

LEADER and Spatial Justice

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Abstract

Recent papers have argued that spatial justice should be pursued through a place-based approach, which enables local people to assert their own capacity to act and to pursue their own positive visions: an approach fundamental to LEADER. This paper considers the extent to which LEADER constitutes local action addressing spatial justice through a case study in England. Analysis of this case leads to questions about the extent to which apparent localism is constrained by 'government at a distance' and how this can affect the ability of LAGs to pursue spatial justice. It is suggested that LEADER displays a tension between network and hierarchy modes of governance, increasingly under control of hierarchy in this instance despite its origins as networked CLLD. The paper concludes that LEADER has potential to contribute to spatial justice – both distributive and procedural – but that this may be frustrated by the imposition of different priorities and controls at local or from higher levels. Further case studies will be required to investigate how widely this potential is realised or frustrated across Europe's varying national and local political contexts.

Key words

community-led local development, LEADER, localism, social justice, spatial justice, rural development

Introduction

Recent papers have argued that spatial justice should be pursued through a place-based approach which enables people to assert their own capacity to act and to pursue their own positive visions, specific to their diverse localities, an approach fundamental to LEADER's approach to European rural development. LEADER is an EU rural community development funding programme which has evolved considerably from its initial manifestation as a pilot community initiative in 1991–1994 (LEADER₁) to its current form (2014–2020) as an 'approach' mainstreamed into Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), aimed at 'achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities, including the creation and maintenance of employment' (European Union 2013, Article 4). The European Commission presents LEADER as a form of community-led local development (CLLD), which is

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place-based, innovative and locally led, following a number of principles which constitute the 'LEADER approach'. Moreover, it is claimed that LEADER can 'mobilise and involve local communities and organisations to contribute to achieving the Europe 2020 Strategy goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, fostering territorial cohesion and reaching specific policy objectives' (European Commission 2013, p. 2). These are ambitious claims.

Yet even from the start, LEADER was a mixture of local and extra-local control, or 'bottom-up' and 'top-down', with local development strategies negotiated with and approved by the European Commission in LEADER1 and thereafter ever more subject to national and sub-national control and constraint (Ray 1998; Hubbard and Gorton 2011; Müller *et al.* 2020; Konečný *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, the ways in which LEADER contributes towards European goals of territorial cohesion have never been clearly articulated, if that was ever their objective (van Well and Copus 2014).

This paper focuses on spatial justice and explores the ability of the LEADER CLLD programme to mitigate spatial injustice, disadvantage and deprivation at local and higher scales. The paper considers the extent to which LEADER constitutes local action addressing spatial justice through a case study of a LEADER local action group (LAG) in the north of England. Analysis of this case leads to questions about the extent to which apparent localism is constrained by 'government at a distance' through various managerial technologies and how these affect the ability of LAGs to pursue social and spatial justice. It is suggested that LEADER displays a tension between network and hierarchy modes of governance, increasingly under control of hierarchy despite its origins as networked CLLD.

In the next section 'LEADER, localism and spatial justice', the paper reviews existing knowledge of spatial justice, LEADER and localism, before introducing the case study in the following section. Building on these, the penultimate section 'Procedural spatial injustice in Northumberland Uplands LEADER' considers the experience of LEADER in the Northumberland Uplands in terms of procedural spatial justice.

LEADER, localism and spatial justice

Spatial justice

Spatial justice is a slippery concept, necessarily related to social justice, each with a strong normative aspect and many different interpretations considered in more detail in Madanipour *et al.* (forthcoming). *Social justice* concerns the worth and rights, opportunities and wellbeing of all citizens, addressing issues of fairness and inclusion, poverty and inequality, power and responsibility, and the relationship between individuals, markets and state. There are inevitably different views and theories (most notably Rawls 1971) of what is 'just' – concepts of need, desert, entitlement, merit, for example – but fairness, equality and citizenship are core elements. Theorists often distinguish between distributive and procedural, or process, aspects of justice. Procedural justice is primarily about the processes which create unjust outcomes, notably relations of power, while distributive justice focuses on the distribution of resources, opportunities and outcomes. Critiquing the distributive approach, Young

(1990, p. 15) argued that 'social justice means the elimination of institutionalised domination and oppression'. Procedural justice, in particular, is considered in the case study below.

Despite the work of Davies (1968), Lefebvre (1970), Harvey (1973), Young (1990), Dikeç (2001) Soja (2010) and Fainstein (2010), there remains a 'troubling tendency of spatial justice scholarship to treat space as little more than a container in which justice is (or is not) to be found' (Woods *et al.* 2019, p. 1). Contemporary approaches to *spatial justice* draw on more relational understandings of spatiality and its intertwining with social processes, influenced by Lefebvre and social constructionists. Thus, spatial justice can be understood in several ways (Madanipour *et al.* forthcoming, p. 4): 'as geographical distribution of social benefits and burdens; as access to space as a condition of possibility for decent living; as the processes of spatial formation and production that consolidate and generate unequal social relations; and as temporality of spatial justice across and between generations. The notion of spatial justice, built on the relational concept of space, sees these four dimensions as closely integrated'.

Until very recently, the concept of spatial justice 'has been overwhelmingly approached through reference to cities and the urban scale' (Jones *et al.* 2020, p. 897), even though 'there is no logical reason to confine the notion of spatial justice to the urban space' (Weckroth *et al.* 2017, p. 7). As Soja (2010, p. 20) observes, 'justice and injustice are infused into the multi-scalar geographies in which we live, from the intimacies of the household to the uneven development of the global economy'. In the last years, a few papers (Woods *et al.* 2019; Jones *et al.* 2020; Nordberg 2020) have begun to interrogate how a relational approach to spatial justice might be applied to rural and regional contexts and scales. Drawing on these papers, we have identified four key themes.

