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Exploring Justice in the Process of Redesigning Local Development Strategies for LEADER: Representation, Distribution, and Recognition

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Abstract: After its first funding period from 1991 to 1994, LEADER was positively evaluated as a successful strategy to empower actors at the regional level, enable regional development and contribute to territorial cohesion within the European Union. Critical studies, however, have highlighted elitist tendencies in LEADER processes and asked whether the proclaimed goal of strengthening ‘the local’ contributes to new or other forms of social and spatial injustice. Our research focus lies in how representation, distribution, and recognition—as the three interrelated dimensions of justice according to Nancy Fraser—are featured in the discourse related to redesigning a local development strategy (LDS). During this process, which is conceived as the most open and inclusive phase in each LEADER funding period, we conducted expert interviews and participatory observations in a case study region and gathered media reports, documents, and official regulations. In our analysis of issues of representation, distribution, and recognition, we also focus on the spatial scales that are referred to and the ways in which the involved actors challenge and justify the status quo. Our analysis explicates the actors’ implicit normative understandings as well as their different perspectives and positions considering perceived injustice. Even though the LDS process provides opportunities to negotiate these positions and to work towards more just representation, distribution, and recognition, they are partly constrained by structural and individual dependencies.

Keywords: rural development; LEADER; participation; social justice; spatial justice; community-led local development

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1. Introduction

The LEADER method—funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) as part of the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)—aims at facilitating regional development and “achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities” [1] (n.p.). In the first funding period from 1991 to 1994, the method was only applied in selected “disadvantaged rural regions”, but it was subsequently rolled out. After 2000, all types of rural areas in the European Union (EU) were eligible for funding [2] (p. 2). With the start of the funding period 2007–2013, all European Member States were obliged to allocate 2.5% (EU-12) or 5% (EU-15) of their budget to the application of the LEADER method. In the following period (2014–2020), the LEADER approach was further expanded to the other funds associated with the second pillar of the CAP, including the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), the European Social Fund (ESF), and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). In these contexts, the method is labelled ‘Community-Led Local Development’ (CLLD) [2] (p. 2). The LEADER method is thus an increasingly

influential instrument for rural development and a mechanism of re-distributing public tax money to rural areas. While the specific funding constellations vary between and even within countries, projects in LEADER regions are in principle jointly funded by the EU, the respective European member state, local authorities and diverse regional partners including economic and civil actors. In Germany, the federal organization of the state resulted in every federal state having its own deal with the European Commission, which for example concerned agreements related to co-financing either provided by the respective federal state or by the municipalities and districts [3] (p. 381). Scientists have evaluated the method and its impacts at the regional and national level (for Germany, e.g., [3,4]), from internationally comparative perspectives [5–8] and more recently also at the village level [9]. Scholars in the fields of geography, planning and European policy have investigated questions related to democratic principles [10], to multi-level governance [11], to social innovation [8,12] or the ‘smartness’ of regions [13]. The researchers highlighted both positive and negative aspects associated with the method. More recently, issues of power and of social and spatial justice in relation to LEADER have received scientific attention [14–16].

Our research aims at contributing to this literature. It focuses on the process of redesigning the local development strategy (LDS) for an already established LEADER region. In 2013, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union defined a community-led LDS as “a coherent set of operations the purpose of which is to meet local objectives and needs, and which contributes to achieving the Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, and which is designed and implemented by a local action group” [17] (p. 339). When applying for LEADER funding, all regions are required to submit such a strategy for each funding period. Designing and redesigning such a strategy is described as involving wide civic participation and allowing (re-)negotiations of the strategy based on an assessment of the status quo. We chose a case study approach encompassing several methods to explore the discourse related to the process of redesigning the LDS in the regional context. Our particular analytical focus is on questions of justice, as “[i]nequalities at a more local level are overlooked both in EU policies and in statistics” [18] (p. 253), which is one research gap addressed in this study. Our analysis was guided by two research questions: (1) How are the three dimensions of justice—representation, distribution, and recognition in Nancy Fraser’s terms [19,20]—featured in the discourse related to redesigning a LDS, and which spatial scales are referred to? (2) How do the involved actors challenge or justify the status quo related to representation, distribution, and recognition?

We argue that implicit normative understandings of representation, distribution, and recognition and resulting practices strongly impact the LEADER process—also beyond the redesign of the LDS—which is why we consider it important to make them explicit. This study can raise awareness about this issue and aims at informing rural scholars, regional planners, LEADER stakeholders and policy-makers involved in community-led local development (CLLD) approaches. We begin by outlining the conceptual framework including an overview of previous literature on LEADER and justice as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the approach we decided to take. The subsequent section explains the applied methods and our data and provides an overview of the analyzed LDS process. In the results and the discussion section, we first focus on how representation, distribution, and recognition featured in our different materials, and secondly present insights into how the status quo was challenged or justified by the observed and interviewed actors. We conclude with contextualizing our results and offering suggestions for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework: LEADER and Questions of Justice

Spatial justice had long only been discussed in urban-centered research [21] (p. 894). The debate around it emerged in the 1960s and 70s inspired by the works of Bleddyn Davies [22], Henri Lefebvre [23], David Harvey [24] and continued later with publications by Susan Fainstein [25] and Edward Soja [26]. Jones et al. [21] (p. 894) highlighted that more recently, researchers also started to look at spatial justice in rural or, more broadly speaking, regional contexts. In an investigation of European cohesion policy, Jones et al. [21] (p. 895) advocated for the empowerment of regions in line with ideas of justice: “[R]egions should be able to: (1) assert their own capacity actively to define and pursue policy goals based on ideas of justice [...]; (2) consider the implications of space and scale for the promotion of justice; (3) be able to define well-being, development and the ‘good life’ in ways that reflect regional priorities”. Madanipour et al. [27] (p. 7) defined spatial justice as “the democratic process of equitably distributing social and environmental benefits and burdens within and between groups, territories, and generations”. The authors’ definition is based on a relational understanding of space [28], which allows them to conceptualize spatial processes as inherently linked to social processes, as well as to integrate the two aspects of procedural justice and distributive justice. While distributive justice is about the distribution of resources and opportunities [27] (p. 5), procedural justice refers to the processes in which decisions on questions of distribution are negotiated. These processes potentially “create unjust outcomes, notably relations of power” [15] (p. 323). It is just in recent years that issues of spatial justice have also been discussed in relation to the LEADER method and its outcomes. Shucksmith et al. investigated how LEADER potentially contributes to procedural spatial justice in rural regions. Their analysis was structured along three interrelated themes, “namely plurality and diversity; active participation and capacity-building; and appropriate governance structures and spaces” [15] (p. 338). Dax and Oedl-Wieser [29] also touched upon questions of justice in their evaluation of all Austrian LDS for the funding period 2014–2020. Their analysis revealed the domination of economic interests over social issues in the regions’ SWOT analyses, but also “the starting recognition of diversity and equality aspects for local development” [29] (p. 33). The authors underlined the importance of “‘equal chances’ for all groups of society” and an increased “understanding of the benefits of social diversity in rural regions” [29] (p. 33). Our aim is to add to this literature by investigating different dimensions of justice at the regional and sub-regional level from the perspective of the involved actors in an LDS process, which is a decisive phase for both new and already established LEADER regions.

2.1. Three Dimensions of Justice

Justice has been described as a complex concept with different notions that potentially lead to contradictory judgements of the same process or outcome [30] (p. 80). As a theoretical framework for this study, we draw on Nancy Fraser, who first highlighted two dimensions of justice in a capitalist society, namely (economic) distribution and (cultural) recognition [19] (p. 74), and later added (political) representation. She chose the term ‘representation’ as it has two meanings, namely “symbolic framing and political voice”, both of which she sees as important for understanding the political dimension [20] (p. 146). Thinking about these three dimensions of justice in the context of LEADER, the distribution of funding within a region is a prominent topic. One can look at the distribution at a certain point in time and thus see it as an outcome, but also at the processes in which this distribution is negotiated. The (re-)design of a local development strategy in a LEADER region is such a process, as main future goals are formulated and topics eligible for funding are defined. Who can contribute to the (re-)design of the LDS is a question of representation. Related to these questions, the issue of recognition arises: which groups of people are considered as beneficiaries of funding and which groups are

considered as potential participants in the process of (re-)designing the LDS? Which groups are neglected?

