayors. It has also been noted that the relative importance of the role of Manager has been growing over time, as the program has been becoming more procedural (mandated rules and regulations) and the weight of the technical team inputs increasing (R6, 2019). A good working relationship between President and Manager can be a strong driver of the network, but there has also been a note of concern as it can be too strong with the ability of shaping and limiting internal discussions.

"*Between the manager and the president, they are the ones managing the day to day issues. The agenda points they discuss among themselves beforehand, and afterwards present it to the Board*" (R3, 2019).

Office location

The location of the network's offices has not been a major concern, being seen more as a practical choice (availability of space), and independence (not being integrated within a municipal office or other entity) sometimes valued higher than location (R2, 2019; R4, 2019). Data analysis (Annex 4 Correlation Coefficients) provides a moderate negative correlation between time to office location and both population and per capita income (-0.61 both). This means that office location tends to be closer to wealthier and more populous municipalities. The average drive for a member is 29 minutes to the network´s office (Annex 1 Key Municipal Data).

In Saja-Nansa the office has changed location once, but it remained within the same municipality, Valdaliga (R2, 2019). The first president of the LAG was the Valdaliga mayor but did not held that position when the office changed (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019).

Location of the office does influence location of network´s assemblies. Of 71 assembly meetings recorded, only 18 (25 % of the total) were in municipalities other than Valdaliga (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). The second and third most frequent locations were San Vicente de la Barquera (3) and Val de San Vicente (3), which, as coastal municipalities, further reinforces the concentration in the coastal area. Assemblies outside Valdaliga have another particularity, as they are mostly concentrated in two periods of time: 5 assemblies in the period 1994-1995, and 9 assemblies between 2001-2004 (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Data collected is not clear on the reasons (interviewees did not highlight this and meeting minutes did not record how choice of location was made) for this concentration. However, they coincide with a change of network president in a contested process (94-95), and territorial and membership expansion (01-04) (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). These could have been periods in which leadership was trying to be more inclusive. The request to have itinerant assemblies was raised a couple of times at assembly meetings in the late 2000s[30] (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Civil society members have been more vocal about this issue as they see that distance is a barrier to those members from farther away in the high valleys, the farthest being Polaciones, 50 km away and around 65 minutes' drive (Annex 1 Key Municipal Data). Data analysis identified a negative but weak correlation between time to location and both board membership and assembly attendance (Annex 4 Correlation Coefficients), although there may be confounding factors and selection bias (actors choosing to become members or not based on distance).

The stated reason for not doing meetings away from the office location anymore is that archives and other key documents (required for review and voting by the assembly) cannot travel around (R6, 2019; Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). A case where a legal-administrative regulation (or its interpretation) limits design and evolution of the network in unexpected ways.

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[30] It may have been done before but there is no record in the assembly meeting minutes nor in other documents consulted

Here we are entering RQ2 territory, local actors interacting with each other. Local leadership begins to clearly emerge within network members through board elections. This leadership clusters around coastal municipalities, and is further reinforced by the early local choice of a vertical organization (small board vs assembly). A non-member leader also emerges, the network manager, who is fully dedicated (primary structure) and has a technical team to support him/her.

Moreover, (locally made) choices of office and assembly location, favouring again coastal and wealthier municipalities, have an impact on membership attendance. Organizational locus takes full shape in this stage by combining the territorial boundaries of the earlier stage with local choice on the physical space of organizational activities

5.2.3 Execution stage

Decision-making

LEADER in Saja Nansa was launched as a pilot program (and even with no clear expectations that it would continue) and therefore no obvious relatable project/program that could serve as a reference (R4, 2019; R14, 2019). Its innovative approach in both decision-making and funding allocation meant that there was limited experience within the member municipalities. Respondents in general agree that no specific model was followed, and that in many ways the network was emergent, and its structuring and evolution was primarily due to internal discussions. There was a set of guidelines that described the program requirements and LEADER approach, on top of the administrative rules and regulations of the funding. A set of program activities was initially developed by the regional government, but these were mostly discarded or contextualized once the LAG was fully established (R14, 2019). This reflects the increased autonomy of local actors (RQ2) once the LAG becomes operational beyond the initial confines of the mandate (RQ1)

This role of local actors became reflected in the establishment of the networks' decision-making structures. For instance, Saja Nansa from the very beginning chose to clearly differentiate the Assembly and the Executive Board, even with such small membership of 12 municipal members (Saja Nansa Archives, 2001). The network's structure thereby follows the fairly common design of most associations in Spain[31]: an assembly with all members, an elected board with full members composed, in the early period, of 5 people (President, Vice-President, Treasurer and Secretary, plus an extra member) and contracted personnel (technical team to implement activities) reporting to the

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[31] For reference Law 1/2002 of March 22

board. Furthermore, with the arrival of LEADER + in 2001, the LAG is re-chartered and the local authority-only "*Grupo de Accion Local Saja Nansa*" is reborn as "*Asociacion de Desarrollo Rural Saja Nansa*" combining both local authorities and associations (Saja Nansa Archives, 2001; R6, 2019). Interestingly, however, local actors took the decision for the new charter to go beyond the minimum requirements of LEADER+ (R6, 2019) of 50% representation of civil society. The board was formed with 7 members (3 municipalities and 4 civil society) sourced from 5 groups (43% for municipalities and 14% each civil society group) whereby each group elects independently its representatives (Saja Nansa Archives, 2001). Not sticking to the minimum requirements not only highlights that local actors had by then taken full control of the networks' decision-making structures, but also proved to be a very good choice as it did not require a new change when the 49% rule came about (R6, 2019). Saja Nansa charter has been quite stable with only one significant reform in 2001 (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Both interviews and archival data highlight that structural changes are primarily driven by external factors, be that funding requirements or legal adaptation. There is a general reticence to charter changes (R3, 2019), a case in point is the reason recorded in the minutes (13/01/95 Assembly) to deny the request of membership to Mazcuerras: it would require a charter reform (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). All the other charter changes have been relatively minor (R6, 2019; Saja Nansa Archives, 2019), either to update it (like the change of location) or legal adaptation to the 2002 Law of Associations (in the case of the 2004 charter changes).

While the board can approve most grants to projects under the program, the assembly approves those projects that involve network members and those above certain amount of money. A measure seen as an active local choice of empowering the assembly as a decision-making body (R6, 2019) and adequate balancing of inclusion and distribution of responsibilities. Many respondents highlight the importance of the Assembly in Saja Nansa, most notably mayors and technical staff, and the level of decision-making it has. Civil society members, however, present a more critical perspective as assembly members are not necessarily the key agents of the territory, and voting is, in many cases, without full information, with no adequate explanations or space for discussions. There has also been a declining trend in frequency of assembly meetings, usually called by the president or the manager, where in the local authority period (92-00) we encounter an average frequency of 4.7 assembly meetings per year, while in the integrated period of civil society and municipalities (01-10) it drops to 2.8 per year (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Moreover, Some respondents (R3, 2019; R14, 2019) expressed concerns that some initiatives have been pre-packaged already by the manager and the president, limiting the effective space for decision-making.

In terms of actors, there is a unanimous agreement that local authorities remain the key decision-makers even if they are in voting minority both at the Board (3 out of 7 as per the charter) and at the Assembly (on average 41% of the overall membership) (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019).

"*Here it was done as the mayors commanded, and still happens, LEADER mayors. Later civil society joined through citizen associations, and that was a wise correction from Europe*" (R8, 2019)

Respondents (R1, 2019; R3, 2019; R6, 2019; R14, 2019) provided 3 potential explanations broadly aligned with hypothesis 5, where out-of-network attributes are key:

- Local authories can filter grant-requesting projects (through municipal licenses), but at the same time take "ownership" of them (dual gatekeeper and champion roles). The equilibrium point is favouring cooperation between municipalities in a quid-pro-quo manner.

  "*As it is today for me, tomorrow for you, in this very institutional group it was not hard that any project presented would be approved*" (R14, 2019).

  There is no equivalent dynamic with civil society organizations.

- Many agreed that civil society is not well organized nor has a history of cooperation/coordination. On the other hand, municipalities have an established platform that completely overlaps the member municipalities: Mancomunidad Saja Nansa. This Mancomunidad had long been discussed among member municipalities within the network (the earliest reference in the meeting minutes being 1993) not being formalized until 2003[32]. While its creation may have been controversial (with 10 years of continued discussion and negotiation), once created it provides coordination and discussion platform and the potential of developing common fronts or agreed positions before issues come to voting in board and/or assembly[33].

  "*Everything is decided at the Mancomunidad. It first goes to the Mancomunidad, and then it goes to the [local action] group*" (R3, 2019)

- A more critical view claims civil society organizations are unwilling to take the responsibility that decision-making carries.