First, spatial justice is characterised by plurality and diversity. Jones *et al.* (2020, p. 909) consider that 'at the very least, spatial justice calls for approaches to be tailored to each specific region's distinctive values and capacities to act', reflecting pluralist understandings of what is fair and what constitutes well-being. This echoes Shucksmith's (2018) contention that place-based deliberation is necessary to allow each rural place-community to reach, and be guided by, a collective vision for its own future: what constitutes 'a good countryside' will depend on the values and the assets of each place-community. Nordberg (2020, p. 48) sees this as a more choice-oriented understanding of what is fair, while Jones *et al.* (2020, p. 398) are clear that 'spatial justice stresses plurality, hence regions should be able to define their own specific development routes'.

A second theme of these recent papers is that active participation and local capability are essential to spatial justice. Jones *et al.* (2020) point not only to Sen's capabilities approach and Dikeç's emphasis on active political participation, but crucially also to Lefebvre's 'right to the city'. Woods *et al.* (2019) ask, what an analogous set of 'rights to the country' might look like, and who should have them? Setting these larger questions aside for now, active participation and capacity-building are familiar elements of networked rural development and of the LEADER approach, as outlined above. Jones *et al.* (2020, p. 398) conclude that, in contrast to discourses of victimhood and helplessness, spatial justice 'emphasises the need to develop regions' capacities to transform themselves'.

A third theme of these recent papers, also drawing on Lefebvre, is that of the power-infused social construction of place, and indeed of rurality itself (Shucksmith 2018). Woods *et al.* (2019) argue that we must consider 'how enduring state and social imaginaries of what rural space is and should be actually contribute to the re/production of rural inequalities. Policies that position cities as drivers of economic growth, for example, can condemn rural communities to chronically inadequate infrastructures, while idealistically requisitioning "unspoiled" landscapes for urban leisure consumption'.

This theme is inextricably linked with the fourth, governance. Jones *et al.* (2020, p. 398) critique the imposition of political and administrative geographies on rural places, arguing that 'spatial justice may potentially empower regions to define alternative spaces of governance that are required to promote spatial justice in effective ways'. Nordberg (2020, p. 57) investigates this in the context of local authority re-organisation and amalgamation in Finland, concluding that the influence of urban interests dominates this process and that 'the issue of power looms over the studied cases'.

The case study presented in this paper explores these four themes of spatial justice under three headings, namely plurality and diversity; active participation and capacity building; and governance and power. The power-infused social construction of place and of rurality is necessarily related to governance and power, and is included under that heading while deserving deeper exploration than is possible in this paper. The study focuses on a LEADER initiative in north-east England, described in section 'The case study: Northumberland Uplands', and so we now turn to review the LEADER programme, and the 'LEADER approach' and the associated idea of networked, or neo-endogenous, rural development.

LEADER

LEADER is often presented as 'bottom-up' or endogenous rural development (European Union 2013, p. 493), in contrast to earlier 'top-down', exogenous approaches. In the context of neoliberalism and fiscal retrenchment, however, a purely endogenous approach exacerbates inequalities both within and between places because the initially uneven playing field disadvantages weaker and poorer places' ability to mobilize resources and form effective external relationships (Shucksmith 2000; Arnason *et al.* 2009). People in rural areas are increasingly exhorted to exhibit community resilience and practice 'self-help', as the state evades responsibility and leaves them to go it alone (Cheshire 2006; MacKinnon and Derickson 2012). The result of this individualisation of risk and of responsibility is uneven development and a perpetuation of spatial inequality between rural and urban as well as within the rural itself.

Researchers proposed instead the notion of *neo-endogenous* development (Lowe *et al.* 1995; Ray 2006), or *networked rural development* (Shucksmith 2010, 2012a) to address these deficiencies. Networked rural development advocates local control and capacity-building but recognises in addition the essential role of the state and other external actors at multiple scales. Local actors cannot work only within their place, but must also construct 'spaces of engagement' (Cox 1998) to resist roll-out neoliberalism

and 'to secure their local spaces of dependence – areas in which their prosperity, power or legitimacy relies on the reproduction of certain social relations' (MacKinnon 2010, p. 5). Indeed, networked development involves not only deliberative governance and territorial place shaping, but also institutional capacity building, engagement in relational networks and sharing of responsibilities with an enabling state and other actors (Shucksmith 2012a) to secure their wider spaces of association in a networked world.

These paradigmatic shifts in thinking were accompanied by parallel developments in EU rural policy, notwithstanding that market support for farmers (CAP Pillar 1) and regional policy focused on urban centres remain dominant (Copus *et al.* 2014). The pilot LEADER community initiative was introduced in 1991 as a potential new justification for rural support as agricultural surpluses and environmental concerns challenged the status quo (CEC 1988). In direct opposition to the agriculture-sectoral basis of existing rural policy, 'rural development' was presented as essentially territorial. Towards this end, a second Pillar of the CAP was introduced in 1999, the so-called 'Rural Development Regulation' (RDR), but this was quickly captured by farming and environmental interests who adopted multifunctional agriculture as an alternative rationale for continued support for farmers. Nevertheless, Axis 4 of the RDR 2007–2013 introduced into the CAP a strand of policy, known as the LEADER approach, which reflects the networked rural development model. These ideas are also reflected in the OECD's influential 'New Rural Paradigm' (2006) and the European Commission's 'smart villages' concept (ENRD 2018).