Nancy Fraser highlighted the interlinkages between the three dimensions and the importance of the frame in which justice is negotiated [19] (p. 72). According to Fraser, “any frame will produce exclusions” [20] (p. 149), which are potentially, but not necessarily, unjust. She, therefore, proposes to constantly evaluate and redesign these frames [20] (p. 150). Several previous studies referred to and applied Fraser’s dimensions of justice, such as Murphy et al. [31], who analyzed the transition of beef farming in Ireland, and van Vulpen and Bock, who published a scoping review on spatial justice in European regions. The latter called for more research on “regional inequality in relation to justice” [32] (p. 23). Carolan examined “justice in the countryside” based on Fraser’s dimension of justice and claimed that “[j]ust as we need to examine grammar concerning the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of justice we need to be more reflexive about how we think and talk about the ‘how’ of justice” [33] (p. 48). Fladvad [30] also worked with the three dimensions of justice and combined these with a practice theory approach to investigate claims for justice in the context of food sovereignty. He defined these claims as political practices and as either challenging or legitimizing norms and rules inherent in practices. Additionally, he highlighted the importance of spatial scales for rights-based claims as they are addressed through such claims—reproduced or challenged—but also provide stability [30] (pp. 82–83). In this study, we apply Fraser’s perspective on justice, complement her perspective with Fladvad’s focus on spatial scales and draw inspiration from his idea of challenging and legitimizing practices.

2.2. Investigating Representation, Distribution, and Recognition in Discourse

For analyzing how issues of representation, distribution, and recognition are addressed in the LDS process in a LEADER region, we compiled different types of data. Official regulations, guidelines and documents, media reports, field notes of participant observations as well as interview transcripts were used to analyze the “doings and sayings” related to the process. Similar to the discourse-oriented post-structural materialist perspective employed by Schäfer [34] and Hillebrandt [35], we bring discourse and practice theory together. In line with Schäfer—who applied this approach to studying protest events—discourses are treated “as practices which set the topics they speak about (cf. Foucault 1973) [...] [and] the observation of things as a discourse inherent practice” [34] (n.p.).

3. Materials and Methods

The data for this study were collected in one LEADER region in Germany. To protect the anonymity of our research participants, the name of the case study region is anonymized and no further information on the region is provided. The LDS process we focus on is depicted in Figure 1, including the relevant groups of actors as well as the documents and media reports, which shaped and accompanied the process. The main actor groups were the LEADER management, the local action group (LAG), the chair of the LAG, the planning agency which facilitated the process and the participants in workshops. The whole procedure is embedded in and influenced by the legal framework set up by the European Union for the implementation of LEADER and its translation in practical guidelines and regulations at the federal state level. We see all of these regulations and guidelines as relevant for our analysis, as they are interrelated and based upon each other, but modified through the translation from one language to another and from legal to more practical terms. Additionally, as a starting point, the previous LDS had an impact on the development of the new LDS. During the process, two regional newspapers published informative articles about the process written by the LEADER management as well as articles written by journalists reporting on main developments.

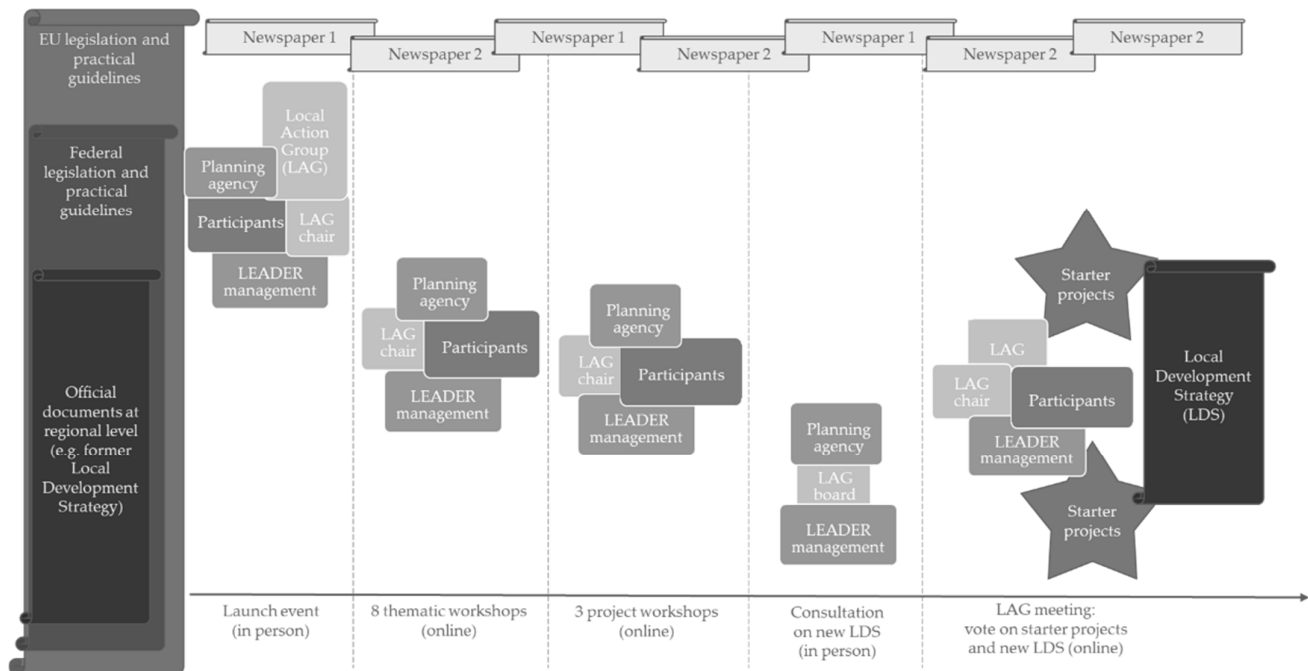


Figure 1. An overview of the observed LDS process, the involved actors, and relevant documents, including EU and federal legislation and articles in the two regional newspapers (authors' draft).

Data collection started in November 2021 when the public process for working on the new LDS had just begun. The last interviews were conducted in August 2022—four months after the strategy had been finalized and submitted to the responsible federal state office in April 2022. (In Germany, the names and responsibilities of these offices differ between federal states. The offices belong to the respective federal ministry responsible for issues such as regional development, agriculture and nutrition. In larger German federal states, several of these offices are distributed across the area of the federal state.) We conducted seven problem-centered expert interviews [36] to explore the three dimensions of justice in experts' reflections on the process of designing the LDS, and analyzed seven official documents issued at the EU and federal state level, ten documents directly related to or created during the LDS process in the region under study [37–39] as well as 23 regional newspaper articles on the LDS process and associated LEADER activities during this period. Based on field notes taken by participant observers in online meetings [40], practices during the LDS process could be analyzed. Additionally, descriptions of practices in the expert interviews were considered. Different actors including two LEADER managers, the head of the Local Action Group (LAG), a project promoter, and a regional planner working for the facilitating planning agency were interviewed as well as two scientists involved in the evaluation of the LEADER funding in Germany. Table 1 provides an overview of the analyzed data and the abbreviations we use in the analysis; Appendix A gives additional details for each of the documents. To ensure the anonymity of the research participants, all sources but the documents at European level are anonymized.

We coded and analyzed the different types of data using MAXQDA software and followed Mayring's method for structuring content analysis [41], "a qualitatively oriented category-based content analysis" [42] (§1), which helped to structure the material along main theoretically grounded categories as well as inductively identified sub-categories. In Section 4, we quote these different materials with the abbreviations indicated in Table 1. For the European documents and regulations, we add the original page number

(i.e., EUR01, p. 356), while we use the document page number for the federal state regulations rather than the original page number for anonymity reasons (i.e., GR01, p. 6). For the quoted interviews and notes, we add the position number of the quoted passage in the respective document in MAXQDA (i.e., GE01, Pos. 63–65). Whenever several passages within an interview are used to support an observation, they are separated by commas (i.e., GE06, Pos. 3, 15, 68), and several different sources supporting one statement are separated by a semicolon (i.e., GE03, Pos. 44–47; GN04, Pos. 10). The passages that we quote in the analysis were translated from German to English - except the European regulations and guidelines,

Table 1. Overview of analyzed data (Explanations: EU = Europe; G = Germany; R = Regulation; D = Document; E = Expert interview; N = Notes taken by researchers; MR = Media Report).