Yet, decision-making by local actors remains circumscribed by outside constraints even in this stage of the network process. The Regional Government is frequently referenced in interviews as an actor of great influence although it is barely visible in the documentation after being written out of the network Charter in 2001 and no longer being a (non-voting) member (Saja Nansa Archives, 1992;

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[32] Formalization of the Mancomunidad is in part pushed forward by LEADER+ arrival and re-chartering of the LAG.
[33] The internal functioning of the Mancomunidad is beyond the scope of this study, and the data collected cannot show to what extent this happens.

Saja Nansa Archives, 2001). Aside from its influence in boundary setting indicated earlier, respondents also highlight its continued influence due to administrative oversight of the funds and deciding over funding priorities (R1, 2019; R4, 2019; R6, 2019).

Respondents note that there has been an increase procedural burden and control over time as part of oversight, reinforced by the great financial dependence on regional funding for the operation of the LEADER program (EU funding proportion has diminished over time, and the regional government currently provides around 70% of the funds). Diversifying sources of funding has been identified as an important objective to enable the network to pursue its own priorities (R6, 2019). Further limiting the autonomy of the LAG and its ability to engage in different policy sectors or regional strategic planning is the overarching legal-Administrative framework. This is under the competence of the Regional Assembly and Government as well as the restrictions that come with reliance on EU funds. Increasing bureaucratization and a more technocratic approach to network outcomes imposed by this legal-administrative framework is a commonly repeated issue. These changing procedural dynamics has meant that grant-management functions have overshadowed the potential policy functions of the network, and implies that activities that could help engage the population and the membership cannot be developed adequately. From this perspective, it is also interesting to observe that regular attendance, and even membership of the board, does not seem to translate increased weight for specific themes or topics. For example, it is striking the fact that Saja Nansa has not developed a stronger gender approach (R3, 2019) when it most frequent attendee, and member of the board, is a rural women association (AFAMMER)[34]. This strongly indicates that local actors – even while formally key decision-makers at this stage, face important thematic and policy constraints created by program requirements from EU and Regional Government. RQ1 continues to be of relevance in the execution stage.

Participation

Participation of members in the core network event, the assembly, has been slowly diminishing over time (Figure 3). During the municipal period (92-00), the average attendance per meeting is 70%, while in the period afterwards (01-10) it was 64% (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Attendance rates vary greatly from individual members and not necessarily a group (local authority/association) behaviour. For example, among municipalities we have one that attended only 12% (Udias) while another 94% (Peñarrubia) of the meetings; among associations, there is AFAMMER with 95% attendance and Camara Agraria a 19%[35] (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019).

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[34] Women´s associations, although not many in number, have regularly been board members at Saja Nansa. Currently another association (Asociacion de Mujeres de Valdaliga) is also a board member.
[35] With the caveat that both Peñarrubia local authority and AFAMMER have also been board members, and the probable expectation that they should attend assembly meetings.
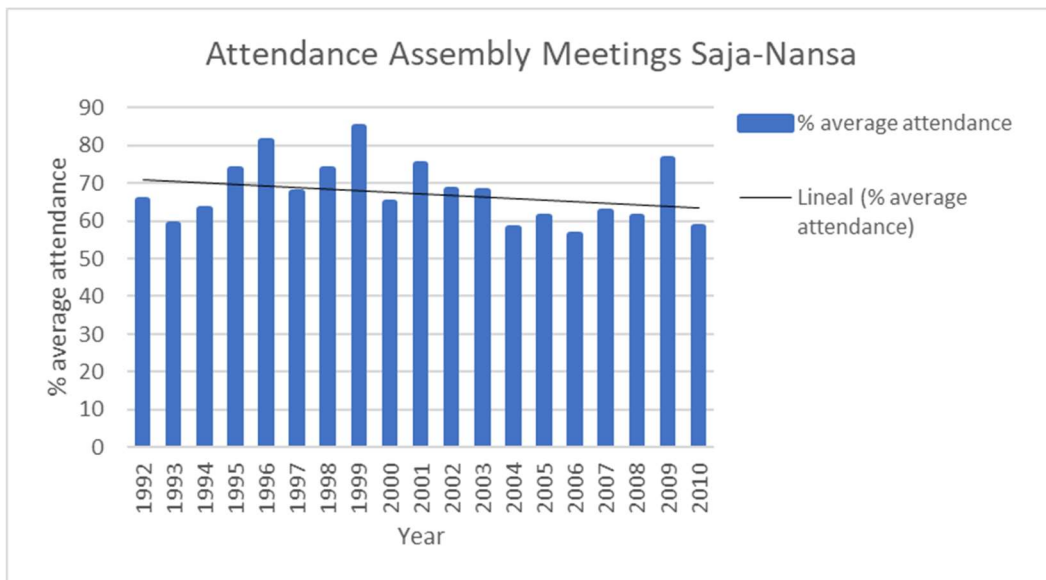
Figure 3 Average attendance of Saja Nansa assembly meetings 1992-2010.

In terms of participation dynamics, respondents identify two axes: The first one refers to the nature of the member, whether it is a local authority or an association. Here, we can clearly observe the effect of structural organizational factors (demography and locus) on members' participation. As indicated earlier, municipal governments have a parallel platform (Mancomunidad Saja Nansa) which allows them to coordinate and negotiate separately. One respondent (R6, 2019) even highlights the very different behaviour and discourse among municipal representatives to those times when civil society members are present. Also, municipalities have a more defined legal-administrative and legitimacy standing and see each other as equals. Associations have a weaker standing, limited resources and higher instability, with at least 8 associations stopped being active members during the period studied (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Given that the meeting minutes and other archives reviewed do not provide enough information to identify voting patterns (and corresponding alignments), a proxy indicator would be vote delegation at assemblies. Vote delegation is a fairly rare phenomenon in Saja Nansa, it occurred 21 times in the timeframe researched (1992-2010), and it tends to happen within groups (i.e. a mayor delegates its vote on another mayor) (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). Table 13 shows municipalities delegating their vote 16 times while associations only 5 times. If we are to assume that vote delegation is based on some level of trust and alignment between two actors, more municipalities rely on each other and more often. This clearly links with H5 and existing relationships between members outside the network.

Table 13 Vote delegation in Saja Nansa 1991-2010

Entity	Instances of vote delegation	Number of delegators	% of delegated votes per group	% of delegators per group
Municipality	16	6	1,74	40
Association	5	4	0,78	14,29

The second axis identified by respondents is geographical, on the one side there are the coastal municipalities and those along the A8 highway, and on the other side the areas located at the head of the river valleys. Coastal or near coast municipalities like San Vicente de la Barquera, Val de San Vicente, Cabezon de la Sal and Valdaliga, have been more frequently members of the Board (Annex 6 Saja Nansa Graphs).While high valley municipalities like Polaciones or Los Tojos never been board members (Saja Nansa Archives, 2019). In Figure 4 Membership per municipality and distance to coast at Saja Nansa Figure 4 below we also see there is a decreasing trend for the number of members the further away from the coast a municipality is. While this may be correlated to population or economic variables, just by sheer numbers there is already an apparent geographic imbalance in membership and engagement.
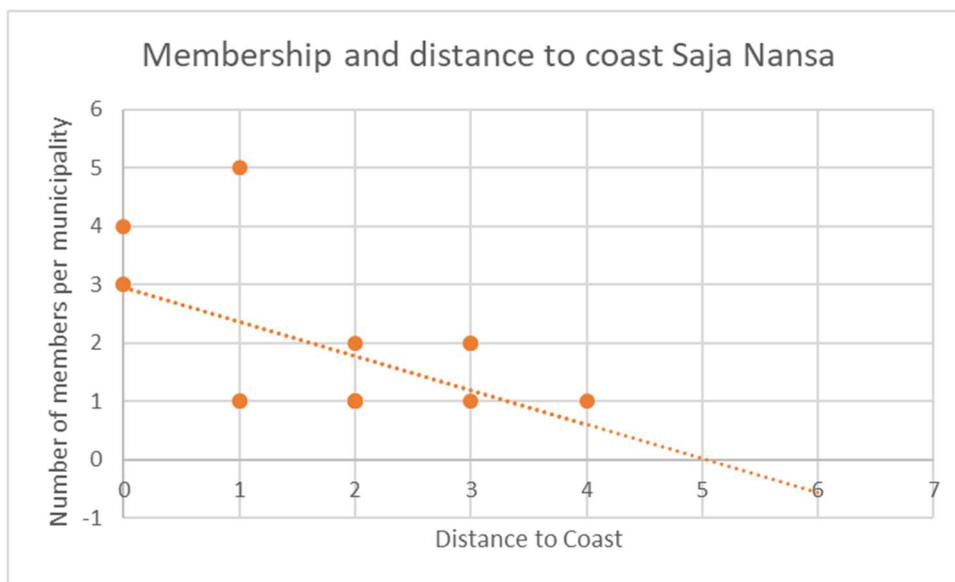
Figure 4 Membership per municipality and distance to coast at Saja Nansa 1992-2010

This geographical imbalance is recognized by the LAGs members and a potential charter change is being considered (R6, 2019), which would place more emphasis on territorial representation over sectoral representation in the board. This serves as a reminder of Gulick´s (1937) early theoretical insights on horizontal specialization in the organizational structure.