However, this networked model of governance, emphasising collaboration between localities, an enabling state and subsidiarity, sits uncomfortably beside the dominant hierarchy model (with EU and nation state control of local actions). It will be argued below that increasingly LEADER has come to reflect governance by hierarchy, while presented as promoting localism and networks (Navarro *et al.*, 1994).

While LEADER funding has supported rural territorial development, research has revealed several ways in which LEADER may work against social justice within those territories. Pre-existing structures of inequality are usually not addressed, such that existing power-holders become more powerful as a result of the failure to consider systems of governance and the dimension of power (Commins and Keane 1994). More articulate and powerful individuals and groups are better able to engage with programmes and to apply for (capital) grants and submit proposals, while others without their capacity to act are unable to benefit (Shucksmith 2000; Ellis 2001). For LEADER to become more socially inclusive, Shucksmith (2000) argued that more funds should be devoted to targeted animation and capacity building; greater diversity in the composition of LAG boards is necessary; and short time-scales, onerous application procedures and capital grants should be avoided.

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) claims that 'bottom-up territorial approaches such as LEADER and other forms of CLLD can play an important role in dealing with problems of poverty and social inclusion in rural areas. In particular, LEADER can help to identify specific problems at the local level, address these through tailor-made measures, and link together the various actors required to provide more effective solutions' (ENRD 2016). This resonates strongly with contemporary ideas of spatial justice, discussed above. The ENRD factsheet recognises

that, at least until 2014, LEADER took ‘a predominantly territorial approach, with strategies focusing on the development of deprived areas rather than the inclusion of deprived people. At the same time, LAGs often concentrated on working with the most active people in their areas to create jobs and improve the overall quality of life rather than trying to help the most marginalised groups’. However, in the 2014–2020 policy framework, it suggests, ‘a new approach to local development has been introduced through CLLD which opens up new, direct opportunities to deal with social inclusion’. The factsheet then sets out some guidance on how LEADER might pursue social inclusion more successfully in this latest phase. Echoing Shucksmith, it suggests the involvement of excluded groups in strategy development and implementation; procedures to ensure disadvantaged groups have fair access; targeted investment in capacity building and animation; and linkages with other support agencies.

This guidance relates to social justice, of course, not spatial justice, and indeed there is very little written about the relationship between LEADER and spatial justice. As Jones *et al.* (2020) point out, ‘the potential of spatial justice signalled by the literature is still largely supposition, with little empirical work yet examining the effectiveness of such an alternative approach’, especially in relation to rural areas. This paper constitutes such an empirical contribution.

Localism, autonomy and spatial justice

At the heart of these recent writings on spatial justice, and of the LEADER approach, is localism. Localism is a form of governance, in which the distribution of power, roles and responsibilities is rearranged with a view to favouring the local (Madanipour 2017). It is a decentralisation of power to lower levels, so as to benefit from vernacular knowledge (Lowe *et al.* 2019) of the local problems and capacities, to mobilise and draw on local assets and resources, to ensure higher levels of efficiency, and to have better democratic accountability to the local population (Madanipour *et al.* 2017). In this, it has some affinities with subsidiarity. Localism is considered a counterweight to the centralising processes at national and EU levels, as well as to the global economic and cultural forces unleashed by neoliberalisation, although the gap between the structural nature and scale of these forces and the capacity of local institutions to address them is frequently pointed out (MacKinnon and Derickson 2012; Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2013; Davoudi and Madanipour 2015).

In this context, Hildreth (2011) distinguishes between three models of localism, one of which is *conditional localism*, where power is ostensibly decentralised but central government imposes conditions on the council or community, requiring them to accept the centre’s policy objectives, priorities, standards and so on. Often this is achieved by a set of managerial technologies such as targeting, audit and financial control, which are deployed to ensure that local institutions are accountable to, and do the bidding of, central government (MacKinnon 2002; Cheshire *et al.* 2015). The applicability of these three models to rural policy in the UK is discussed by Shucksmith and Talbot (2015), and it will be argued below that LEADER, at least in England, has been implemented as conditional localism. Indeed, Shucksmith (2000, p. 213) noted that ‘a “capturing” of LEADER by other agencies and authorities has been a feature of

LEADER₂ in many parts of the UK'. Related to this is the concept of autonomy, viewed as powers of initiation and of immunity (Clark 1984), initiation being the capacity of the place-community to accomplish tasks; and the power of immunity being the effective possibility for a place-community to act without oversight by higher levels.

The case study: Northumberland Uplands

The study area

This case study was undertaken as part of the ReLocal project. The project explored the relationship between local-community development actions and spatial justice, asking whether spatial justice (within and between places) can be achieved through place-based strategies.

The Northumberland Uplands are located at the northernmost tip of the north-east of England, bordering Scotland to the north. The land is mainly rough grazing but of high environmental value, and includes the Northumberland National Park and designated areas of natural beauty. The county of Northumberland also includes more fertile lowland and coastal areas (covered by another LEADER LAG), and a built-up south-east corner contiguous with the Newcastle upon Tyne conurbation. The uplands are sparsely inhabited: tenant farmers rent land from estates and survive on small profit margins (Lowe *et al.* 2003; NULAG 2008). Large areas are also covered by forestry plantations and a huge reservoir, Kielder Water, which provides water to local river systems to compensate for abstraction in conurbations downstream.

Where the uplands meet the lowland areas are several traditional market towns, which retain their role as district service centres. These were excluded initially from the Northumberland Uplands LEADER area but were brought within it for the 2014–2020 phase, during which they became a main source of funding applications in competition with the more remote upland areas. Apart from this, remote/market town divide within the Northumberland Uplands, there are also divides within settlements, where inequalities and disadvantage tend to be hidden – young and old, people in local, low-paid work, the unemployed and those in ill-health (e.g. CAN 2016; Public Health England, LKIS 2017). In the remoter upland areas, these groups are even more hidden, dispersed and ill-served by public transport and other services, and therefore particularly disadvantaged.