Abbreviations	Data
EUR01–EUR02	EU regulations
EUD01–EUD04	EU guidelines (published by the EC and the ENRD)
GR01	German federal state legal document
GMR01–GMR23	Media reports
GE01–GE07	Expert interviews (GE03 was interviewed twice (quoted as GE03_01 and GE03_02); GE04 and GE05 were interviewed together)
GD01–GD10	Official documents of the LEADER region under study (incl. the old LDS, official minutes of LAG meetings etc.)
GN01–GN07	Researchers' field notes of participant observations (of thematic workshops and project workshops)

4. Results

Before we investigate how actors challenged and justified the status quo related to representation, distribution, and recognition in Section 4.2, we begin in Section 4.1 with an analysis of each of the three dimensions of justice and the contexts in which they were addressed. For this analysis, we first separate the three, even though the strong interlinkages suggested by Fraser were very apparent in our material.

4.1. The Three Dimensions of Justice in the LDS Process

Discussions about and statements on questions of representation, distribution, and recognition were to be found in all types of data from the more evaluative, meta-level expert interviews to the workshop sessions and the official documents. In the following sub-sections, we present the sub-topics identified for each of the three dimensions. For each sub-topic (highlighted in italics), we firstly refer to the relevant regulations and guidelines, secondly to the interviews and the official documents, thirdly to the newspaper articles and fourthly to our observation field notes. In some instances, this order was slightly changed for a more logical connection of topics.

4.1.1. Representation

The representation of different societal groups was problematized in all analyzed sources for the context of the *LDS process*, for the *LAG* and for the *project promoters*. While the EU regulations remain vague in relation to the participating public, they require the LDS to contain “a description of the community involvement process in the development of the strategy” (EUR01, p. 356). The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) emphasizes the necessity “not only to involve the community in the development of the

LDS but also to demonstrate how and how effectively that has been done” (EUD03, p. 19). It is not specified, however, who should represent ‘the community’. In another guideline, the ENRD is more explicit and stresses the *LDS process* as a window of opportunity to attract new people and organizations to participate but adds: “An open-door approach is not enough, there can be many barriers, distance, transport, timing, child-care, school hours, even language can discourage people. People need to be invited in, to have permission to contribute. Think it through, how can you help people to contribute, what tools, methods and mediums can you use?” (EUD04, p. 8). In this document, the ENRD does not explain why these efforts are necessary. In the LEADER region under study, the regional management published calls for participation in the LDS process in the two regional newspapers. For the launch event, all “committed citizens” (GMR01, n.p.) were asked to join. After the event, the level of participation was positively evaluated: “[the region] has indeed had a remarkably positive turnout, i.e., a high level of participation, a very, very high level of participation. We hope that this will continue through the process” (GE01, Pos. 4). Additionally, the diversity of people and actors in this first event was highlighted, mentioning citizens, LAG members, representatives of associations and interest groups (GE07, Pos. 31–32). However, the high number of participants dropped after the first meeting and over the course of the process (GE07, Pos. 31–32). In terms of social structure, more men than women were taking part in the process (GE03_01, Pos. 80–83), and young people were seen as underrepresented (GE07, Pos. 34–36). Two main aspects, which were mentioned as hindering people to participate were the required spatial mobility and temporal flexibility (GE05, Pos. 57). The newly established online format of the workshops due to COVID-19 was thus mentioned as enabling more people to join. While older people were expected to have difficulties with the online format, young adults with children and long working hours were expected to join more readily (GE07, Pos. 37–38). After the first workshops, the regional manager concluded, however, that the online format did not attract new groups (GE03_01, Pos. 79). Over the course of the process, not only the number of participants, but also the wording in the calls for participation in the two regional newspapers changed. For the thematic workshops, the newspapers still addressed “committed citizens and actors” (GMR04, n.p.). For the project workshops, the wording changed to “people and organizations are now being sought who would like to realize their projects with the support of the regional management” (GMR11, n.p.). Both regional newspaper announcements highlighted the activity and commitment necessary for participation. The following online LAG meetings were announced as “open to the public, [i]nterested citizens are cordially invited” (GMR15, n.p.).

Framing the composition of the LAG, the legal regulations at European level describe “local action groups [as] composed of representatives of public and private local socio-economic interests, in which, at the decision-making level neither public authorities, as defined in accordance with national rules, nor any single interest group represents more than 49% of the voting rights” (EUR01, p. 355). Our interviewees’ opinions on representation within the LAG were complex and partly contradictory. LAG members were described as people who are active anyway, but nevertheless a diverse group (GE01, Pos. 9–10). The LAG was also understood as a circle of people open for interested applicants (GE06, Pos. 50), but many current members were characterized as similar regarding their professional backgrounds as former mayors (GE06, Pos. 59–60). The maximum quota of 50 percent for municipal actors in the LAG was stressed as breaking up top-down structures and thus as a positive influence on representation (GE03_02, Pos. 67–68). For the LAG under study, representatives of the social sector and the environmental sector were seen as underrepresented, even though the latter gained representatives over the last years (GE06, Pos. 20). In terms of social characteristics, the LEADER manager mentioned that while the LAG was male dominated, the percentage of women involved was not as small as in other LAGs (GE03_02, Pos. 77–78). Several interviewees highlighted the lack of representation of adults younger than 30 (GE03_01, Pos. 80–83). Other characteristics

such as migration background or residential locations of LAG members were not discussed, and neither was the inclusion of people with disabilities.

Representation in the group of *project promoters* is not addressed in any of the legal documents. The regional management commented on unequal representation in this group regarding gender, age, and migration background: “Not only women, but also people with a migration background, that’s the same topic. I don’t think we’ve had any project promoters yet [laughs dryly for a moment], to be honest. So, ehm, yes. So, the diversity of society is not really reflected in LEADER—at least not in our region” (GE03_01, Pos. 89). Reliability, available time, and experience with administrative work were mentioned as features project promoters should have (GE02, Pos. 31; GE03, Pos. 57). In one of the newspaper articles, a local mayor was quoted describing project promoters as “people who realize dreams with perseverance, courage and a willingness to take risks” (GMR21, n.p.). The residential locations of project promoters and workshop participants were addressed in interviews with the regional manager (GE03_01, Pos. 39; GE03_02, Pos. 64) and highlighted by participants during workshop sessions (GN01, Pos. 40, 43; GN03, Pos. 14, 80).

4.1.2. Distribution

Questions of distribution were addressed in all types of data, mainly along three sub-topics, including the *distribution of funding*, with a focus on the actor groups and projects eligible for funding as well as the spatial distribution of funding within the LEADER region. The other two identified sub-topics are the *distribution of knowledge*, both on the LDS process and on LEADER funding regulations and opportunities and the *distribution of work to volunteers* necessary for LEADER projects.

The federal state law declares funding recipients to be LAGs or partners with a legal status, other legal persons of public and private law as well as natural persons (GR01, S. 10). In the interviews, the *distribution of funding* was mainly discussed in relation to volunteers, who in Germany are often organized in associations and clubs. The two interviewed LEADER managers underlined that LEADER funding in their regions should especially support associations and volunteers and their ideas instead of importing ideas from elsewhere without any local rooting (GE01, Pos. 8, 16, 34). According to the LEADER managers, small amounts of money can motivate volunteers to continue (GE01, Pos. 34) and initiate further activities: “out of the [LEADER] project, an association was founded [...]. And they are now running another LEADER application via the association [...]. And that is actually quite nice to see when something like this develops in a place from such a relatively small investment [...]” (GE03_01, Pos. 51). Several interviewees, however, highlighted the difficulties for volunteers in accessing funding as they have lesser resources to deal with increasingly complex bureaucracy compared with, for example, municipalities or economic stakeholders (GE01, Pos. 16). “That is why it is becoming less and less attractive for associations, because they do not have the necessary capacities to handle all that. It is incredibly bureaucratic, and you can make a lot of mistakes” (GE07, Pos. 19–20). The focus on funding for volunteers and associations was consciously chosen by the LEADER management and the LAG (GE01, Pos. 36). The two regional newspapers mirror this focus, as all presented LEADER projects were led by local associations (e.g., GMR09; GMR18; GMR21; GMR23). In the observed thematic and project workshops, this focus was also visible with most participants representing associations (GN01–GN07). In the project workshops, struggles with the complex funding regulations and requirements were expressed by several potential project promoters (GN06, Pos. 7–13; GN07, Pos. 6).

