

The roles of local action groups in supporting sustainable innovation: evidence from German LEADER regions

Artem Korzhenevych^{*a,b}, Sabine Philipps^a, Franziska Görmar^c, Katrin Martens^d

a: Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development, Dresden, Germany

b: TUD Dresden University of Technology, Faculty of Business and Economics, Dresden, Germany

c: Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig, Germany

d: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HUB), Berlin, Germany

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A growing body of literature highlights that sustainability transformation is driven by actors who assume specific agency roles. Among these, leadership and intermediation have received increasing attention in transformation and regional development studies. Transformative leadership refers to practices through which actors articulate visions, mobilize others, and challenge established routines and power relations (Wolfram, 2016; Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2019). Intermediation, by contrast, emphasizes the role of actors who connect heterogeneous stakeholders, translate between knowledge domains, and facilitate collaboration across institutional and sectoral boundaries (Lord et al., 2025; Sovacool et al., 2020; Sundqvist and Tuominen, 2024). While both roles are widely recognized as important, their concrete practices and their contributions to collective transformative processes remain insufficiently integrated into existing frameworks.

This paper addresses this gap by explicitly bridging the concept of collective change agency with the transformative capacity framework. We argue that leadership and intermediation can be understood as distinct but complementary manifestations of local agency that contribute to the development of transformative capacity through specific practices. These roles can also be executed simultaneously by the same actors (De Haan and Rotmans, 2018). Building on existing literature, we derive a set of leadership and intermediation practices and examine how these practices relate to key collective processes associated with transformative capacity, namely system analysis, foresight, experimentation, innovation embedding, and monitoring (Wolfram, 2016).

Empirically, the paper draws on a comparative study of two rural regions in Germany, focusing on the so-called Local Action Groups (LAGs) within these regions. LAGs are collective bodies managing the formulation and implementation of rural development strategies under the EU's LEADER approach ("Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale", meaning "Links between activities for the development of rural economy"). These organizations are particularly well positioned to enact both leadership and intermediation, as they operate at the intersection of policy, civil society, and local economic actors (Bosworth et al., 2016; Esparcia et al., 2015; Lacquement and Raynal, 2013). By analyzing how different agency practices align with observed collective processes in each region, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how transformative capacity is built in rural contexts.