The Northumberland Uplands LAG (NULAG) was run by a voluntary Board of Members, many of whom were retired, or representatives of partner organisations. LEADER in England is poorly funded and reliant on volunteers (Interview 27). In the 2007–2013 phase, the NULAG budget funded 2–3 full-time paid staff, but in the second phase, 2014–2020, this was reduced to one full-time officer, supported by a dedicated administrator at Northumberland County Council (NCC). Between them, the Board and staff pursued a locally generated local development strategy (LDS), at least during Phase 1. Like other LEADER LAGs, NULAG worked with several layers of oversight shown in Table 1 – a host body, an accountable body, a managing body and central government (RPA/DEFRA) – to allocate grant to local applicants through

Table 1 The main features of each LEADER phase in the NULAG case study

	2007/2008–2013	2014–2020
Host body and location	Northumberland National Park Authority, Rothbury (NNPA)	Northumberland County Council, Morpeth (NCC)
Accountable body	Northumberland County Council (NCC)	Northumberland County Council (NCC)
Managing body	Regional Development Agency (ONE NE) until 2012; then Rural Payments Agency (RPA)	Rural Payments Agency (RPA) (an agency of DEFRA with regional branches)
Local development strategy	2008 – ONE NE consultation; statistical report; 1 SWOT (with NULAG Board); public consultations.	2014 – Survey (447 respondents) Census data; 4 drop-in events (208 attendees); 27 SWOT analyses (with parish councils, special interest groups).
Total funding	£2,035,372 or £2,018,164 (see footnote in s.4 below)	£1,676,976
Population of area	33,000	55,000
Category and purpose of funding available	Capital and Revenue	Capital – 70% for job creation
Fundable themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people • Land management • Farming and forestry • Tourism, culture and environment • Microenterprise • Communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farm productivity • Micro- and small enterprises and farm diversification • Rural tourism • Culture and heritage • Rural services • Forestry productivity
Application process	Full application initially, but a simplified application for small grants introduced	Two stage: expression of Interest and Full Application No simplified application process for small grants
Trajectory	From a degree of autonomy within the constraints of the fundable themes in 2008, to increasing top-down control exercised by host, accountable and managing bodies under pressure of the global financial crisis and its political and economic impacts	Ministerial imposition of capital-only funding constraint and focus of 70% of grant for job creation overrides LDS. Bureaucratic and democratic-process delays create time pressure for awarding grants. Growing frustration of LAG at loss of autonomy and plurality

a competitive bid process, which required applicants to source a proportion of match funding (the exact proportion varying depending on the category of application).

Table 1 presents the two phases of NULAG in summary form, showing how the character and the degree of autonomy and plurality changed during the period

2007–2020. More details of these changes and of their relation to spatial justice are contained in the text of section ‘Procedural spatial injustice in Northumberland Uplands LEADER’.

Over its 14-year span of operation, NULAG supported environmental and social inclusion projects and amenity, services and job creation initiatives, although its scope was narrowed to job creation in the second phase, due to Ministerial intervention, as we shall see. It not only levered considerable match-funding for the area, but the projects it sponsored improved the area's amenities to the benefit of local people, brought economic benefit to the area (helping it to retain jobs and population), improved its offer for tourism and to some extent raised its profile nationally. It also, in the first phase, provided opportunities, facilities and training for younger people, identified by NULAG as a key disadvantaged group. Several projects supported disabled people and their carers, and a number were to the benefit of older rural dwellers. In its second phase (2014–2020), the action was no longer able to support to any significant extent the kinds of projects that would develop disadvantaged individuals' capabilities and build their social capital, despite increasing concern over the challenges facing rural young people, of unemployment, of low pay and of social isolation.

Methods

The method of the NULAG case study was broadly guided by the ReLocal Manual, piloted through eight pilot studies (of which NULAG was one) and then finalised in 2018 (Weck *et al.* 2018). The Manual set out a framework for the methods to be used and the areas to be covered in the case study research, aiming to ensure that all cases addressed the overall research questions, and to enable a systematic and comparative thematic analysis across cases. The first of these thematic strands related to vertical and horizontal governance and their relation to spatial justice. The second strand explored how spatial justice is perceived, implemented and influenced by localities, and the role of EU Cohesion Policy in furthering spatial justice at lower levels. The third strand concerned the degree of autonomy disposed of by actions, seeking to answer the question of whether greater local autonomy can bring about better spatial justice.

The Manual also provided guidance on the categories of interviewees that should be included in each case study, spanning public, private and voluntary stakeholders in a range of sectors at the local level, as well as those concerned in policy and governance and at regional, national and, where relevant, EU levels. Reflecting the concern for procedural justice, the Manual set out a conscientious approach towards informing and involving stakeholders in the study, which was closely followed in the NULAG case (Weck *et al.* 2018). This approach allowed NULAG Board Members early involvement with the design and development of the case study, and included stakeholders in feedback on results, analysis and scenarios resulting from the case.

In the NULAG case study, two main versions of the interview guide were developed, one for current NULAG staff and volunteers, and one for non-NULAG members (Brooks *et al.* 2019). Where interviewees were involved in areas of work at several removes from the NULAG action focus – for example, a local Foodbank – the interview guide was used more loosely and the interviewee's area of knowledge steered the questions used.