A LEADER LAG has another component of participation by its very nature that should also include non-members: a participatory diagnostic in support of the LEADER funding application to the EU. The participatory component of the diagnostic is not applied too extensively in the early years, relying mostly on the technical team and desk review and not dedicated processes to generate the necessary documents (R6, 2019). Saja-Nansa´s LEADER II application in 1994 is a good example, with more than 71 letters of support of local and regional organizations, plus references to a "collaborating committee", but no indication in the application itself on any process or input from them (GAL Saja-Nansa, 1994). In later years the participatory process has been improved, and stronger engagement has been promoted in the diagnostic preparation (R5, 2019). Civil society members and also from the technical team do, however, raise a series of concerns regarding participation:

- There is participation fatigue among many actors. Processes following participatory methodologies have increased over time, but the follow up has been patchy. Local Agenda 21 (in the 2000s) is sometimes given as an example where expectations are raised and engagement is high but there is no action plan and implementation.

- Participatory models are still relatively unknown. Success in engaging with different actors is very dependent on the capacity, skills and keenness of the officer/consultant/staff leading it (R3, 2019). Interpretations on what is participatory or not have not seeped in the administrative structures, openness in one instance is countered with closeness in another.

- Participatory processes in Saja Nansa have highlighted the interest in social rather than economic development (R5, 2019). There is high demand for activities leading to social services, culture and exchanges at the local level. However, funding allocations and priorities are not aligned with the priorities raised by the participatory process.

Participatory models (or the lack of) are an organizational structure choice. Although partially driven by EU requirements (RQ1), they are designed and implemented by local actors (RQ2)

Sustainability

The recognition that without external support the network would disappear is nearly unanimous among respondents. To this day (28 years after the founding of Saja Nansa), respondents highlight the strong localism and that the municipalities are too individualistic (R8, 2019; R4, 2019; R14, 2019). There is not a strong enough sense of territory that would allow for a functional *comarca* to subsists based only on local resources. Some respondents reiterate that the LAG has not promoted more integration or sharing of services among municipalities and the Mancomunidades remain too weak to take over some of network´s roles (R7, 2019; R6, 2019; R8, 2019). Nearly everybody agrees that the network plays (or could potentially play) an important role, but without continued external funding

(Regional Government or others) its continuance would be in doubt, and there is no obvious platform/mechanism that could replace it. LEADER approaches, while acknowledged as important, have not trickled down within network members, and there are no equivalent experiences/replications of note at the municipal level (R5, 2019; R6, 2019; R8, 2019)

This stage represents the core of RQ2 analysis. Even if we still identify external influences from mandate/oversight, we see internal structural choices that have significant effects on both decision-making and participation. Local authorities are the key players, even as a minority in numbers, in part due to out-of-network attributes (i.e. coordination capacity, legal-administrative capacity, stability) and in part due to structural choices (i.e. policy themes, participatory dynamics). There are, however, some external constrains (RQ1) which limit that autonomy through oversight mechanisms and rules and regulations.

The territorial imbalances identified earlier are further reinforced by structural choices (i.e. board quotas, outreach), and a select group of municipalities closer to the coast continue to be the main actors. On the other hand, membership and attendance numbers have remained surprisingly stable, which may be related to the early choice of more power sharing between the board and the assembly.

5.3 Ason Aguera Trasmiera

5.3.1 Negotiation stage

Initiation

In Ason Aguera Trasmiera area, the respondents indicated that the context before the arrival of PRODER was not conducive for local development. Most of the development activities had been sectoral, mainly around dairy production, led by the Regional Government without an apparent integrated approach, with no specific actions towards rural development, characterized by some of the interviewees as an overall failure, especially in comparison with other EU countries (France was given as a key example) with much more successful policies for the countryside (R12, 2019; R11, 2019; R13, 2019). Respondents noted that the perception of failure had permeated within local society. "*I have a feeling they are depressed. They are waiting to see what happens, to see if somebody will do something, to see if the earth will spin the other way*" (R11, 2019).

Although there was no formal mechanism for municipal coordination, there was the start of some inter-municipal cooperation around tourism promotion, mostly along individual valleys (R12, 2019; R17, 2020). *Mancomunidades* were in very early stages (only one municipality of the original

network, Voto, was member of a *mancomunidad*, Oriental de Trasmiera) (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Publicas, 2019). The bulk of Mancomunidades in the area were created in the early 2000s, sometime after the introduction of PRODER in Ason Aguera (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Publicas, 2019).

Local administration was seen as burdensome, too bureaucratic and under-resourced (R12, 2019). Municipal services are described as very basic (R10, 2019), with very limited information being shared (about local or other locations), and structures not open to local voices or civil society participation (R15, 2019). Local associations are presented as sectoral or parochial with no unity or platform among them (R10, 2019).

Even as LEADER has been going on in Cantabria already for a few years, there is no indication that there was an organized local initiative to bring LEADER/PRODER to Ason Aguera, and the role of initiator is strongly associated by respondents with the Regional Government. The nature of PRODER, as an offshoot of LEADER but not a European Commission initiative (as Saja Nansa and Campoo LEADERs were), means that the Regional Government´s role is key in identifying the "extra" geographic areas for funding and launching the program (R10, 2019; R12, 2019; R17, 2020). However, civil society respondents tend to have a more complex view of the initiation process. They see the European Union as initiator, and the role of the Regional Government, while key, as an intermediary. This tends to align with more aspirational views of LEADER which highlight European ideals and the need for an external impetus as engine for change in a stagnant context (R12, 2019; R15, 2019).

Convening

Territorial boundaries, and therefore member municipalities, are initially decided by the Regional Government. However, respondents (R12, 2019; R17, 2020) do also note that inclusion of extra municipalities had taken place; for example, Valle de Villaverde[36] was not included in the initial set of discussions but brought in after some negotiations, and become one of the original 11 municipalities. The lack of connection to nearby wealthier coastal municipalities like Colindres, Castro Urdiales, Santoña and Laredo was noted as a shortcoming (R11, 2019; R12, 2019).

While inclusion of more municipalities may seem to be negotiated possibility, the choice of which network to join wasn't. Some respondents (R10, 2019; R11, 2019) noted that Trasmiera municipalities (especially Riotuerto, and also Entrambasaguas) have stronger socio-economic and historical

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[36] Valle de Villaverde given its condition of exclave, that is a Cantabria municipality surrounded completely by the province of Biscay, is a special case on its own.

connections with a different neighbouring LEADER/PRODER Local Action Group, that of Valles Pasiegos. The designation of areas seems to be a top-down process without a wider discussion with local actors on preferences, models or effectiveness. As one respondent noted:

 "*You don´t choose in which LAG you are in. In reality, it is a fitting exercise, a distribution, and at the end that distribution is done by the Department of Livestock*" (R10, 2019).