Questioning which actors should receive funding is inextricably linked to defining which projects are eligible for funding. European regulations require LAGs to develop a “non-discriminatory and transparent selection procedure and objective criteria for the selection of operations, which avoid conflicts of interest” (EUR01, p. 37). The federal state law requires funding to be applicable for “projects within the frame and on the basis of the respective LDS of the region” (GR01, p. 9) and the selection to take place “in the LAG according to the criteria laid down in the LDS” (GR01, p. 10). Additionally, the main

purpose of LEADER funding in this German federal state “is to support balanced regional development through the implementation of regional development strategies (LDSs) in rural areas which help their regions to shape the transition to a sustainable future” (GR01, p. 9). In the interviews it became apparent that in the region under study, clear selection criteria for projects had not existed during the previous years. The criteria which were introduced for the new funding period also encompassed accessibility, gender equality and sustainability. Another aspect relevant for the selection is the impact of a project on the locality and population, which was illustrated with the negative example of funding a prestigious building: “of course we don’t want to put all our LEADER money into a tower. That’s not the kind of thing that has a sustainable effect on society or anything like that. What we always want to pursue to some extent is that somehow something happens in the individual villages in terms of quality of life, cohesion” (GE03_01, Pos. 49). The regional newspapers reported on two project ideas which were directly related to sustainability: one aimed at starting a sustainability-related regional consultation service and another one at creating an inclusive space for environmental education for different age groups (GMR12; GMR13; GMR23). The latter thus addressed problems of accessibility, which was also undertaken in another project, for which the sanitary facilities were planned to be accessible for everyone including individuals with disabilities (GMR18).

The spatial distribution of LEADER projects is not clearly defined in European regulations, which only specify that “[c]ommunity-led local development shall be [...] focused on specific subregional areas” (EUR01, p. 355). In Germany at the federal state level, projects for the region as well as transregional and transnational cooperation projects are listed as eligible for LEADER funding (GR01, p. 9). Intra-regional distribution of funding and projects is generally not prioritized in LEADER (GE05, Pos. 79). Depending on their histories, some LEADER regions nevertheless informally emphasize equal distribution between villages, towns or parts of the region, also with the argument that this strengthens the community feeling (GE05, Pos. 79). According to the facilitating planning agent, LEADER funding can generally be used to support projects which benefit many people within the region and even beyond, while others might only be beneficial for the population of a few villages (GE07, Pos. 44). Both the planning agent and the LAG chair stated that the distribution of funding within the region should be spatially just (GE06, Pos. 29–30; GE07, Pos. 50). However, they highlighted the difficulties related to this goal, as the funding is dependent on the activity of local actors. Municipalities have to provide co-financing for projects (GE07, Pos. 45–46). The LAG chair criticized the priority for local village projects in the LEADER region under study and was in favor of supporting more regional projects (GE06, Pos. 34). Closely related to this idea of prioritizing the region over individual villages is the vision of spatially concentrated, but also outstanding services such as leisure centers, touristic offers, etc. to make the best out of the available financial resources in the region (GE06, Pos. 36). In the observed thematic workshops, topics such as the road, cycle and footpath network as well as housing and vacancies were discussed on a meta-level for the entire region (GD04, p. 1). In the project workshops, the majority of the presented project ideas were, however, related to one town or village (GN06, Pos. 33) or mainly beneficial for one association (GN05, Pos. 14; GN06, Pos. 23, 28; GN07, Pos. 6). Only one project spanning several LEADER regions was presented in one of the project workshops (GN05, Pos. 17). Spatially just distribution of funding within the LEADER region was also addressed by the LEADER management in relation to the definition of LEADER regions in federal state regulations and the question whether bigger towns could also receive funding or not. A change in this regulation resulted in towns with up to 75,000 inhabitants being eligible for LEADER funding (GR01, p. 9). Even though the LEADER management generally questioned the inclusion of urban centers, it was considered to be positive in their case: “It is good for us that [the biggest town in the region] is also part of it now, because there was always a bit of resentment that they somehow didn’t quite understand: why aren’t we part of it? We have the same challenges, the same difficulties, we are also a rural area and have always felt a bit disadvantaged” (GE03_01, Pos. 39).

We identified the *distribution of knowledge* as the second sub-topic. It was not discussed with as much controversy as the distribution of funding. The federal state law explicitly lists costs for public relations work as eligible for LEADER funding, including “raising awareness among local actors, training (participants or organizers), events, networking activities within the LEADER networks” (GR01, p. 9). The interviewed LEADER manager addressed the importance of distributing knowledge during the LDS process to inform people about the possibilities to participate, about decisions and about projects. For the launch event of the LDS process, information was mainly shared via two e-mail distribution lists—one of them being administered by the LEADER management and the other one being a broader newsletter for associations and volunteers in the entire administrative region. According to the regional manager, the two main newspapers in the region were “only an addition” to these forms of knowledge sharing (GE03_02, Pos. 37–42). For the public, however, the newspapers were the main source of information on all stages of the LDS process. Additionally, basic information on the LEADER program was shared in these newspapers. While almost half of the analyzed newspaper articles were written by the regional management and advertised participation in the LDS process, others informed readers about recent activities, decisions and funded projects and were written by journalists (see Appendix A). The regional manager also highlighted that knowledge on funding regulations, procedures and successfully funded projects should be distributed even more, but explicitly only mentioned municipal administrations, mayors, associations, and project promoters (GE03_01, Pos. 59; GE03_02, Pos. 61–64). One of the LEADER evaluators stressed that in most regions, knowledge on LEADER is only available to a small group of people (GE05, Pos. 9), and during the workshops, different forms of knowledge provision were requested by the participants (GN03, Pos. 30–32; GN03, Pos. 72–75).

The third sub-topic identified was the *distribution of work to volunteers* to ensure a functioning LAG and the implementation of LEADER projects. According to the LEADER evaluators, the reliance on volunteers is generally not problematized by the involved actors, but in many LEADER regions, a concern was expressed about whether the younger generations will be willing to volunteer in the future (GE05, Pos. 66). Several interviewees criticized that the work for LEADER could not be performed by everyone due to the necessary knowledge and time (GE01, Pos. 56), which was also problematized by the interviewed project promoter: “You have to imagine that I am now a successful or unsuccessful pensioner, I have a bit of time for [doing a LEADER project] and I enjoy it. But if you have someone who is a tiler by profession or works at the tax office and has to do all this after work and doesn’t know the people, how difficult it is for him. That is a problem” (GE02, Pos. 31). The resulting trend of single persons doing most of the work for LEADER projects was problematized by the LEADER manager and contrasted with a rare group of volunteers running several connected LEADER projects in one village (GE03_01, Pos. 57).

4.1.3. Recognition

Recognition of individuals based on certain characteristics played a role whenever questions of representation and distribution were addressed. The categories that we identified as being used to distinguish groups include *age* (young, mid-age, old), *gender* (men, women), *health* (physical limitations yes or no), *educational background* (academic, non-academic), *profession* (jobs in administration or manual professions), *residential location* and *citizenship* (German citizenship yes or no). In addition to these, some categories were used to refer to different actor groups in the LDS process. These include the main *thematic orientation of the actor* (economic, social, or environmental) and the *legal status* (private or public).