Table 2 Categories of interviewees, anonymised

Category	Number	NULAG Phase 1 interviewee code	NULAG Phase 2 interviewee code	Phases 1 and 2 Interviewee code
NULAG Board members/staff	10	1, 22	3, 4, 5, 6, 7	2, 8, 15, 26
NCC/NNPA	5	12	7, 9, 16, 21	
DEFRA/RPA	4		11, 17, 27	10
Local stakeholders	7	13	14, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25	
Project applicants	3	23, 26	15	

Note: Interviewees 7, 15 and 26 appear under more than one category.

In terms of sampling, while the Manual set out the main categories of interviewee, the most appropriate way to identify and gain contact details for the relevant stakeholders was found to be a snowballing approach, starting with NULAG Board Members and staff, and thence proceeding to other local, regional and national interviewees. ‘Cold-contact’ had little success. In all, 25 interviews were held with 27 stakeholders between November 2017 and October 2018, represented by code numbers in this paper to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. These are summarised in Table 2.

These interviews were supplemented with data from: non-participant observation of three NULAG applicant assessment meetings; attending relevant workshops and conferences taking place locally during the period of the interviews; content analysis of documents produced by and about NULAG and the LEADER programme, including archival research at Northumberland National Park (NNP); and reference to local media.

Procedural spatial injustice in Northumberland Uplands LEADER

Spatial justice has both distributive and procedural aspects, as noted in section ‘Spatial justice’. The findings on distributive justice, which concerns the distribution of resources, outcomes and opportunities, are excluded from this paper for reasons of space, but are reported in Brooks *et al.* (2019).

Plurality and diversity

This section considers to what extent NULAG's approach exhibited the plurality and diversity dimension of spatial justice, as outlined in section ‘Spatial justice’ above, through developing and pursuing an approach tailored towards the locality's distinctive values, challenges and capacities. As will emerge from this and the two succeeding sections, the three ‘procedural spatial justice’ dimensions of plurality and diversity, capacity to act and governance are closely interrelated and considering any of them necessarily draws on evidence from the others.

In its first phase, the NULAG area included 33,000 inhabitants dispersed over 3,232 km². Apart from its staff, the LAG's Board, drawn from every part of this area

(NULAG 2008, 21, Figure 5), were able to bring diverse local knowledge and professional expertise (Interviews 1 and 4), including international development experience. The LDS was based on limited local consultation (see Table 1) and a statistical report commissioned by ONE NE, which formed the basis for the successful proposal to DEFRA for funding.

The LDS priorities were young people; land management, farming and forestry; tourism, culture and environment; microenterprise and communities. The need to support young people aged 20–34 to stay in the local area was prioritised because of the demographic imbalance identified in the statistical report. Although these priorities were locally selected, the choice was already somewhat circumscribed by national guidance and EU funding rules:

So, yes, you could write quite a broad local development strategy, but not be able to confront some of the issues that you put in that. And, that was some of the tension that we talked about earlier, between wanting to embrace a broad view of what would be useful development in the Northumberland Uplands, and having to spend your money against, sometimes, a fairly narrow set of priorities. And, that tension existed at the start of my time with NULAG, and probably exists even more now, because those priorities that you can spend money on have become even narrower. (Interview 1)

This phase of the England LEADER programme allowed both capital and revenue funding grants, a combination described as particularly effective (Interview 10). This funding structure also enabled international exchange between LEADER groups, a dimension enthusiastically taken up by NULAG, and their participation in networking with the European Commission and with EU-wide LAGs, despite discouragement from DEFRA (Interview 1). Networking with neighbouring LAGs was also effective in this phase, with regular meetings of the four North East LAGs and cross-border projects (Interview 1).

In the course of the first NULAG phase, a simplified application form was introduced for smaller LEADER grants, and this was successful in encouraging such applications: indeed there was regret when DEFRA required this to be discontinued in Phase 2 (Interviews 10 and 11).

Even in this first phase, not all the projects put forward by the Board were accepted at higher levels of governance and there was always some degree of top-down control, with projects ruled out if regarded as contrary to land management objectives, or incompatible with ONE NE's funding criteria (Interviews 1 and 22). During this period, the imposition of top-down control gradually became more forceful, not least because in the first year of NULAG's operation, the financial crisis of 2007/2008 began to impact on the three higher-level organisations responsible for its delivery. Each constituted a layer of governance that both influenced NULAG's action and gradually diminished its autonomy.

The NULAG Board entered Phase 2 in 2014 with enthusiasm, having received interim funding from DEFRA not only to retain the Programme Officer through to the next LEADER programme but also to carry out a full public consultation to inform the next LDS. On the downside, NULAG was allocated less funding¹ to cover an expanded area and population (now 55,000), including several of the market towns previously outside the area. Across England there were now 80 LAGs (from 64), but

still the minimum funding allowed under EU rules (Interviews 17 and 27). Moreover, DEFRA Ministers limited to 18 per cent the proportion of the budget that could be used for staff and animation (later increased to 22 per cent) (Interviews 17 and 27). NULAG could now only employ one full-time Programme Officer, with administrative support from NCC staff, thus limiting its capacity for animation and outreach (Interviews 4, 5, 16 and 17).