Regarding membership of civil society organizations, we can identify three periods (Figure 5). First, from 1996 to 2001, local authorities are the only full members, with associations allowed as collaborating (non-voting) members if their activities are connected to the PRODER program (AAT Archives, 1996). Only one organization is recorded as attending the meetings (AAT Archives, 2019), Caja Cantabria (since 1998), as a condition for the provision to the network financial services, primarily credit lines (R17, 2020).
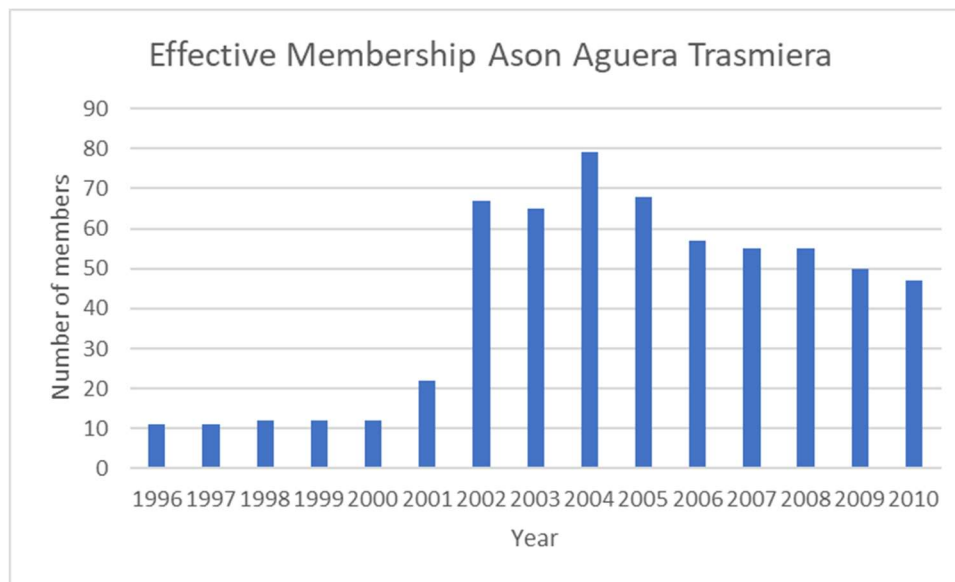

Figure 5 Effective membership at Ason Aguera Trasmiera 1996-2010

Secondly, with the adaptation to the funding requirements for PRODERCAN, the network´s charter opens up to civil society as full members in 2001 (AAT Archives, 2001). This initial wave sees 19 organizations joining, but the network is overwhelmed by requests and a wider discussion on membership criteria (AAT Archives, 2019). Acceptance of new members is briefly put on hold while criteria are defined, and a few days later 33 organizations are admitted as members in December 2001. It is in the 2002 assembly that holds the first election with representatives of civil society, and given the nature of the Board (28 members, of which 50% civil society) it is also the largest contingent of associations elected (14) (AAT Archives, 2019). A new charter change in November 2003 reduces the Board to 10 members (5 associations), and 14 new organizations are accepted as members[37] (AAT

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[37] Members attend their first assembly in the next meeting, which with a yearly frequency it usually means a lag

Archives, 2019).

The third period, from 2005 until 2010, is of overall effective membership decline, with new members not compensating for the number of members going inactive, representing a net loss of 30 members (22 joining and 52 going inactive[38]) (AAT Archives, 2019). Figure 6 bellow shows the yearly change in effective membership, the "drop-outs" marked in orange.
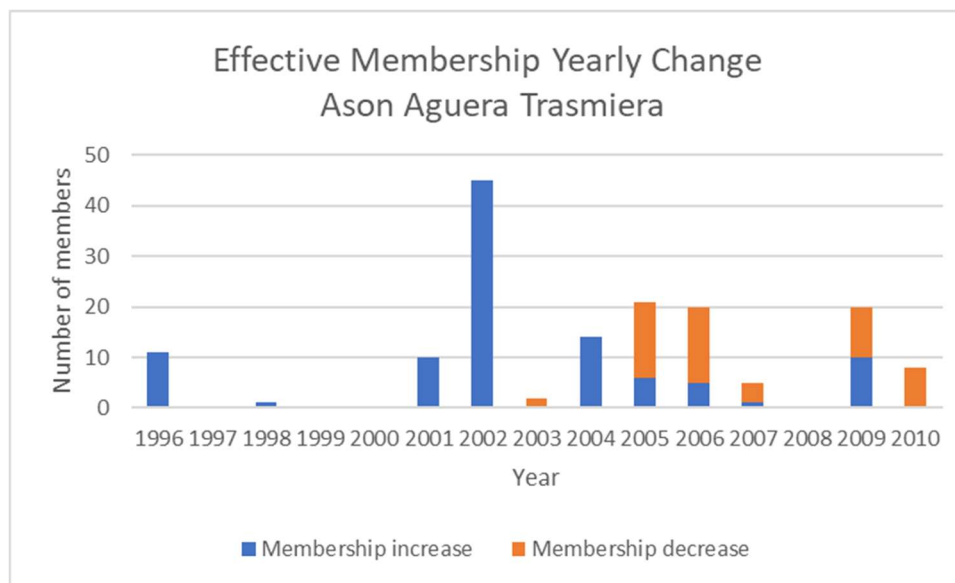

Figure 6 Changes in effective membership per year at Ason Aguera Trasmiera 1996-2010

It is quite notable the large number of applications to join that the network received. 92 organizations and entities[39] are recorded in the minutes as having been accepted as members over the whole period (1996-2010) (AAT Archives, 2019). Respondents (R17, 2020; R10, 2019; R13, 2019) noted that the LAG office was actively encouraging local associations to join as part of its strategy of ensuring a wide representation both in terms of sectors and territory. A sector to which there was also a special effort in bringing in was that of social economy (cooperatives, mutual organizations and similar). An exemption was requested by the network, and debated with the managing authority (the Regional Government) to include social businesses and not consider them private sector (individual businesses were not allowed to become member) (R17, 2020). Although initially reticent, the exemption was approved and several social businesses joined (8 members, 7.8% of the total number of organizations) (AAT Archives, 2019).

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between acceptance and actual exercise of that membership. For example the 2003 accepted members start to show up in the 2004 assembly (AAT Archives, 2019).

[38] According to the "effective members analysis" described in *4.4 Data Analysis*

[39] This number includes associations, federations, professional bodies and non-municipal local authorities (juntas vecinales and mancomunidades)

A third set of actors, *juntas vecinales* and *mancomunidades*, were allowed to become members after some internal debate. However, this membership was considered honorary, and therefore, became non-voting members (AAT Archives, 2019). The reasoning (R17, 2020) provided, especially for *juntas vecinales*, was that a) territorial representation was already provided by the municipal representation, ensuring total coverage of the network´s area; and b) the number of Juntas is very uneven among municipalities, with some having more than a dozen while others none, it would then create a territorial imbalance. Two *juntas vecinales* would join the network (AAT Archives, 2019).

The negotiation stage addresses directly the role of local actors in the initial phase (RQ1). Many key decisions on network´s purpose (EU) or the territory of application (Regional Government) are taken by external actors, although local actors manage the inclusion of an extra municipality. It is on structural choices of demography where local authorities seem to have been most influential. For instance, local actors achieved the inclusion of one additional municipality, actively reached out to civil society organizations, organized an exemption for social businesses to be accepted into the network, and limited the influence of village councils (with no voting rights).

5.3.2 Commitment stage

Leading network formation

Leadership in the Ason Aguera LAG[40] seems to be diffused in the initial phase, with a choice of a flat structure encompassing both Assembly and Board with all the local authority representatives (AAT Archives, 1996). Respondents, in general did not identify a specific local authority or its representative as leading the network process, and the emphasis was placed more on a collective task (R17, 2020). There is, nevertheless, a strong association by respondents between leadership and the position of the network´s president, increasingly so over time, especially when the Board and the Assembly become separate entities (PRODERCAN 2002, and the inclusion of civil society and 3 more municipalities) (R11, 2019; R17, 2020). The President is elected by the members, and it has always been a mayor of one of the member municipalities (AAT Archives, 2019). There has been an alternance of two political parties (PP and PRC) in the presidential position reflecting the changing political balance of municipal election results (Ministerio de Interior, 2020) and political agreements with a third party (UPCA or PSOE)

Respondents also identified the role of the Manager as an engine for the network (R11, 2019; R17,

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[40] The first iteration did not include Trasmiera municipalities

2020), providing not only technical advice but also coordinating and adapting the LAG to changing circumstances. Interestingly, some respondents criticized the Regional Government for providing oversight and shaping many of the network´s options and opportunities, but not being really present at the ground level (R11, 2019; R10, 2019). While they were not referring to the need of a more interventionist Regional Government, they indicated they were missing a more engaged coordinating and "big picture" role, to ensure that the network was in sync with other LAGs, territories and experiences.

"*I was a fan of management of the territory by the people of the territory, and now I am questioning that. I think the group should have a representative of the regional administration to widen the focus. We are too close to the field. Maybe we need an overall picture, something beyond the network*" (R11, 2019).