The European regulations demand member states to “ensure that equality between men and women [...] [is] promoted throughout the preparation and implementation of programmes [...]”. Additionally, “appropriate steps to prevent any discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation during

the preparation and implementation of programmes” should be taken, especially ensuring “accessibility for persons with disabilities” (EUR01, p. 342). These regulations are also referred to in guidelines for the design of LDSs by the European Network for Rural Development, together with arguments for why equal opportunities are important: “This is important, not just in upholding citizens’ rights, but also in ensuring that all available talents and abilities are harnessed” (EUD03, p. 17). The federal state regulation for LEADER funding does not explicitly mention the goal of equality of societal groups, but generally refers to the European regulations (EUR01 and EUR02 in this paper) as applicable law (GR01, p. 9). In the ‘old’ but still applicable LDS of the LEADER region under study, paragraphs on gender mainstreaming and non-discrimination were included: “the LDS [...] gives all people the same opportunity to participate in the development of the LDS and in regional development in general. The LAG will continuously review the equality of interests and non-discrimination during the funding period” (GD01, p. 98). In the interviews, recognition was less directly problematized compared with representation and distribution but was rather indirectly addressed when these two dimensions were discussed. The LEADER manager highlighted that recognizing the needs of different societal groups was a bigger topic in the neighboring region with a university city, while a transfer of these ideals into the region under study could already be observed (GE03_01, Pos. 91). Different age groups were frequently addressed by the LEADER managers, the planning agent, and the LAG chair, acknowledging the different needs and perspectives of young people compared with older ones (GE03_01, Pos. 25; GE03_02, Pos. 78). The complexity of older people’s needs and comparisons of their situation in a village context as opposed to an urban neighborhood was, for example, reflected against the background of the aim to enable them to stay in villages. In this context, the general assumption that older people in rural areas would automatically need support was questioned: “these are things that are always in the minds and often also in the minds of those who come up with funding programs, because this is- this is- the problem group. But is this really the problem group?” (GE01, Pos. 64). Another characteristic which was considered by some of the interview partners was the residential location of people and their local needs. Equality for men and women was also addressed as an aim in most interviews in relation to the LDS process, the distribution of projects and the representation in the LAG (GE03_01, Pos. 89–91; GE07, Pos. 49–50). From the evaluators’ perspective, gender equality in representation and distribution should be considered over the whole course of a project (GE04, Pos. 52). People with disabilities and their needs were mainly mentioned in the context of the distribution of funding for projects, with the appeal to address their needs in LDSs and through projects (GE06, Pos. 23–24). Only the planning agent also reflected on their inclusion in LEADER processes: “in regional management, there’s the topic of inclusion. I think that addressing these target groups, i.e., people with disabilities, is still very unequal. It hasn’t really taken off yet. But it also depends on the region. Other regions are much further along and are working on it much more. Unfortunately, that is not yet the case here” (GE07, Pos. 50).

The newspaper articles mainly referred to citizens of the region and to local actors, sometimes only using the masculine version of the German words: “Bürger und Akteure aus der Region” (GMR15, n.p.). In reports on project ideas presented in LAG meetings, age-related groups such as pensioners and pupils were mentioned as beneficiaries of projects (GMR13, n.p.). The needs of future generations were not made explicit, even though it can be assumed to be one main motivating factor for projects related to sustainability (GMR12, n.p.; GMR13, n.p.). Taking all sources into consideration, more marginalized groups, such as disabled people, were considered as groups whose needs should be acknowledged by LEADER projects but were not considered when it came to representation in the LDS process or the LAG. Other groups were not considered at all, especially socially disadvantaged people without economic and social capital and non-binary people. Migrants and refugees were mentioned only once by the LEADER manager.

4.2. Challenges to and Justifications of the Status Quo

We identified different ways in which actors challenge or justify the status quo related to representation, distribution, and recognition in all phases of the LDS process (see also Figure 1 and Table 2). In this section, we aim to analyze the potential of the LDS process to open ‘windows of opportunities’ for actors to challenge or justify the status quo. In Section 4.2.2, we highlight how actors explained unjust representation, distribution, and recognition with structural constraints and external dependencies outside of their sphere of influence. In Section 4.2.3, we subsequently look at responsibilities assigned to regional actors for ensuring just representation, distribution, and recognition. Based on these analyses, Table 2 provides an overview of all phases of the LDS process with a focus on the main aims for representation, distribution, and recognition that were addressed in our materials and the associated opportunities and constraints.

4.2.1. The Different Phases of the LDS Process as Windows of Opportunity

Taking all our data into consideration, we see the LDS process as a series of ‘windows of opportunity’ for the involved actors to address issues of representation, distribution, and recognition. In the official guidelines, the LDS process was associated with potentials for diverse representation, resulting in a better and more widely legitimized LDS for the region based on the incorporation of diverse types of knowledge (EUD03, p. 4). Our observations as well as the interviews underline that each phase of the process presents an opportunity to realize these potentials, but our interview partners also referred to challenges in doing so.

These opportunities strongly depend on the conceptualization and implementation of the process as well as prior announcements. In *the preparation phase of the LDS process*, the LEADER management planned the events, including their format, timing, and their announcement to the public, trying to find a balance between practicability and efficiency on the one hand, and diverse representation on the other hand. The decisions of the LEADER management were then listed as requirements for the planning agency. Very detailed requirements left little room for creativity in the implementation through the planning agents, and the entire preparation phase was limited in terms of time resources. According to the facilitating planning agent, under different circumstances, the process could have been designed to represent more diverse people. The short time frame and the online format of the workshops were described as especially problematic (GE07, Pos. 31–32). The communication about the process can either openly address the population of a region or directly address certain people in advance to ask them to participate, as for example, young people (GE07, Pos. 36–38). The *launch event*, which took place in person, was the first occasion for people other than LAG members and the LEADER management to discuss and brainstorm ideas and share their views on the region and the population for a SWAT analysis. Through their presence and their contributions, participants thus had the opportunity to challenge the status quo related to representation, distribution, and recognition in the process itself and for the upcoming funding period. A challenge for the LEADER management and the facilitating planning agency was seen in motivating as many people as possible to continue their participation in the following workshops, while being honest about the actual possibilities through LEADER (GE06, Pos. 57–58). During the thematic discussions in the *first round of online workshops*, participants again had the opportunity to contribute and potentially challenge the status quo. The field notes taken during the workshops illustrate how one participant repeatedly referred to his societal and geographical position to raise awareness about unjust representation in the workshops. The criticism included the overrepresentation of inhabitants of the larger towns as opposed to villagers, the underrepresentation of inhabitants from the western as opposed to people from the eastern part, and most participants having an academic background as opposed to practical professions. The participant thus indirectly also pleaded for the recognition of different types of knowledge in the discussion (GN01, Pos. 40, 43; GN03,

Pos. 78–80). Several other participants addressed goals for recognition and non-discrimination in relation to the distribution of funding to projects. These were integrated into the working documents in a transparent way, visible for all participants because of a shared screen (GN01–GN04). The chair of the LAG, for example, demanded that people with disabilities should also be able to participate in social life (GN01, Pos. 48–50). Accessibility was then added as future goal to the topics of “road, cycle and footpath network” (GD04, p. 1) and a lack of “accessible private and public space” (GD04, p. 2) in the region was identified. Parallel to the workshops, individuals with project ideas contacted the LEADER management about their ideas and were encouraged to do so in the regional newspaper articles (GMR10, n.p.; GMR11, n.p.). The feedback provided in these one-to-one meetings served to ensure the quality of the project proposals and the coherence with the LDS and the official funding regulations (GE06, Pos. 14) and to evaluate whether LEADER was the best funding program for the proposed project (GE07, Pos. 24). During the following project workshops, the people who presented project ideas all referred to these consultations with the regional manager (GN05, Pos. 14; GN06, Pos. 23–26; GN07, Pos. 6),

For the *project workshops*, honest communication about funding regulations and requirements was mentioned as an important task for the LEADER management and the facilitating planning agents (GE07, Pos. 16; GE06, Pos. 57–58). One point of uncertainty and criticism by the participants, especially representatives of associations, was the rule of having to pre-finance projects before receiving refunds (GN06, Pos. 7–10). The LEADER manager announced changes in funding regulations at the federal state level and potential resulting injustice, about which some of the participants expressed their discontent (GN07, Pos. 6), as mentioned by the LEADER manager: “And that, yes, I don’t find quite comprehensible, because with that- just this unequal treatment” (GE03_02, Pos. 11–12). In the discussions, practical and legal details were more present than the actual aims of the projects and the aims for the region that were previously identified in the thematic workshops (such as gender equality or climate mitigation). Following the chair of the LAG and the LEADER management (GE03_02, Pos. 57–60), more focus on these aspects could have been expected: “That is our task. Accessibility is an important goal, so when someone comes along and has an idea, we make sure that they somehow take it into account in some way, if it is somehow possible” (GE06, Pos. 24). Towards the end of each workshop, the facilitating planning agent generally encouraged participants ‘to stay true to the process and to join the LEADER network’ (GN06, Pos. 35; GN07, Pos. 20).

