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THE LEADER PROGRAMME AS A VEHICLE IN PROMOTING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RURAL REGIONS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THE GREEK PARADIGM¹

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Abstract

The 'new rural paradigm' in Europe, applied through the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), places at the center of academic analysis and policy formation the concept of 'territorial dynamics' (versus the sectoral approach) as an important vehicle for growth in rural regions. The term denotes "specific regional and local factors, structures and tendencies" which include factors such as "entrepreneurial traditions, public and private networks, work ethics, regional identity, participation and attractiveness of the cultural and natural environment" and would facilitate the creation of 'smart places' among EU regions - according to the 2020 EU strategy terminology - competitive on a regional and global scale. Such intangible elements constitute 'social capital', a term of decisive importance in the endogenous development literature, often denoted as 'territorial capital' - as initially proposed by the OECD and recently re-launched by DG-Regio of the EC - usually defined as: "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions". This paper examines the significance of social capital for the regeneration of rural regions as well as the overall socio-economic & regional cohesion and the importance of RDPs, particularly the LEADER axis, in this context. We take on a thorough literature review on the subject with reference to the case of Greece, a country of the southern European periphery, particularly hit by the current financial and economic crisis. This country is furthermore characterized by a very centralized governance model, in combination with a sectoral (vs. an integrated and holistic) approach to rural regions and intense regional imbalances, comprising a large proportion of marginal and abandoned territories in the so-called less-favoured areas (LFAs). We conclude with lessons learned on the potential role of social capital in inducing territorial/regional growth in Greece.

Key words: Social/territorial capital, Rural Development Programs, LEADER, regional development in Greece.

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