Office location

The original office location was set in the village of Udalla (Ampuero Municipality) until it was moved in 2011 to Ramales de la Victoria (AAT Archives, 1996; AAT Archives, 2019). The choice of Udalla was partly due to its centrality of location in relation to the network members at the time (R17, 2020), the farthest member, Valle de Villaverde, being 29 kilometres away (Google Maps, 2019). While the geographical shape of the network is fairly compact on the map, with an average member drive to the network office of 26 minutes (Annex 1 Key Municipal Data), the mountainous nature of the area (including a mountain pass, Alisas) means that extra time is taken by the members on the outer areas (R10, 2019). It was also highlighted that time and distance have depresses participation and engagement with the network, indicating the need for spreading activities to increase inclusion (R10, 2019). This is specially the case with the 2001 territorial expansion into Trasmiera, with Riotuerto and Entrambasaguas municipalities not only being the farthest in distance (Annex 1 Key Municipal Data) but also among the lowest number of members[41] (Annex 7). Data analysis of time to office location provides for a weak negative correlation with time spent as board member (-0.33) but a moderate negative correlation (-0.63) with attendance of network assemblies (Annex 4 Correlation Coefficients), linking more strongly with H6 (participation) than H7 (decision-making roles)

The anchoring effect of the office also happens regarding network assembly meetings. Of 49 recorded assemblies, only 5 (10%) took place outside of the municipality of the office, Ampuero (AAT Archives, 2019). And while the idea of rotating assemblies was fielded at the 2002 assembly meeting,

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[41] To note that distance is not the only factor for lower membership, respondents also indicated stronger socio-economic linkages to locations outside of the network´s territory among others.

and followed up and approved in Board meetings in 2003, it isn't until 2009 and 2010 when most of out-of-Ampuero assemblies took place (AAT Archives, 2019).

This stage reflects on two RQ2 dynamics, local leadership and physical design choices. In Ason Aguera there is no clear local leadership among the members, but rather a more collective approach which generates a flat structure with no division between Board and Assembly. The elected network president and network manager are seen as the practical leaders for network operations, although there are some calls for a better engagement by the Regional Government.

The geographical dimension of network activities is actively chosen with centrality of access in mind. However, there is a negative relationship between distance and attendance, with calls for more distributed assembly meetings and activities in all member municipalities being made.

5.3.3 Execution stage

Decision-making

Although there had been already two cycles of LEADER in Cantabria (LEADER pilot in Saja Nansa completed, and LEADER II ongoing in both Saja Nansa and Campoo) by the time PRODER was launched in Ason-Aguera in 1996, respondents (R17, 2020; R12, 2019) indicated that no specific external model was followed, although acknowledging of taking in some of other networks´ experiences (none was specified). The meeting minutes of the founding assembly in 1996 (AAT Archives, 2019) refer to a set of options produced by an external party (consultancy), but such document was not annexed and couldn't be reviewed. Nevertheless, both options and choices seem to have been developed together among the local authorities as to maximize consensus (R17, 2020).

The network was articulated under the legal framework of non-profit associations which designates the assembly as the primary body (AAT Archives, 1996). To the choice of creating a Board, they equalized the membership of both bodies, so in practice there was no Board and all decisions are taken at assembly level (AAT Archives, 2019). This produced a very flat organization, with initially two elected executive positions (President and Vice-president), already divergent from other LAGs which had a clear division of Board and Assembly.

The Regional Government is designated as a non-voting member, and other entities can also join as (non-voting) collaborating members (AAT Archives, 1996), although only one would do it in the PRODER period (AAT Archives, 2019). In 1997, 3 commissions are created (Tourism, Agriculture and Employment) with three municipalities in each. One of the commissions (Tourism) eventually opened up the possibility of attendance by associations in 1999 (AAT Archives, 2019). As one

respondent noted (R17, 2020), the small membership allowed for a flat structure that involved everybody, with assembly attendance rates for these years were on average 81% (Figure 7). While there may have been a cooperative and inclusive spirit, structural developments later on and the lack of experience in formal supra-municipal structures (only 1 municipality was member of a *mancomunidad*) may also point to unwillingness to delegate power. Subsequent changes to the organizational structure can be easily traced through the meeting minutes, and there is no reference to other LAGs or model in the discussions. As a respondent notes (R17, 2020), the resulting changes are fruit of both internal discussion and experience.

From 1996 to 2010, the Ason Aguera Trasmiera network underwent one territorial expansion and three significant Charter changes (AAT Archives, 2019). Respondents (R12, 2019; R15, 2019; R17, 2020) indicated that change was primarily originated by requirements of external actors (Regional Government and the European Union), otherwise there would have not been but minor reforms. Network´s leadership is perceived by some (R11, 2019; R15, 2019) as "legalistic", sticking to the letter of the law or requirement, but not necessarily to the spirit, in order to keep the *status quo* and political networks. One respondent (R15, 2019) made a direct connection of more stringent EU requirements on civil society inclusion (first 50% rule, later on the 49%) as a direct response to local authorities not really committing to the LEADER approach (in the area and elsewhere).

Charter reform would arrive with PRODERCAN, mainly because of 50% requirement for inclusion of civil society (AAT Archives, 2001). The three subsequent reforms are an attempt to reconcile PRODERCAN requirements with the network´s member priorities. The first charter reform (November 2001) coincides with the territorial expansion (three new municipalities), and it is quite straight forward, it introduces a board of 10 members (5+5) elected for 3 years, weighted voting at Assembly (50% each group) and the creation of 5 sectors/commissions (2 members each) (AAT Archives, 2001). This structure was agreed through consensus, with 10 of the 11 local authorities present (AAT Archives, 2019).

A month later (AAT Archives, 2001) a new consensus is reached for a different structure whose salient point is that all local authorities get to be members of the Board (either to be more inclusive or to allay representational fears, the data collected is not able to answer this properly). This second reform greatly expands both the Board with 28 members (also 50/50), the number of commissions to 7 (4 members per commission) and coincides with the first wave of admissions of associations as members (17 new voting members, already outnumbering the 14 local authorities) (AAT Archives, 2019).

Respondents are divided on their views of this period: elected officials and technical team highlight the impracticality of having such a large Board, and the burden of time and resources that the

multiplicity of commissions created; civil society see this as a period of activism, where associations had a voice and input into the proceedings. This division of views also reflect the explanations for the third reform, whether a practical need to simplify decision-making (the former), or a move by local authorities to restrict the presence of activist associations.

"*The idea is, although it sounds a bit like the mafia, to change so everything stays the same. I mean, it is difficult for it to be otherwise because the associational tissue is not independent. All associations are dependent on local authorities in some way. Therefore, it is not true there is a free and independent vote*" (R11, 2019)

The third reform takes place in November 2003 and, in essence, brings back the first reform charter: A Board with 10 members (again 50/50), and 5 commissions (2 members per commission). The only significant change is that the board is now elected for 2 years (AAT Archives, 2019).

A further analysis within Board members was conducted to identify those municipalities that held executive positions (President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer), as these are more prominent (more so in a context of up to 28 Board members). There are three municipalities that have held executive positions more than 50% of the time: Ampuero (AMP) 73%, Arredondo (ARR) 60% and Ramales (RAM) 53%. On the other extreme there are four municipalities that never held an executive position in the period: Riotuerto, Ruesga, Soba and Solorzano. This goes to the point of greater preponderance of Ason valley municipalities in visible decision-making positions.

The role of the Assembly has also varied greatly. For being the all-powerful only entity in the early period (AAT Archives, 1996), to an ever-diminishing role over time. This is also reflected in Charter changes, first with the creation of a Board in 2002, and second when adapting to the 2002 Law of Associations, where network membership approval is taken over by the Board, and budget approval is not necessary (AAT Archives, 2004; AAT Archives, 1996). Frequency of assembly meetings decreased to the point that only the Charter requirement of once a year is kept (and not even in 2008, when there was none), when in the early period there were an average of 5.7 meetings a year (**¡Error! No se encuentra el origen de la referencia.**).

In terms of actors, all respondents agreed that mayors remained the key decision-makers during the period studied.

"*It is the local authorities who decide, and the local authorities who have the weight within the group*" (R10, 2019)

Four explanations were provided (R10, 2019; R11, 2019; R15, 2019; R17, 2020) that point to both organizational structure and demography:

1) Civil society was dis-united and lacked adequate coordination mechanisms or resources. Some associations were dependant on municipal grants and resources, therefore being considered less independent and prone to align themselves with local authorities, according to some respondents. This was also compounded by the frequent cross-over between political actors and some civil society leadership. Associations are more unstable in terms of attendance and membership (AAT Archives, 2019). The 2002-2003 period is seen by some of the respondents as a "golden age" of civil society impact, with 14 associations members of the board allowing more activist organizations to coalesce.

2) Local authorities are more consistent as a group, generating common positions. Attendance and participation tend to be more regular over time, their membership being more a requirement than an option. They were also providers of extra funds for extraordinary activities not covered by the program.

3) In light of the previous two points, the structure of the network also offers an advantage to local authorities by locking-in the 50/50 division at board and weighted voting in the Assembly.