After the last project workshops, the LDS was finalized in a *consultation meeting* including the board of the LAG, the LEADER management, and the facilitating planning agents. According to the LEADER manager, the funding criteria and the corresponding minimum score for projects were the only controversially discussed topics, as finding a compromise between ensuring the quality of projects without excluding any project promoters proved difficult (GE03_2, Pos. 54). Formulating and communicating clear criteria for project funding was seen as necessary (GE03_01, Pos. 49). For the LAG meetings, invitations were shared in the newspaper and on the website of the LEADER management, where the minutes of the meetings were also uploaded. In the meetings, the decisions were based on the recently introduced procedure of finding majorities through blind votes, which ensures transparent and fair decision-making in the LAG (GE06, Pos. 50–54). The results were all documented in the official minutes of the meetings that also indicated the votes for municipal actors and economic and social partners separately (GD09, p. 11). With a focus on each of the phases in the LDS process, we observed how different actor groups can and partially have used these as windows of opportunity to bring up debates about or directly influence aspects of representation, distribution, and recognition in the LEADER region.

4.2.2. Structural Constraints and External Dependencies in the LDS Process

One way in which actors justified the status quo related to representation, distribution, and recognition was to stress the structural limits of LEADER and existing dependencies outside of their sphere of influence. The *limited financial importance* of the LEADER funding was repeatedly mentioned to relativize unequal distribution of funding: “The funds that are available in the LEADER funding pot or in the LEADER pot of a region are, yes, I don’t want to say vanishingly small, but they are very small” (GE07, Pos. 19–20). The limited financial means were also used as a general explanation for why not everyone in a region could be “reached”, implying both the distribution of knowledge and the representation of certain groups in LEADER boards and processes such as the LDS process: “Of course, many civil groups that are important for rural development or that are problem groups cannot be reached. But this is also due to the approach of having a committee with a few million euros for a region with 100,000 people. This is due to the task definition, so to speak” (GE05, Pos. 9).

Besides the addressed financial limits of LEADER, some of the *regulations at the European and the federal state level* were commented on based on their potential to strengthen or threaten representation, distribution, or recognition. One example for a regulation at the federal state level, which was perceived as fostering representation, was a minimum binding quota for the representation of women in LAGs (GE07, Pos. 49–59), but the exact percentage was controversial in debates (GE04, Pos. 45; GE05, Pos. 46). Another example receiving positive comment was a maximum quota for the public stakeholders represented in the LAG for breaking up top-down structures (GE03_02, Pos. 67–68). For the distribution of funding, similarly clear regulations were not in place and were deemed as nonsensical (GE05, Pos. 82), but regulations for co-financing were seen as impacting the distribution of funding indirectly. The project promoters’ resulting dependency on their municipalities was the subject of varying comments among our interview partners. The viewpoints ranged from seeing the necessary municipal financial support as a way of ensuring local acceptance of projects (GE06, Pos. 46) to critiquing the spatially unjust distribution resulting from mayors’ attitudes towards LEADER (GE03_02, Pos. 68–74). Based on the latter critical observation, the possibility of creating a co-financing pool for the region was brought up, which would be helpful whenever the responsibility for co-financing was unclear (GE07, Pos. 45–46). However, installing a co-financing pool was seen as problematic because of other regulations between the municipalities and the federal state (GE03_02, Pos. 68). Some of the interviewees also critically commented on the changing regulation for the upcoming funding period related to the taxes paid for expenses for LEADER projects, which was anticipated as having an unjust effect for associations (GE06, Pos. 24; GE07, Pos. 16). According to our interview partners, the mentioned structures and dependencies thus partly contributed to and partly hindered just representation, distribution, and recognition. In case of hindrances, some of the regional actors took structural constraints for granted and used them as an explanation for existing injustice, while others reflected upon ways of overcoming these constraints.






Another form of dependency which was used to explain unjust representation in the LAG and the group of project promoters was described as resulting from the voluntary basis of these time-intensive and complex roles. *Relying on the commitment of volunteers* who are able and willing to take on these roles, while the funding provided by LEADER also must be spent within a certain time frame, left little room for thoughts on diversity (GE03_01, Pos. 15, 25, 83; GE02, Pos. 31).

4.2.3. Constrained Responsibilities for Issues Related to Representation, Distribution, and Recognition

Besides the structural constraints discussed in Section 4.2.2, individual responsibilities for dealing with inequalities and resulting injustice were addressed in the interviews. Our interview partners both assigned responsibilities to others and reflected on

responsibilities they perceived as being assigned to them. *Reflecting potential injustice in the different phases of the LDS process* was stressed as a task for the regional actors, especially for the LEADER management (GE07, Pos. 50; GE04, Pos. 52). Having a good overview of all local actor groups and recognizing their individual needs was mentioned as necessary to working towards just representation, as well as being able to determine which groups were of relevance in a given context (GE01, Pos. 56; GE04, Pos. 54). Another responsibility assigned to the LEADER management was to *counteract the underrepresentation of certain groups of people* in the workshops, the LAG, and the group of project promoters—especially the younger age groups—through actively lowering barriers to participation in cooperation with the planning agency (GE07, Pos. 34–36; GE05, Pos. 82). The regional actors' potential impact on representation was relativized, however, by highlighting how unjust representation was a common feature of all forms of participation and could not be avoided (GE05, Pos. 55). Unequal representation in the LAG was also commented on with the comparison that “as always in society”, tasks are shared with some taking the lead and responsibility, while others are quieter (GE06, Pos. 50). Being passively open for new participants and members without encouraging people to participate was the other proposed strategy, which was described as ensuring participants' motivation and will to implement projects: “if someone has an idea and they're on fire for it, then they find- [...] they find their way to our LAG” (GE06, Pos. 37–38). With this strategy, the responsibility for representation in the group of project promoters can be interpreted as being shifted to the population in the region. For the context of women's and young people's underrepresentation in the LAG and as project promoters, the LEADER manager also admitted not taking responsibility to combat the existing imbalances: “I am aware of that, somehow. We sometimes talk about it on the LAG board, but we don't try to actively make it more diverse. We say: ‘OK, everyone has the possibility, we don't restrict or anything. But it is not actively demanded that more young people apply, or more women, ehm, exactly” (GE03_2, Pos. 78). The responsibility for ensuring *just distribution of funding* was mainly seen to lie with the regional managers and the LAG, who need to weigh up and make trade-offs between the various relevant aspects for selecting projects (GE05, Pos. 82). The partly contradicting aspects were also used to justify the status quo of how funding had previously been distributed. In this context, the LDS and the defined thematic foci can provide orientation, even though the diversity of a region and different locally specific needs are not necessarily recognized within the LDS (GE07, Pos. 49–50). Additionally, contributing to quality of life for everyone was not seen as realistic considering the limited financial means of LEADER. Distributing funding to projects with the aim of benefitting certain groups—such as disabled people—was therefore seen as a potentially helpful strategy (GE05, Pos. 55). The LEADER management and the planning agency were also seen as responsible for *distributing knowledge and facilitating knowledge exchange* in a way that reaches diverse target groups (GE03_01, Pos. 29; GN03, Pos. 30–32). Information on changes in funding regulations and advice on how to deal with such changes should, for example, be passed to the LAG and the project promoters (GE07, Pos. 14). More difficult, however, was reaching out to groups which had not been interested in or supportive of LEADER so far, including young people and some of the municipalities in the region. As one example, the LEADER manager described taking responsibility for negotiating with and informing the municipal actors about LEADER whenever a municipality declined to provide co-financing for a project—with limited success so far (GE03_02, Pos. 70–74).