NULAG developed an impressive new LDS, assembled through much time and voluntary effort, which raised interest in the scheme and elicited around 60 pre-launch Expressions of Interest. This accorded well with the plurality and diversity dimension of spatial justice. Despite this, and its basis for the award of LEADER funding, an unprecedented intervention from DEFRA Ministers made this irrelevant overnight (Interviews 5, 6, 15 and 17), as it was decided that LEADER across England would now become a capital grant scheme (Interviews 17 and 27), with 70 per cent of the budget earmarked for job creation. The locally informed and approved LEADER priorities in each LAG's LDS, including NULAG's, were replaced by a set of six central government-imposed priorities (Interview 17). This led directly to the resignation of the NULAG Chair, followed by several Board Members, not only creating a loss in continuity, but instilling ill feeling even among those who did not resign:

There was all of the ill feeling about not being appreciated, delay and kind of, "Well, why are we doing this? We're not being treated properly." They [Board Members] didn't feel it justified to devote their time, to the same level of time, they were previously providing, to the new programme. [Interview 4]

And then when they said that DEFRA would be making the final decision on every project, [through RPA] that was when I said, "I'm off, I'm not working for free for DEFRA." [Interview 15]

Bureaucratic inertia added to their frustrations, most notably when stronger central control through the RPA, but ultimately from DEFRA, delayed publication of the LEADER Handbook setting out eligibility criteria for more than a year (Interviews 2, 3, 6, 9 and 12). There was another year's delay between the NULAG programme opening and funding from the RPA materialising, during which it had to be underwritten by NCC. Further delays occurred around elections and the 2016 Brexit referendum. These delays intensified pressure on the Board to select those applicants most likely to spend the budget within the timetable (Interviews 2 and 3). Another deterrent for applicants for smaller grants was the absence in phase 2 of a simplified application process for smaller applications. By 2019, only two members from Phase 1 NULAG remained on the Board.

Even prior to the financial crisis and austerity, growing top-down control over LEADER in England had reduced local autonomy. Over the two phases, conditional localism intensified, with control exerted through various managerial technologies, discussed further in the next section, but the most visible instance was this Ministerial imposition of a jobs and growth priority, overriding all approved LDSs in England, and permitting capital funding only for much of Phase 2.

I fully subscribe to the concern that what is supposed to be a community-focused scheme has been turned into a largely economic one. It may sound a bit odd saying that, but I

would tend to agree, having worked in rural policy ... Previous programmes have been more community-focused, and funding ... more social activities. [...] The current programme, I think, is too economically driven [...] (Interview 27)

Some regarded the economic turn as a logical direction, to replace the jobs lost through the decline in agricultural employment (Interviews 18 and 22).

I think the benefits for the change in LEADER though is that it's moved away from maypoles and thatched bus shelters into driving economic development. And if you'd got the thriving rural economy, they can thatch their own bus shelter, and fix their own maypole, and I think it's right that public funds are being used to help drive the economy. (Interview 18)

In Phase 1, the local knowledge of the LAG Board built trust and resulted in locally significant projects that could not have been envisaged by middle and higher levels of government: for example, a community petrol station (Interviews 2, 3 and 13); a village shop and bakery (Interviews 1 and 22); a mental health project in a café in a converted railway carriage (Interview 1). Phase 2 focused on rural businesses and tourism projects, but still managed a few social projects, such as a youth activities scheme in a market town and saving a public swimming pool (Interview 5).

Nevertheless, the mid and end of programme reports, provide clear evidence of a shift from LEADER as community-led local development towards control through 'government at a distance', with not only a narrower scope than the LDS had proposed, but also a far narrower range of beneficiaries (Brooks *et al.* 2019).

Capacity to act

The second core aspect of spatial justice, as outlined above in section 'Spatial justice', is the extent to which NULAG were able to foster active participation and capacity to act, given that spatial justice emphasises the need to develop places' capacities to transform themselves. This also necessarily includes fair, transparent and inclusive processes.

Staff made efforts at the beginning of each phase to visit every parish (Interviews 1 and 5), to elicit active participation and to build capacity through animation. Various factors then intervened to impede people's access to the grants, including inexperience in developing a business case, poor digital infrastructure and skills, difficulties in raising match funding (Interviews 1, 5, 12 and 26), and the complexity of the forms (Interviews 12, 15 and 26). Animation by staff (Interviews 1 and 5), and by Board Members (Interviews 6 and 15) helped to overcome these obstacles and supported weaker and less well connected applicants across the NULAG territory, but the capacity to give this support diminished in Phase 2 (Interviews 4 and 14), favouring those in towns at the expense of the remoter areas:

Once upon a time, we couldn't move for community development people, now they're a very rare breed. (Interview 16)

Meanwhile, austerity-related reductions to RPA staffing at national level necessitated more regulation and compliance-style directives instead of negotiated and flexible inter-level coordination (Interview 17). These directives were subject to continual

fine-tuning and adaptation, causing confusion and further frustration among LAG members (Interview 7), who also resented the time wasted on monitoring and forecasting requirements (Interview 6), at the expense of animation and capacity-building. For all these reasons, the better-capitalised and more experienced rural businesses, perhaps able to pay for help with an application (arguably those least in need of LEADER support) were more likely to gain funding (Interviews 2, 3, 5, 6 and 16). Smaller SMEs were also discouraged by the job creation focus of the new scheme, requiring an economic commitment beyond their capacity (Interview 26) with risk of 'clawback'.

Turning to participation and voice, the very existence of NULAG enhanced the institutional capacity and networks of the Uplands (Interview 1) and the LDS consultations offered opportunities to participate in strategic development. LAG membership in Phase 1 was very inclusive, socially and spatially, (Interviews 2 and 4, NULAG 2008:21, Figure 5), but became less so in Phase 2, increasingly reflecting the growth focus and the business sector.

What I was very impressed with in the previous programme, is the extent to which, the length to which they went to assemble a LAG that was truly representative of geography and the different sectors and different sorts of constituencies like young people or the land based sector or whatever it might be. (Interview 4)

Some rural dwellers are unheard. The first NULAG LDS identified young people as a priority (Interviews 1 and 12), but many other categories of local need (unemployed, people with drug and alcohol addition, people with mental health problems) remained invisible to most NULAG members (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 16) unfamiliar with such marginal groups (Interviews 2, 3, 16 and 21). As Jelenik *et al.* (2020) have argued, local perceptions of need often unconsciously reproduce systematic exclusion of such groups.