4) Board procedures have converted it in a more administrative body, mostly focused on quick project approvals after a short presentation, but little policy discussions or leadership

Respondents (R12, 2019; R11, 2019; R15, 2019) acknowledged that local authorities were resistant in ceding power to civil society representatives, and that the adaptation to the new set-up was especially difficult for mayors. This resistance was defended around two main arguments (R12, 2019; R17, 2020): a) legitimacy, as local authorities see themselves as the democratically elected representatives for each municipality; and b) economic, as both due-paying members (local authorities had to provide co-funding for the PRODER program) and "payers-of-last-resort" in order to cover extraordinary expenditures not funded by the program. Three significant structural reforms in three years puts the light on both the resistance built around organizational structure and the attempt to find a practical model that works operationally for the network.

Participation

Members attendance of network´s assembly meetings has greatly reduced over time (Figure 7). During the local authority period (96-01), the average attendance per meeting was 81%, while in the period afterwards (02-10) goes down to 48% [42] (AAT Archives, 2019).

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[42] This calculation is based on effective membership and therefore understating absenteeism. If it were to be based on registered membership the number would be much lower.
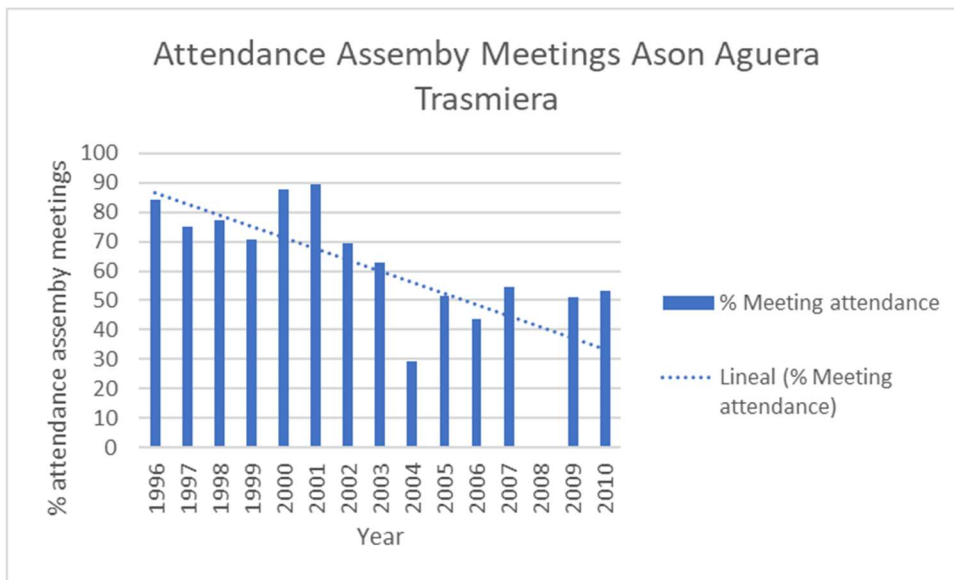
Figure 7 Average yearly attendance assembly meetings Ason Aguera Trasmiera 1996-2010

Local authority members, as a group, tend to be quite regular although they also attend less in the PRODERCAN and LEADER period (especially if adding the instances of delegated voting). Among associations, and given the large number, there is a great range of behaviours, from the 26 member organizations (24% of the total) for which there is no record of attending any of the assemblies, to the 12 members that had an attendance rate of 80% or higher (AAT Archives, 2019).

Respondents (R10, 2019; R11, 2019; R15, 2019; R17, 2020) highlighted several – often structural – reasons for the limited participation of civil society in the network:

a) Civil society is not vital enough to present an organized position. Many associations are financially dependent on subsidies and resources from the local authorities, potentially undermining their independence within the network. Also, as noted earlier, the cross-over of individuals between association leadership and political office, temper their behaviour in light on how one affects the other. This relates directly to H5 and out-of-network relations.

b) Associations have been getting weaker over time. While this may be a secular trend (social media dynamics, increased individualism, etc…), some respondents would have liked to have seen a more nurturing environment for their role. In this direction is also the high attrition rate, of the organizations that joined in the 2001 to 2010 period (91), only 34 remained after the 2015 membership update (AAT Archives, 2019)

c) LAGs earlier focus on ensuring good overall representation may have primed quantity over quality. Many of the associations that joined probably did not have the resources or commitment to really engage and considered their membership testimonial. Maybe a different membership model (both organizational structure and demography) may have been more apt.

d) While the local authorities were resistant to share decision-making power within the network, many of the civil society actors actually had a different set of priorities: to have a voice and platform for discussion and networking. More activist associations may have been seen as a threat when their aspirations actually laid elsewhere, and not necessarily on fund management [43]. Local authorities and civil society should play different roles, as one respondent (R17, 2020) noted, but the network´s structure is not built around that principle. However, a more negative interpretation was also presented, in which local authorities purposefully limited the more activist civil society organizations as to preserve the status quo of existing political networks.

e) Lack of deeper policy discussions and/or inspirational approaches on the present and future of the territory. Many associations had more aspirational visions for the area, instead they encountered an entity more focused on procedure and fund management.

"*I see the lack of participation, it should not only be an assembly, because at the assembly there is already a pre-set agency, but rather sectoral work meetings, team meetings*" (R10, 2019)

Another dynamic related to assembly meetings is that of delegated voting. The act of delegating the power to vote in the network´s assembly to a third person on your organization´s behalf. The Ason Aguera Trasmiera network is striking by the widespread use of vote delegation, especially among associations. It is also important to note that some people held the vote for more than one organization (besides their own), and who at the same time are also elected officials or political party members (but not present at the assembly on that capacity) (AAT Archives, 2019; R11, 2019). More than 46% of the civil society members have delegated their vote at some point during the period of study, and the delegated votes represent 15% of overall potential votes[44] (AAT Archives, 2019)

Table 14 Vote delegation in Ason Aguera Trasmiera assemblies 1996-2010

Entity	Instances of vote delegation	Number of delegators	% of delegated votes per group	% of delegators per group
Municipality	14	8	2,46	57,1
Association	86	39	15,66	46,4

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[43] Given that shared decision-making was a requirement from the EU, this could hardly be avoided entirely.

[44] This has been calculated on the "effective members" approach to membership. With a full registered membership, the percentage would become negligible even if many registered members never showed up at an assembly meetings

Vote delegation gets even more interesting as there are a significant amount of organizations (11, 10% of the total membership) whose only act in a network´s assembly has been through a delegated vote, not having a direct representative at any time (AAT Archives, 2019). Vote delegation is also concentrated in time, being unheard of before 2003, and peaking in four specific years: 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2010 (Figure 8). The first three peak years were board election years, and the fourth peak had a disciplinary proceeding being decided at the assembly (AAT Archives, 2019).
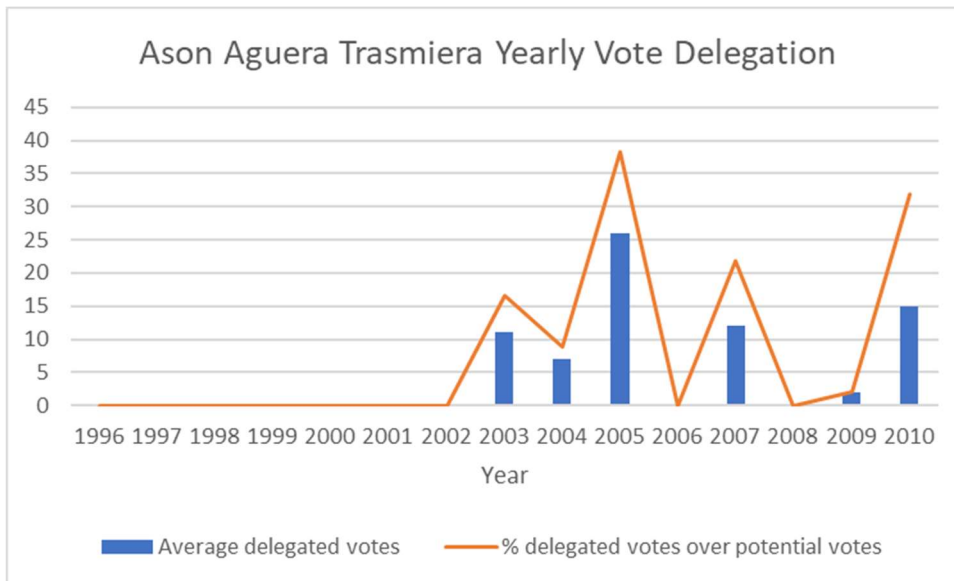

Figure 8 Yearly vote delegation in Ason Aguera Trasmiera 1996-2010

Some respondents (R11, 2019; R15, 2019) raised questions on the independence of many associations as tied to local authorities by subsidies and access to resources, and also frequent leadership cross-over between political parties and local associations.