Table 2. A summary of opportunities and constraints in working towards aims related to representation, distribution, and recognition in the different phases of the LDS process, as addressed by actors in the analyzed case study *.

Phases of the LDS process and actor constellation	Aims related to representation, distribution, recognition	Opportunities to work towards these aims	Structural constraints and external dependencies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paving the way for diverse representation and lively debate in the process • Distributing knowledge about the process to a wide audience without promising too much 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorming on societal groups and actors in the region and how to reach them • Developing innovative formats for events and discussions • Utilizing different media (potentially different languages) to distribute knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited time for collaboration between planning agency and LEADER management due to deadlines and bureaucratic hurdles
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing diverse types of knowledge in thematic discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussing the relevance of justice and its dimensions with participants • Moderating events in a way to encourage debate • Upholding sensitivity for diverse perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time constraints and online meetings during the pandemic as limiting factors for open discussions and exchange • Dependency on diverse people and actors to join the events
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translating abstract ideas into projects, including goals for representation, distribution, and recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspiring diverse people and actors to initiate projects while being transparent about funding regulations and requirements • Encouraging and supporting project applicants in considering dimensions of justice in their project ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependency on people and actors with the necessary resources to propose projects • Dependency on EU and federal state regulations to demand or encourage just representation, distribution, and recognition in the strategy and in projects
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that representation, distribution, and recognition are considered throughout the upcoming funding period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting criteria for the distribution of funding to projects considering the three dimensions of justice • Setting criteria for representation in the LAG and the LEADER management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependency on federal state office to accept the strategy • Criteria for diverse representation in the LAG and the LEADER management might be difficult to meet and conflict with valuing current members' work
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At EU and federal state level: encouraging just representation, distribution, and recognition in all phases of the LEADER process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing quotas for more diverse representation in LAGs • Adapting co-financing mechanisms to foster just distribution (e.g., co-financing pools) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited financial means of LEADER constrain all opportunities and increase the dependency on volunteers and their capacities

* These are the summarized main aims, opportunities and constraints that were mentioned by our interview partners, dealt with in the observed workshop sessions or in the analyzed documents. Section 4 provides details regarding the context of these aspects, different actors' standpoints and perceived responsibilities.

5. Discussion

In this section, we reflect on the results presented in Section 4 by coming back to our research questions and firstly discuss *how the three dimensions of justice are featured in the discourse related to redesigning an LDS*. Issues of representation, distribution, and recognition were addressed by all observed and interviewed actor groups in the LDS process. These actors, however, had different priorities and positioned themselves differently in relation to them. The European regulations and guidelines provide a rough orientation towards these questions, which are complemented with regulations at the federal state level, potentially including binding ones such as quotas for equal representation. The LEADER management as well as the planning agency were informed about the different regulations and took issues of inequality and injustice seriously. However, resignation and pragmatism in the practical implementation of measures to reach more fair representation, distribution, and recognition was reported. This observation can be interpreted as a form of tension between bottom-up and top-down dynamics, which Pollermann et al. described as “typical frictions” in the implementation of the LEADER approach, specifically referring to the LDS process [11] (p. 5). Dependency on contributions from volunteers and the general will to support those who are already active and their ideas are two reasons for regional actors’ pragmatism related to representation, distribution, and recognition. The distanced position of the planning agency allowed for a more critical view, which mainly identified unequal representation and a lack of recognition in the region under study. Similarly, the participants in the public workshops had enough distance to the LAG, the LEADER management and the planning agency to take critical perspectives, but only some pointed to perceived injustices. Interestingly, diverse representation in the LEADER management and the planning agency was not problematized in any of the analyzed sources.

The importance assigned to each of the three dimensions changed over the course of the LDS process. In the beginning, the representation of a variety of societal groups in the events was a central aim shared by all involved actors, and perceived imbalances were problematized. Diverse representation was interrelated with recognizing diverse positions and the aim of developing a broad understanding of the region and the population. The importance of efforts towards representation and recognition of diverse groups can be underlined with literature that highlighted diversity as prerequisite for innovation and transformation based on mobilized regional capacities in rural areas [29,43]. In the project workshops, the distribution of funding through the selection of projects was the main underlying aim, while previously debated aspects of recognition and representation were less in focus. The resulting gap between these phases of the process was raised as an issue by our interview partners. Our first research question also comprised the aspect of the *spatial scales that are referred to in discussing issues of representation, distribution, and recognition*. We identified spatial references in different contexts and the spatial scales that emerged as relevant were (1) the *village level*, (2) the *municipal level*, (3) the *regional level*, and (4) the *federal state level*. These also encompass discursive comparisons between villages, between municipalities, between regions, or between federal states. Furthermore, (5) the *state level* played a role in the context of recognition based on citizenship. The inhabitants of the region who participated in the process as well as project promoters tended to be focused on developments in their respective places of residence, including villages and municipalities. The entire region was more often used as reference by actors who had a distanced perspective due to their professional role both in LEADER and in other contexts. When questions of representation were addressed, spatial aspects such as the people’s residential locations were not considered. The only exceptions were situations in the thematic workshops, in which participants stressed the lack of recognition of needs of certain parts of the region because the respective inhabitants were underrepresented in the process. For issues of distribution, spatial contexts were prominently discussed, including the controversy about whether to prioritize projects at the regional level over

projects in municipalities and villages. Additionally, regulations on co-financing were highlighted as controversial because of their impact on the spatial distribution of funding.

The second research question we come back to is *how the involved actors challenge or justify the status quo related to representation, distribution, and recognition*. The three main ways to justify the status quo included not seeing a problem in the status quo, assigning responsibility to other actor groups, or referring to structural constraints and dependencies. Examples for the latter comprise limited resources of the LEADER management in the region and the relatively small financial importance of LEADER in comparison to other funding instruments. Whenever imbalances in representation, distribution or recognition were described as a result of such structural constraints and dependencies, the potential influence of the regional actors was seen as limited. In many other cases, responsibility for dealing with questions related to representation, distribution, and recognition was assigned to the regional management. While Bruckmeier described the role of the regional manager as “symbolic” [44] (p. 223), our analysis also identifies it as central for mediating between top-down influences and bottom-up activity, similar to what Müller et al. described as a “knowledge mediator” [14] (p. 231). Considering challenging the status quo related to representation, distribution, and recognition, different actors had different opportunities based on their positions. The LEADER management and to a lesser extent the planning agency reported on options to design the process in a way to steer representation. Additionally, the distribution of knowledge on LEADER and the LDS process was reported as a potential strategy to impact representation. All participants in the LDS process had the opportunity to raise issues of unjust representation, distribution, and recognition in the workshops to be discussed and potentially integrated into the LDS. The participant observation in the online meetings, however, indicated that actively contributing to these workshops was associated with several barriers despite their advertised public character. This observation can be contextualized with other studies generally investigating trends in who participates in such events [44] (pp. 222–223), or is represented on boards, such as LAGs [10,45]. Berriet-Sollic et al. [7] (p. 30) underlined how “institutional settings at the local level” have an impact on which local actors become involved in LEADER activities. Lacquement also pointed to the influence of spatial patterns on “the emergence of groups of stakeholders likely to involve themselves in cooperation based on networking” [4] (p. 70), such as in an LAG or in a LDS process. Drawing on theories of democracy, Thuesen suggested finding “innovative ways of establishing further linkages between the public and the board members” [10] (p. 43) to challenge the “lopsidedness” she found in the composition of LAGs in Denmark. Such links could also lower barriers to participate in public LEADER events and the LDS process. In our interviews, the LDS itself was identified by our interview partners as an instrument to ensure just representation, distribution, and recognition for the upcoming funding period. For working towards more social diversity, Oedl-Wieser similarly highlighted defining goals in the LDS as a prerequisite for implementation [46] (p. 37). Based on an analysis of 77 Austrian LDSs, she found that the needs of groups such as women and older and younger people were addressed in the SWAT analyses but rarely considered in suggested operationalizations [47] (p. 21). Our case study additionally revealed a gap between the aims formulated in the LDS and their application and translation into projects. To strengthen the function of the LDS, both the bottom-up development of the LDS as well as top-down requirement setting by the program managing authorities [11] (p. 5) could be adapted. With a focus on EU guidelines in the context of LEADER+, Böcher highlighted that these guidelines had already increased the chances of certain societal groups, such as women and younger people, to become involved in German LEADER regions [3] (pp. 383–384). Our findings as well as Oedl-Wieser’s study on social diversity in rural development [46] indicate that the recognition of all and especially less visible groups of society, their representation and the distribution of funding to them continues to be a challenge. The LDS process opens up windows of opportunity to work on this challenge at local and regional levels.