In terms of transparency and accountability, in Phase 1 two issues should be highlighted. The first is the disproportionate amount of funding that went to NNPA projects in Phase 1, relative to its share of the NULAG catchment population; and the NNPA's attempt to take greater control of the project towards the end of Phase 1. From 2011 the NNPA claimed more money from the budget for its host role and insisted that NULAG's Programme Officer should report to the NNPA leadership, rather than to the LAG Chair (Interview 1). In Phase 2, the principal issue is the capture of control by central government and the discarding of the locally-generated LDS, so undermining the accountability of LEADER actions to their local population and obscuring the power relations by presenting the top-down (government imposed) as bottom-up (community led).

Governance, power and autonomy

The final element of procedural spatial justice to be investigated in this case study is that of governance. As noted above, this should involve a decentralisation of power to lower levels, so as to benefit from local knowledge of the area's problems and

capacities, to mobilise and draw on local assets, and to ensure better democratic accountability to the local population.

The governance arrangements for NULAG were complex and power-infused. In the first phase (2007–2013), the managing authority, managing NULAG's finances and processing awards, was the government-appointed regional economic development agency, ONE NE. The accountable body, NCC, underwrote the action financially and dealt with complaints and appeals. The host authority was NNPA, employing, accommodating and servicing NULAG's staff.

The NNPA might seem a logical choice as host for LEADER, but it contained only 2,000 residents out of 33,000 in the NULAG area. Moreover, English national parks are required to pursue primary objectives of preserving and enhancing natural beauty and promoting public recreation, and only have a subsidiary duty to 'seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the national parks' (NP UK 2018). NNPA's own grant became more business-focused over this period (Int 12) and was more aligned towards visitors to the park (Interview 22). During this first phase, LEADER funds were disproportionately spent on projects within the Park area.

The NCC, the accountable body, had a risk-averse institutional culture which differed from the creative and flexible development culture of NULAG, being slow in its processes and focused on compliance (Int 1). It nevertheless had skilled officers and a robust appeals process (Interviews 1 and 3). It was also 'closer to the realities of people trying to work their way through all of this' (Interview 26) until local government re-organisation and merger in 2009, after which much of the detailed knowledge of the rural area became outdated and governance became more urban-focused (Interviews 7, 13 and 16).

ONE NE, the managing authority, contrasted even more with the NULAG approach. As a layer of regional governance, it sought to address both urban renewal and rural development, but was remote from rural affairs and appeared controlling or over-bureaucratic (Interviews 1, 12, 15 and 26). The forms it produced for applicants were over-complex (Interview 15), and it took processes to a new level of bureaucracy (Interview 12). Crucially for the future of LEADER in England, inconsistent accounting for LEADER expenditure by regional bodies led to an adverse audit and sanctions by the EU which led to even more bureaucracy, inflexibility and scrutiny:

The imposition of a national set of processes and the making sure that people were doing those consistently, and the tightening up, and therefore some would say bureaucratising, of those processes was a result of the audit. (Interview 17)

When, a new government took power in 2010, it abolished the regional level of governance in England, including ONE NE which closed in 2012. Its role as managing authority of NULAG transferred to the regional office of a national agency of DEFRA responsible for EU farm payments, the Rural Payments Agency (RPA). At this point, the relationship between the managing body and the LAG, became 'interminably difficult' (Interview 1). The national level of LEADER governance, DEFRA, was also experienced as a constraint:

We tried very hard to have a meaningful relationship with them [DEFRA], they were good for some things, you know. But, I think, overall, we found them to be a very bureaucratic,

burdensome, organisation. The individuals, when you get them on their own, you know, they talk about achieving the same stuff, and wanting to do the same things. [...] But, there was an organisation culture, that just seems to attach a couple of weights to your feet and drag you down. (Interview 1)

It had always been hard for NULAG to marry the flexibility, trust and risk-taking that characterise good development practice with the bureaucratic pace and process of the accountable body (NCC), managing body (ONE, RPA) and the national programme lead, DEFRA.

We were in a system where we were pushing back on mostly local authority, but also DEFRA, rules to say: "This is what we want to do. This is good development practice." And, they were pushing back on us saying: "The system has to conform to a national programme, the system has to be audit-proofed." And, we were unable to make the two of those things meet. (Interview 1)

As phase 1 of NULAG moved towards its conclusion, gradual changes in the character of the scheme responding to a changing economic context anticipated the shape Phase 2 would take:

I think it's fair to say that the last two years of the programme ... in hindsight, they were foretellers of what the situation is now, which is a very tight, narrow, programme, that you have got to work against. (Interview 1)

By the time of the second phase (2014–2020), ONE NE had been abolished, and the NCC became both the host authority and the accountable authority, with the RPA becoming the managing authority from 2012. The RPA intensified the bureaucratic hold over NULAG (Interview 11), displaying the very different organisational culture of an agency whose main purpose is distributing CAP funding to farmers, with 'a huge chasm' between the RPA's understanding and the reality on the ground (Interview 8). Interviewees expressed considerable frustration with the RPA (Interviews 7 and 18), which was regarded as forcing unnecessary administrative burdens on LAGs and accountable bodies, continually changing its interpretation of the rules on issues such as eligibility and State Aid, and being unduly cautious (Interview 12). It required both local and external reviews of applications (Interviews 7, 10, 11 and 17), resulting in some inappropriate rulings due to the lack of local knowledge among reviewers (Interviews 7 and 26). Meanwhile, the council culture grew even more risk-averse under austerity, viewing programmes primarily through an economic lens without benefiting from grass-roots knowledge (Interview 7).