"*There is sometimes when you see association with a captive vote. Everybody knows what they have to vote and what that one is going to vote, because at the end it becomes a representative of the local authority, which is the one that provides the subsidies*" (R11, 2019)

Another respondent (R17, 2020) presented a more benign interpretation, referring to the efforts of increasing membership and reaching to all sectors and municipalities, which may have brought in organizations not as engaged or able to attend meetings, and rely on vote delegation to have some, if minimal, connection to the network. Data collected is not conclusive, but the pattern is worrying on democratic health and representative model of the Ason Aguera Trasmiera LAG.

In terms of internal groupings or block, respondents (R11, 2019; R15, 2019) tend to identify the local authority vs association as the clearest divide, also indicating that they play different roles in the network (R17, 2020). Geographically there is some difference is between the three valleys, in which Trasmiera tends to have lower assembly attendance (43% average), less members (2.6 average per municipality) and less time in executive positions at the board (7.3% between the three municipalities). Aguera stays in the middle with 57% assembly attendance, the highest with membership (8.6 per municipality) and holding executive positions 33% of the time. Ason valley is the one that comes on top at assembly attendance (69% average), membership also quite high (7.6 per municipality) and three of its municipalities have been more than 50% of the time holding an executive position. (AAT Archives, 2019).

Sustainability

In general, there is agreement that Ason Aguera Trasmiera LAG would not be sustainable without external support. Respondents (R10, 2019; R11, 2019; R12, 2019; R17, 2020) provided different explanations.

a) Municipalities interests are not aligned and unwilling to join up local resources. Even if they were aligned on specific areas, the internal structures of local authorities will be a barrier as local civil service would also be unwilling to cede power or competences.

b) Local authority budgets are constrained, barely keeping up with increasing demands, and already dependent on external funding (regional and national transfers). There might not be enough local resources to sustain the network.

c) Definition of territory/boundaries of the network. There is already some criticism on the extent and territorial membership, without the external incentive a different configuration might emerge. There is also the question of effective territory depending on the type of service and the adequate size for delivery.

d) While the work of the LAG is beginning to be recognized by different departments of the Regional Government, there are still different visions, strategies and territorial approaches. "*That is the problem, bureaucracy, each group, each department, establishes a different vision of the territory. This should be more coordinated*" (R10, 2019).

Rules and regulations of regional funding lines still do not promote coordination or joint activities among local authorities[45].

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[45] For example, funding lines that are nominative create an administrative difficulty for a small grouping of actors that are not formalized through a separate entity (R10, 2019).

This stage is at the core of RQ2, with local actors shaping decision-making and participation processes. An initial flat structure with all-member equality quickly develops (after 2001 mandate) into a vertical structure, with a large empowered Board. The reform period is quite convulsed with 3 charter reforms in relatively rapid succession, in what can be interpreted as measures to balance preserving local-authority power with practical operational needs of the network. Local authorities are the key players, even as a minority in membership, in part due to out-of-network attributes (i.e. legal-administrative capacity, stability, status, civil society dependency) and in part due to structural choices (i.e. policy themes, voting weights and delegation, board quotas, participatory dynamics). The geographical expansion also brings to the fore territorial imbalances, with the central Ason valley municipalities playing a key role. Membership has remained quite volatile and attendance numbers have been steadily decreasing, probably linked to the more limited space and role which civil society plays.

5.4 Comparative

This comparative section takes the findings presented from each of the networks and analyses them in light of the seven hypotheses established in the theoretical framework.

H1: **Network´s structural design and changes are biased towards actors better positioned within existing structures**.

This hypothesis is confirmed in both areas. Here we have a situation where the first mover has an advantage in shaping the structure to its objectives. The Regional Government initiates network formation with its traditional interlocutors, with no significant effort in bringing in other actors. In turn, local authorities restrict membership to themselves with very limited exceptions out of functional needs. When the new mandate is introduced in 2001, some divergence occurs where Ason Aguera Trasmiera is more resistant to power sharing and approves three charters in succession in an attempt to find the balance between local authority presence and operational capacity. It nevertheless ends up with a large empowered board and weighted assembly voting, preserving local authority advantage. Saja Nansa, on the other hand, implements a reform that goes beyond basic requirement and aligns with the spirit of LEADER: a mixed board where local authorities are minority, and a re-empowered assembly. This could be explained through three factors: **structural experience** due to having a vertical structure from the beginning, and the skills, confidence and knowledge obtained by leadership on its strengths, weaknesses and how to manage them; **leadership** with a vision, as noted earlier some municipalities and mayors had been more active establishing inter-municipal structures

and had a vision for them; and **knowledge of local context**, in which limited experience in participation and a weak civil society would anticipate an inherent advantage to local authorities.

In both locations, village councils are either shut out or have limited **membership** as they could potentially undermine the power base of local authorities in terms of representativeness.

H2: **Increased complexity (size, network pluralism) will lead to vertical and hierarchical structures**

In both networks we see the locally-led development of vertical specialization in decision making (Gulick, 1937), however we encounter a reverse dynamic in formal power redistribution. In Saja Nansa we encounter a vertical structure from the beginning, with the board being the key decision-maker and frequent assemblies, probably as a measure to sustain engagement and consensus (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006). With the increase of size and network pluralism, some formal power is redistributed to the assembly, but its meeting frequency diminishes. In Ason Aguera we find a flat structure where every decision is made at the assembly level. However, with the inclusion of civil society, formal power is shifted to the board, and the assembly also diminishes. Given the size of AAT´s board, horizontal specialization (Gulick, 1937) also occurs, with the development of sectoral commissions. This dynamic happens from time to time in both local-authority only and hybrid period (as a way to distribute power), but eventually dies off due to low attendance and coordination burden.

H3: **Mandate requirements further removed from current local structure and goals will trigger more resistance**.

Here the picture is more complex. Stringent mandates do not appear to produce special resistance or reduced compliance. The territorial approach and the Local Action Group requirements are well complied with. However, the bottom-up approach starts as low stringency which is reversed to a higher stringency (inclusion of civil society) because of low compliance! (R15, 2019; Perez Fra, 2004) Two factors seem to be at play. First, the **interest/alignment of local actors** with the required change and expected benefits. In the initial phase, local authorities gain access to new resources while giving "away" little. It is not especially hard to argue the advantage of accepting the changes. In the hybrid phase, they have already access to the resources (although they still have to fulfil the funding cycle requirements) while they have share "control" to non-local authority organizations. It is not a win-win situation anymore, and finding the balance between mandate and status-quo benefits is what generates the internal conflict.

Second, **experience** in both inter-municipal arrangements and in implementing the program, may

have given an advantage to Saja Nansa in anticipating/pre-empting resistance and generating a balanced structure. The extra two LEADER funding cycles served as a learning process (R6, 2019) and the opportunity to settle in processes and the initial hierarchical structure.

H4: Increase of number and type of network members will be a source of internal conflict as it increases network plurality and diversity of goals.

AAT large increase of member associations from a wide set of sectors can be linked to the successive changes of the formal structure in the network´s charter. This was, in part, an objective of the LAG (the diversity, not the conflict) and it may have brought a set of un-intended consequences aside from charter changes: reduced attendance, membership turnover and delegated voting. SN had a much less diverse and smaller increase of membership, which, if anything, reinforced existing territorial imbalances in favour coastal and lower valley municipalities. In turn, there is much less apparent conflict and charter changes, combined with higher attendance and lower member attrition rates. Here we see two different membership strategies at play with also very different outcomes

Also linked to organizational locus, the expansion of membership in more peripheral municipalities has also led to repeated requests, in both networks, for itinerant assemblies and more distributed activities. This is specially the case with associations, as the burden of mobility tends to hit harder on them.

H5: Out-of-network interactions between members provide within-network power imbalances even if all members are notionally equal

There are three dynamics at play in both networks: history, geography and nature of organization. **History** refers to the previous experience in *mancomunidades* or other inter-municipal mechanisms, which have generated a level of experience and trust among certain members. It is in SN where this is most clear as leadership is initially centred around the members of the same existing *mancomunidad (*Valles de San Vicente*)*. **Geographically**, we see that wealthier and closer to the coast municipalities in SN (linked to organizational demography), or same-valley centrally located in AAT (linked to organizational locus) have a preponderance in board membership or executive functions. SN has acknowledged this imbalance as problematic as is currently considering a structural solution (a charter reform) aimed at re-balancing territorial representation (R6, 2019).

The final divide is **organizational nature** between associations and local authorities. This imbalance is probably the strongest, as there is already an asymmetry of resources, legal-administrative standing,

dependency and perceived legitimacy. Moreover, the existence of a parallel mancomunidad in SN composed of only local-authorities allows for separate coordination and a structural diversion of topics (i.e. agenda setting, policy themes, timing).

