How can FLAGs really help fishing communities?

SUMMARY

The Union Priority 4 (UP4, formerly axis 4) was created to incorporate a territorial vision into a sectorial fund. It was evident that the initial versions of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) were creating severe problems in fishery-dependent areas and communities, and it was considered necessary that the European Fisheries Fund (EFF, 2007-2014) address these issues through a specific axis. During the current European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF, 2014-2020), this system has been consolidated and now that the next programming period (2021-2027) is beginning, it is time to refine the evaluation of its performance.

Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) were created under a Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach and have allowed the financing of thousands of grass-root level inspired local projects spread across hundreds of European fishing communities and fishery-dependent areas.

This policy brief focuses on analysing what types of projects are being financed and comparing the results with the priorities expressed by the FLAGs themselves.

METHODOLOGY

- Evaluating the use of UP4 project funds has required a double methodology. On the one hand, the typology and other characteristics of projects financed by EMFF have been studied through a quantitative analysis based on information available in the European reporting system. On the other hand, the results of this analysis have been compared with the priorities expressed by FLAGs at the beginning of the program.
- The dataset contained information on 3807 projects, but only projects related to the five objectives of UP4 and developed in the eight countries with enough information were considered. Finally, 2691 projects were analysed. At the beginning of the programming period, FLAGs indicated to the European Commission’s Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) how they prioritize each of the UP4 objectives in line with their LDSs.
- Throughout this process, the support provided by FARNET Support Unit has been essential.
THE CONTEXT

The UP4 of the EMFF aims to “increasing employment and territorial cohesion by pursuing the following specific objective: the promotion of economic growth, social inclusion and job creation, and providing support to employability and labour mobility in coastal and inland communities which depend on fishing and aquaculture, including the diversification of activities within fisheries and into other sectors of maritime economy” (EMFF Regulation (Eu) No 508/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014, Article 6.4).

Under UP4, Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGS) were established at the crux of the EU’s move towards a more territorial approach to developing fisheries areas. As of 2019, there were 367 FLAGs across 20 European Member States applying the EMFF policy, each implementing a Local Development Strategy (LDS) and funding a portfolio of projects to address local priorities.

TYPÖLOGY OF PROJECTS ACCORDING TO THE 5 OBJECTIVES OF THE UP4

- **Adding value**: Investments in fishing and aquaculture activities; producer or product certification; building the capacity of current or potential fishers (or aquaculture producers) to carry out their activities; developing the marketing, processing and distribution of fisheries and aquaculture products.

- **Socio-cultural**: Promoting social well-being and cultural heritage in fisheries and aquaculture areas. This includes capacity building, education and training opportunities, providing services; and addressing social issues such as the role of women in fisheries, generational renewal, and the exclusion of vulnerable groups (the unemployed, ethnic minorities and migrants).

- **Diversification**: Examples include supporting diversification inside and outside commercial fisheries, lifelong learning and job creation in fisheries and aquaculture areas by operations related to fisheries and aquaculture (e.g. diversification into new markets and lines of production) diversification into other sectors such as tourism and gastronomy.

- **Governance**: As a project objective governance relates to strengthening the role of fisheries communities in local development and the governance of local fisheries resources and maritime activities. The wider aim is to give fishers a voice in local decision-making and resource management and to raise the profile of fishers and producers in the community.

- **Environmental**: Environmental projects means enhancing and capitalizing on the environmental assets of the fisheries and aquaculture areas, including operations to mitigate climate change, by for example protection and valorisation of local environmental assets; raising environmental awareness among fishers and the local community; and minimizing the negative impact of fisheries and aquaculture activities on the environment and climate.

*Location of the FLAGs across the eight MSs analysed*
RESEARCH RESULTS

The results are based on a comparison between the typology of the projects financed (Article 63, codes 106-110), the priorities expressed in the national Operational Programs (OP) and the project typology preference expressed by the FLAGs themselves at the beginning of the period. There is an over-presence of ‘diversification’ and ‘socio-cultural’ projects, and a possible under-representation of the ‘adding value’ projects. ‘Diversification’ projects account for 32.7% of total expenditure, closely followed by socio-cultural projects (30%). However, ‘adding value’ projects are indicated as the main priority by FLAG managers in six of the eight countries studied, but it is only the third priority by the amount of expenditure accounting for 26.2%. ‘Environmental’ projects are far behind, representing only 10.3% of total EMFF expenditure, whereas governance projects present a testimonial 0.5%. The small percentage allocated to governance issues may indicate a lack of connection between these funds and promoting and strengthening fisheries-related organisations and, in general, collective action related to fisheries issues.

A country-by-country analysis shows different national models are emerging. There are very important differences between countries. Some countries put emphasis on diversification (Spain), others on added value projects (like some Nordic countries) and others on socio-cultural projects (Poland or Ireland). Different national models are emerging in line with different national Operational Programs.

According to some researchers, one of the key roles of FLAGs is to find their position on a territorial vision (focused on helping the territory) and a sectoral vision (focused on helping the fishing sector). Attaining this theoretical balance in practice is not easy. For instance, the FLAG system’s implementation may either be excessively sector-based without using the opportunities for wider local participation, or tilted towards an excessively territorial vision, that excludes in practice the fishing sector. The latter seems to be happening in some territories demonstrated by the weakness or nonexistence of fishers’ organizations, associated with the intrinsic difficulty of initiating EU projects and managing European funds. It may also be caused by the presence of socially and economically more powerful sectors or diverging priorities of local public administrations.

Figures comparing spending by projects and the priorities indicated by the FLAGs
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

If the projects are chosen by the FLAGs themselves based on the principles of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), it is necessary to ensure that those who have the capacity to choose truly represent those for whom the UP4 of the FEMP was designed, "communities which depend on fishing and aquaculture". It is necessary to ensure that the institutions and representatives of the fishing communities lead the FLAGs. The excessive bureaucracy and complexity of these funds do not help the fishers (and their organisations, where existing) to get involved in their management.

It is recommended that FLAGs and national administrations provide comparative information on the characteristics and beneficiaries of each funded project. The amount of information should be increased, in order to improve the evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of the funds used.

In-depth comparisons between regions and nations are recommended to show holistic differences on several FLAG levels, for instance in relation to governance and management. Single case descriptions are not sufficient.

KEY RESULTS

- From the data emerge different national models in the application of the UP4.
- The majority of the projects’ financing is related to diversification and socio-cultural issues. Less than expected was invested in adding value projects. There were few environmental projects and almost no governance projects.
- Difficulty for some FLAGs to find a balance between the EMFF sectorial vision and the UP4 territorial vision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reduce the bureaucratic difficulties linked to the granting, management and control of funds.
- Use UP4 of the EMFF to promote and strengthen fisheries related organizations.
- Ensure that the territorial vision of the UP4 does let it be forgotten that the funds are aimed at the development of "communities which depend on fishing and aquaculture".
- Ensure a significant presence of fishers, and other relevant members of the fishing communities, in the decision-making bodies of the FLAGs.
- Develop research that analyses the efficiency and effectiveness of these funds in helping fishing communities.
- Carry out a comparative holistic investigation of the FLAGs involvement with communities which depend on fishing and aquaculture should be addressed in different EU countries applying the EMFF.
- Increase available information on the characteristics and beneficiaries of each funded project.

Further reading:
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104111