In sum, LEADER in the Northumberland Uplands, and in England more generally, became an example of conditional localism with local control severely eroded as central government control escalated during the period 2007–2020. The evident discrepancy between the networked 'LEADER approach' and this more hierarchical experience led one LAG member to say:

I don't think it should be called LEADER any more. I mean, it doesn't comply with LEADER's seven principles any more. It complies with Westminster's idea of what should happen in the rural areas. (Interview 15)

Returning to the concept of autonomy, NULAG's 'powers of immunity' were always constrained due to public funding. The regulation and monitoring intensified, however, to a pitch experienced as excessive, with continual assertion of bureaucratic control through changes to the applicant Handbook, withholding payments, changing budgetary allocations, altering eligibility criteria, steering quality control processes, draconian penalties for errors (Interview 9), limiting potential for animation, and absorbing Board and Officer time through repeated monitoring and forecasting requirements (e.g. Interviews 5, 6).

The curtailment of the scheme's powers of initiation was illustrated most dramatically in the over-ruling of the scheme's locally generated LDS goals, and their substitution by central government goals, at the beginning of Phase 2. Another unanticipated restriction was withdrawal of permission for international networking. The bureaucratic oversight of the scheme eventually resulted in pressures to get grants out in a short time frame, placing further limitations on 'powers of initiation'.

In spite of these, NULAG clung on to a degree of autonomy, pushing back against top-down control to the extent that they were described by one RPA officer as 'the most challenging of the LAGs that we were responsible for' (Interview 11). The RPA's staffing reductions and poor communication evidently contributed towards a loss of trust, misunderstanding and costs in terms of disputes and appeals.

Conclusion

Recent papers have argued that spatial justice in rural areas should be pursued through a place-based approach reflecting many of the elements of the LEADER approach, namely plurality and diversity; active participation and capacity-building; and appropriate governance structures and spaces, although it was acknowledged that this argument awaited empirical investigation to support it. This paper reports empirical investigation of a single case study of LEADER in the north of England, exploring its contribution to spatial justice in relation to these three themes. While not claiming to represent LEADER experience elsewhere, given the diversity of political contexts across Europe, it is suggested that this case study might prompt reflection and further research on how rural development actions elsewhere contribute to these three elements of spatial justice in diverse national and local political contexts. Further research might also explore more deeply the social construction of place and rurality in different national and local contexts, and how this influences how power is exercised over LAGs by central government and intermediate bodies.

In both its phases, NULAG was able to develop a LDS appropriate to the area's distinctive values, challenges and capacities, within the constraints of national guidance and EU funding rules, and subject to the power exerted by the host, accounting and managing bodies. But in Phase 2, the approved LDS and locally derived priorities of all LEADER groups in England were discarded by Ministers and replaced with government-imposed priorities around jobs and growth; capital grants only were permitted; and international networking was abandoned. Reduced capacity for animation and outreach, the complexity of the forms, difficulties in accessing match-funding, the change to capital grants, the emphasis on jobs and growth, and the many

delays in funding all made it harder for NULAG to pursue its local strategy, and so curtailed this aspect of spatial justice.

Similarly, active participation, capacity-building and accountability were all diminished during the period of NULAG's operation, first by the reduction in funding for staffing and animation, and then by the Ministerial interventions to override the LDS and to permit only capital grants. The lack of capacity to give support favoured those in towns at the expense of those in remoter areas and favoured larger business interests with access to capital. Nevertheless, the very existence of NULAG enhanced the institutional capacity and networks of the upland area, and the potential to promote spatial justice in this respect with greater support for animation is clear.

In terms of governance and power, the NULAG case study reveals how the LAG's autonomy was increasingly constrained by central government's hierarchical use of managerial technologies to the extent that LEADER principles no longer obtained, and localism and networked governance mutated into 'government at a distance', impeding the ability of the LAG to promote spatial justice through deploying local knowledge, mobilising and drawing on local assets, and ensuring better transparency and accountability to the local population. When it was closer to conditional localism in Phase 1, NULAG was better able to promote spatial justice, setting priorities informed by local needs and supporting disadvantaged rural groups. After the 2007/2008 financial crisis and the 2010 election, the priorities of the partner bodies (host, accountable and managing bodies) and of central government changed and pressure was exerted to focus more on their priorities.

The discussion of procedural justice in this paper, taken together with the discussion of distributive spatial justice in (Brooks *et al.* 2019), show that these curtailments of local autonomy on balance worked against spatial justice, both procedurally and distributively. This raises questions which those engaged in rural development in other local and national contexts may wish to ask about their own programmes and their contribution to spatial justice. While this case study reveals the considerable potential of LEADER to contribute to spatial justice, it is apparent that this can be frustrated at local level (by invisibility of injustice, or by elite or partner capture) and/or by the imposition of different priorities and controls from above. Spatial justice may be most effectively pursued when both local actors and higher-level authorities pursue common objectives, with each contributing in complementary ways, as the European Commission argued, on grounds of subsidiarity and vernacular knowledge, in its original justification for the LEADER approach.

Conflict of interest

We have no conflict of interest to declare in relation to this research.

Data availability statement

Requests for access to data may be made to the authors. However, in accordance with ethical procedures, respondents were assured that their interviews would remain anonymous and confidential to the research team.

Note

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¹ The budget reduced from £2,035 million in phase 1 (NULAG 2013) to £1,677 million in phase 2 (personal communication, former project officer), a reduction of 17.6 per cent compared to a population increase of 67 per cent.

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