Structural design has not effectively tried to address these three dynamics, and out-of-network power imbalances have remained. Aside from the egalitarian concept of networks, only the, externally driven, reform addressing 50% membership of civil society in decision-making roles was specifically designed to provide a counterbalance (Perez Fra, 2004).

H6: **Distance (from network office location) has a negative association with member participation**

H7: **Distance (from network office location) has a negative association with on decision-making roles to be taken up by members**

Both hypotheses can be addresses together as the two networks have **negative correlations** between time it takes to drive to the office location and assembly attendance, and board membership. However, the negative correlation is (comparatively) stronger for AAT when it comes to assembly assistance. In both areas, the location of the office is a strong predictor of the location of the assembly; with assembly locations elsewhere only in very specific periods of time. Interestingly, office location priorities have also been different between networks, with Saja Nansa favouring availability and independence, and Ason Aguera Trasmiera centrality. Maybe in part as result of that choice, SN is less centrally located within the network and closer to municipalities with more population and wealth.

For each of the network formation stages a comparative table of Saja Nansa (SN) and Ason Aguera Trasmiera (AAT) networks has been produced: Negotiation (Table 16), Commitment (Table 17), and Execution (Table 18). They can be found at Annex 3 Comparative summary tables.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Research Question 1

To the question What is the role of local actors in mandated network design? The straight answer is: apparently not much (in this context). The European Union as originator creates a series of conditions to be fulfilled in order to access a specific set of resources. This is, however, mediated initially by the national government, but primarily by the Regional Government of Cantabria (as the closest to the ground managing authority). It is the Regional Government who establishes boundaries and interprets the EU conditions, becoming the primary promoter and decision-maker at the initial stage of developing the network. In this initial phase there is also a clear imbalance in capacity and expertise, as local actors have little knowledge of LEADER and what it may entail.

Even though local actors have limited space to act at the initial stage of the network, this does not mean that play no role at all. The local authority-only mandate at the beginning of LEADER (with very limited exceptions for non-voting members allowed in for functional reasons of coordination and funding) indeed allows a first mover advantage to local authorities. This would also be identified as a concern by the EU (Perez Fra, 2004) for the overall LEADER program (so this is not only an issue with the two networks in question), and in 2001 civil society participation is required (instead of recommended) in decision-making.

My findings show that this ability to define **membership** from an early stage allows structural control of subsequent organizational behaviours, and it is the primary local organizational factor in the design phase. Other early choices by local actors also have a lasting impact, as with the office location or organization structure. This aligns with the theoretical framework and previous empirical studies and are further developed under RQ2 as they are continued/altered over time.

6.2 Research Question 2

To the question How do local actors engage with each other once the mandated network is launched? the findings provide a richer perspective. Once the networks are created many of the dynamics are driven locally, although there is still the external influence of changing requirements in each cycle as well as the oversight of the Regional Government. Consistent with insights from organization theory, I can identify four mechanisms at play affecting internal dynamics: Membership, Structure, Leadership and Location.

Membership. It is the primary structural mechanism of control in the initial years, by shutting out non-local authority actors (civil society and *juntas vecinales*) from membership and decision-making processes. However, this is changed with the 2001 mandate, which specifically targets inclusion of civil society (in reaction to the previous lack of access). Here we see two strategies in response: AAT´s objective of including a wider set of actors/sectors has also led to a more unstable membership (in attendance and retention), and also raised questions on the independence of actors (vote delegation dynamics being a troubling indicator). SN has had a lesser outreach but have been able to maintain a more committed membership, although this may also be related to the relative empowerment of the assembly and early allocation of positions at the board. Nevertheless, managing the flow, type and engagement of members seems to be important mechanism for organizational control and behaviour. For example, village councils would remain shut out of the structure even after the 2001 reforms, maybe as they could represent a much deeper threat in terms of territorial representation and democratic credentials.

Structure. In line with existing literature, my findings suggest that there is a bias in favour of existing decision-makers in structural design issues. Once mandated membership requirements (inclusion of civil society) are in, structural decisions increase in importance for organizational behaviour. The introduction of quotas, vote weights, number of board members, election procedures, etc… allow to structurally shape and limit the new organizational demography. However, the dynamics in each network follow a different path. SN´s choice of having a small board from the beginning may have advantaged more engaged and experienced municipalities. It also provided better adaptation when expansion arrived as the change to a vertical structure was minor. Board seats allocation allows for local authorities to be the single biggest block, and the relatively small membership together with some single-member sectors, brought a very stable dynamic. AAT´s initial flat structure may have been an advantage in bringing in participation among members but proved to be a harder starting position when reform came. It had to deal with two big issues at the same time: inclusion of associations and relative loss of power by local authorities. It took three charter reforms to find a new equilibrium. The main step was the redistribution of power from the assembly to board, where the large overall numbers of civil society were equalized (quotas and vote weights). This, together with membership dynamics, has meant that local authorities have remained as key players.

Leadership. Here we encounter a mix of individual and institutional leadership, and it is a more contingent factor. In SN we see that some mayors are especially active. This is in part because their own characteristics (inter-municipal vision), and in part because of the municipality they represent

(wealthier, experienced in inter-municipal arrangements, economic/social poles). These representatives together with the manager have been able to structure and anticipate a reform process that went relatively smoothly. In AAT no equivalent drive can be identified with no clear leading actors or long term inter/supra-municipal vision articulated, which may also account for the higher instability of the network.

The network manager role is also identified as a leadership one, even though this is a non-member and formally subordinate to the President/Board. This is generated by an organizational structure factor: the existence of a fully dedicated (primary structure) network and project management function, a supporting technical team, and the increased complexity of reporting, procedural, and fund compliance requirements.

Location. The design of the network´s physical space, in this case office and assembly meeting locations, have had significant influence on member´s engagement and leadership positions. In both networks there is a negative relationship between distance and location. This arises despite the networks having followed different location strategies, with Saja Nansa favouring availability and independence and Ason Aguera Trasmiera centrality. The organizational locus bias is then towards wealthier/coastal municipalities in SN and toward more central (Ason Valley) municipalities in AAT. In both cases, the mobility burden falls more on associations (linking back to membership and demography) as they have limited resources and the network is a secondary structure (a more limited priority).

6.3 Potential directions of future research

Although the empirical foundations are limited to two networks within one regional/national context, the findings indicate a couple of avenues for future research. First, the importance of organizational locus, sometimes not paid due attention in the literature (Trondal & Egeberg, 2018). This is even more the case in a program specifically aimed at countering territorial dynamics: depopulation and lower economic performance of rural/mountainous/marginal areas. Networks are usually represented as flatter structures, but the spatial component creates a more complicated geography.

Second, the organizational factors of the networks and their environment and nested within a wider context of multi-level governance. As already hinted from the findings, the relationships between the Regional Government, the network and its individual members, are founded on a different set of specific factors that are also affected by the EU´s mandate. The transmission of the mandate through multiple levels generates both vertical and horizontal dynamics, which leads to the question on how the evolving networks fit into the wider administrative and political ecology (or not, as we have seen

in the respondent´s views on network sustainability), and how local actors engage with it as members of the network. The growth of networks of local development networks seem to point to an increased awareness and policy engagement.

It is also interesting to note that in both networks there are very positive perceptions of the European Communities/European Union. The EU has a very high brand value, especially among civil society members, where it is associated democracy, professionalism and less corruption. EU requirements are generally seen as reasonable, in some cases welcomed, or at least not resisted; on the other hand, Regional Government requirements are seen as more arbitrary, controlling, and, in general, detrimental. While this may be related to an issue of distance, where proximity and frequency of interactions raise the level of frictions; it also links up with the general positive attitude of Spaniards towards the EU and its institutions (i.e. in April 2000 55% had a positive image of the EU, while 8% was negative, according to Eurobarometer 53[46]). To what extent this may have affected network formation and internal dynamics is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it does raise fascinating questions regarding legitimacy of requirements/conditions in a mandated network depending on the standing of the source

To sum up, networks are an increasingly common feature in collaborative governance, even to the point of being top-down mandated to be established. However their ideals as innovative, more democratic and participatory space sometimes do not match up well with reality. The case study shows two mandated networks with similar contextual conditions but that articulate themselves differently. The theory chosen to address this difference, organization theory, has been able to do so convincingly, outlining four organizational factors at play: Membership, Structure, Leadership and Location. This serves as reminder of the importance of considering local organizational conditions when aligning goals and promoting a mandated network approach.

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[46] EU´s positive image has diminished over time but remained fairly high during the time period studied.

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