6. Conclusions

This study was inspired by the ongoing success of the LEADER method despite criticism pointing to issues of power in regional contexts. While terms such as ‘local’ or ‘community-led’ tend to be associated with homogeneity and a manageable area and population, our analysis of the participatory process of redesigning a local development strategy showed the diversity and potential conflicts at that level and explicated normative understandings of just representation, distribution, and recognition. The involved actors positioned themselves differently, with varying degrees of responsibility for working towards normative ideals of justice. Some of the established actors described being constrained in taking on responsibility for questions of justice because of structural and individual dependencies. As the public LDS process provides the opportunity for ‘external’ and more independent participants to challenge the status quo, fostering diverse involvement is of high importance. Our analysis also revealed that ideas for more just representation and distribution were expressed by several actors, while ways to increase recognition of diverse groups were rarely addressed. We thus see the necessity of raising awareness about the importance of recognition, which determines what is perceived as just representation and distribution, to enable just community-led local development processes.

With this paper, we aimed to contribute to the discussion on LEADER and justice based on a regional case study. Our findings gain additional importance in light of the main aspirations formulated by the European Commission in the document titled *A Long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas*. These include that rural areas should strive to be “engaged in multi-level and place-based governance, developing integrated strategies using collaborative and participatory approaches” [48] (p. 15), for which one can see the LEADER method as a blueprint or inspiration. Additionally, justice-related visions are listed, such as rural areas being “inclusive communities [...] fostering equal opportunities for all” as well as “[p]laces of diversity, making the most out of their unique assets, talents and potential” [48] (p. 15). These aspirations highlight the need for additional knowledge on how forms of governance based on participatory approaches can be designed to accommodate for the necessary negotiations around just representation, distribution, and recognition. Future research should investigate related questions in diverse regional settings and countries to further enrich our understanding of this issue. Comparative approaches could take geographic and socio-economic characteristics of regions into consideration, as well as the influence of the different implementations of EU regulations at the (federal) state level.

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Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions that safeguard the privacy of research participants.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Overview and description of data collected for the analysis.

European Law	
EUR01	European Parliament; Council of the European Union (2013): Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013. In <i>Official Journal of the European Union</i> L 347, pp. 320–469. Available online at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2013/1303/oj , accessed on 6 September 2022.
EUR02	European Parliament; Council of the European Union (2013): Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013. In <i>Official Journal of the European Union</i> L 347, pp. 487–548. Available online at http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2013/1305/oj , accessed on 9 September 2022.
Official documents at the European level	
EUD01	European Commission (Ed.) (2018): Guidance for Member States and Programme Authorities on Community-led Local Development in European Structural and Investment Funds. Available online at https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/guidance_community_local_development.pdf , updated on 9/17/2018, accessed on 17 October 2022.
EUD02	European Commission (Ed.) (2018): Guidance for Local Actors on Community-Led Local Development. Available online at https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/informat/2014/guidance_clld_local_actors_en.pdf , updated on 9/17/2018, accessed on 17 October 2022.
EUD03	European Network for Rural Development (Ed.) (2016): LEADER Local Development Strategies (LDS). Guidance on design and implementation. Available online at https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/enrd-guidance_lds.pdf , accessed on 27 April 2022.
EUD04	European Network for Rural Development (Ed.) (2021): LEADER/CLLD explained. Available online at https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/leaderclld-explained_en , updated on 6/29/2021, accessed on 24 April 2022.
German federal state law	
GR01	Official regulations at the federal state level
Documents related to the LEADER region under study and the LDS process	
GD01	Regional LDS for period of 2014–2020
GD02	Official power point for launch event, created by planning agency
GD03	Official minutes of launch event, created by planning agency
GD04	Official working document co-created in thematic workshop on social affairs and basic services shared with participants
GD05	Official working document co-created in thematic workshop on culture, education and sports shared with participants
GD06	Official working document co-created in thematic workshop on economy and tourism shared with participants
GD07	Official working document co-created in thematic workshop on agriculture and the environment shared with participants
GD08	Official power point used in thematic workshops, created by planning agency (incl. explanations of LEADER and the LDS process)
GD09	Published minutes of LAG meeting, which took place before project workshops in the LDS process

GD10	Published minutes of LAG meeting after LDS process, including the vote on the LDS for the period 2023–2027
Observations protocols of LDS process	
GN01	Field notes of participant observation in thematic workshop on social affairs and basic services
GN02	Field notes of participant observation in thematic workshop on culture, education and sports
GN03	Field notes of participant observation in thematic workshop on economy and tourism
GN04	Field notes of participant observation in thematic workshop on agriculture and the environment
GN05	Field notes of participant observation in project workshop I
GN06	Field notes of participant observation in project workshop II
GN07	Field notes of participant observation in project workshop III
Conducted interviews	
GE01	LEADER manager of neighboring LEADER region
GE02	Project promoter
GE03_01, GE03_02	LEADER manager of the LEADER region under study, who was interviewed once at the beginning of the LDS process, and once after the LDS was submitted
GE04& GE05	Experts on LEADER in Germany, who were interviewed together
GE06	Chair of the LAG of the LEADER region under study
GE07	Responsible employee of planning agency facilitating the LDS process in the region under study
Media reports of two regional newspapers on the LDS process and other LEADER activities in this period (either written by the LEADER management or journalists, names of journalists are not provided for anonymity reasons)	
GMR01	Article in Newspaper 1: announcing launch event, written by LEADER management
GMR02	Article in Newspaper 2: announcing launch event, written by LEADER management
GMR03	Article in Newspaper 2: report on launch event, written by journalist
GMR04	Article in Newspaper 2: announcing thematic workshops, written by LEADER management
GMR05	Article in Newspaper 1: announcing thematic workshops, written by LEADER management
GMR06	Article in Newspaper 2: announcing thematic workshops, written by LEADER management
GMR07	Article in Newspaper 2: report on thematic workshops, announcing project workshops, written by journalist
GMR08	Article in Newspaper 1: report on thematic workshops, announcing project workshops, written by journalist
GMR09	Article in Newspaper 1: announcing LAG meeting, written by LEADER management
GMR10	Article in Newspaper 2: announcing project workshops, written by LEADER management
GMR11	Article in Newspaper 1: announcing project workshops, written by LEADER management
GMR12	Article in Newspaper 2: announcing LAG meeting, written by journalist
GMR13	Article in Newspaper 2: report on LAG meeting, written by journalist
GMR14	Article in Newspaper 1: report on already funded project, written by journalist
GMR15	Article in Newspaper 1: announcing LAG meeting, written by LEADER management
GMR16	Article in Newspaper 2: announcing LAG meeting, written by LEADER management

GMR17	Article in Newspaper 2: announcing LAG meeting and the presentation of a project, written by LEADER management
GMR18	Article in Newspaper 2: report on already funded project, written by journalist
GMR19	Article in Newspaper 2: report on LAG meeting, written by journalist
GMR20	Article in Newspaper 2: report on LAG meeting, written by journalist
GMR21	Article in Newspaper 2: report on already funded project, written by journalist
GMR22	Article in Newspaper 2: report on LAG meeting and decision on further projects to be funded, written by journalist
GMR23	Article in Newspaper 2: report on project, written by journalist

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