

## Article

# Tourist Itineraries, Food, and Rural Development: A Critical Understanding of Rural Policy Performance in Northeast Italy

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**Abstract:** The tourist itinerary concept refers to initiatives combining activities/attractions under a theme and stimulating business opportunities by developing products and services, in accordance with the cultural context and the interaction with the territory. Rural Development Policy serves as example. While not intended to promote tourism directly, it encourages the creation/rediscovery of tourist itineraries, including those that are food-related. We undertook a case study in northeastern Italy. Using a mixed research method, we aimed to appreciate the role played, within the EU Rural Development Programme of the Veneto region, by tourism and the tourist itinerary as a tool for territorial and traditional foods valorisation. Our first objective was to identify the correlations between the choice of certain types of tourism interventions and the territorial characterization by tourism. Through a correspondence statistical analysis, two analyses on the funding beneficiaries were carried out in particular on the period 2014–2020, depending on whether the issuing organization was the Veneto Region or a Local Action Group. The types of intervention on information and infrastructures for tourism, as well as on the redevelopment of cultural heritage, emerged of interest, in particular to public entities. Focusing on the LEADER areas, we examined, through semi-structured interviews, critical issues associated with the implementation of the Policy to grasp the degree of incisiveness of the examined Measures which place the tourist itinerary at the centre of the rural development. Our work shows that in the territories analysed, tourism is a driving force. There emerges, though, a need to refocus the Measures. This is to ensure that their effects are more durable, that eligible actors are more involved, and that there is less strategic redundancy in relation to other policies.

**Keywords:** tourism development; tourist itineraries; rural development; food; EU Rural Development Programme; northeast Italy; Veneto Region; Local Action Group



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## 1. Introduction

In the 2014–2020 programming period, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has set itself the goal of contributing to the solution of the challenges facing the European Union [1]. Today these are all of great magnitude: real threats, pertaining both to agriculture and to the wider context with which it communicates. As Mantino et al. (pp. 1–2) [2] recall, their nature is manifold. They are at the same time environmental, economic and—not least in importance and urgency—territorial. Our work focuses mainly on this last category, in order to:

- create the conditions for agriculture to adopt an orientation which is based on the diversification of activities (in order to continue to be sustainable above all as a source of income and profit);

- keep rural areas viable, ensuring their resilience.

The three objectives of the 2014–2020 CAP—as specified in art. 4 of Regulation 1305/2013 [3], in line with the vision of (intelligent, sustainable and inclusive) growth that the European Union has given itself in recent years [4–7]—are: (1) Profitable food production, with particular attention to agricultural income, agricultural productivity and price stability; (2) sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, with particular attention to greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity, soil and water; (3) balanced territorial development. We refer especially to the third, which pays particular attention to the issues of growth and development, poverty, and employment in rural areas.

Among the Priorities (art. 5, Reg. 1305/2013) that the EU Rural Development Policy for 2014–2020 has set itself, the one we are interested in—and is most linked to the third objective mentioned above—is no. 6: “promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas”. Among the areas of work in which it is divided (the so-called “focus areas”), we will refer more specifically to the first and second:

- 6A—“facilitating diversification, creation and development of small enterprises, as well as job creation”.
- 6B—“fostering local development in rural areas”.

In our research, we have concentrated on the support component that interacts with tourism (rural [8,9], [10] (pp. 7–8), [11], and food tourism [12]) as a lever. For this reason, the analysis will consider primarily the Measures included in the Rural Development Programme (the implementation instrument of the second pillar of the CAP) that are related to it in various ways. Reflecting on these connections will require taking into consideration three strands of the literature:

- (a) that exploring the link between tourism and rural development policy;
- (b) that reflecting on the EU’s approach to rural development: (neo)endogenous, not spatially blind, participatory, and community-led [13,14];
- (c) that which considers *itineraries* as tools for local development, given the nature of some of the Measures that we will consider (cf. Section 5.1). This also depends on the knowledge and consumption of local food products as ingredients, as processed products and/or in culinary and gastronomic preparations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Role of Tourism over Time in the Context of European Rural Development Policy

In Europe, rural tourism spread to the centre and north between 1960 and 1980, in the Mediterranean area since the 1990s, and in the eastern part at the beginning of the current century. It has done so under the banner of two prevalent models: one based on agritourism and one also on Bed and Breakfasts [15–17].

As is well known, agriculture’s role as a source of employment and income has continued to decline [18]. Increasingly, it has affected rural areas, causing various problems including depopulation, a low density of commercial activities, and the emigration of young people. From the very beginning, it was already clear that even if agriculture were to once again occupy a fundamental place in the public sphere and in the economy, it would certainly not do so under the same conditions [19–23]. A response to the crisis affecting rurality was therefore necessary. It was found in the drafting of measures that favour the diversification of productive structures and functions: see [24], [25] (p. 16), and [26]. Among these, the promotion of rural tourism was seen very much as an effective catalyst for change in depressed areas without entrepreneurial capacity, and for exploring new interrelationships between services. This type of tourism may be considered as a potential driver for more balanced socio-economic (and environmental) development, which is capable by its very nature to interrelate with other activities (agriculture and the agro-industry, crafts, the retail trade, etc.) [27,28].

We find traces of this awareness and sensitivity—as Maroto-Martos et al. [29] (p. 184) reminds us—in various European documents [30–33].

The considerations contained in these provided an initial point of contact, on which the momentum that followed was based. Community initiatives and programmes financed by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF), the European Agricultural Fund Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the European Social Fund (ESF) have in fact been conceived and implemented [34]. Of these, LEADER (Liaison Entre Action de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) has been the most successful. Adhering to the logic described, all have aimed to stimulate tourism planning, especially in the most marginal areas of rural Europe.

“Sustainability is the main concern for authorities all over the world” [35] (p. 1). In every European Member State, policy is expressed through Rural Development Programmes (RDPs), which are developed with sustainability in mind. In general, efforts in support of rural tourism have focused mainly on improving the quality of accommodation and the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) to boost the recovery, conservation, management, and promotion of the natural and cultural heritage in rural areas with the greatest difficulties. These efforts—together with those aimed at supporting small and medium-sized rural enterprises, including non-agricultural businesses—are combined with the promotion of forms of special interest tourism (such as cultural, food and wine tourism and gastronomy, nature-linked/ecological tourism and cycling) and itineraries [29] (pp. 181, 203), and [36–38]. The implementation of Rural Development Programmes demands evaluation processes, both mid-term and final. The application of the measures is documented quantitatively, and results on social, economic, and territorial impacts, along with recommendations at both regional and national levels, are provided [39–41].

## 2.2. Tourist Itineraries, Sustainable Tourism, and Food

Itineraries are becoming increasingly popular with the now slow tourist (cf. “Trails and slow tourism corridors” in [9] (p. 10)). By using them, he can gain access to the landscape system, appreciate its environmental, historical, and cultural significance, and even experience it in terms of its most economic-productive connotations [42–45]. The itineraries place emphasis on the short chain of integrated economic activities (agriculture, food, handicrafts, and hospitality) and support marketing efforts related to tourism. Such a tool, therefore, relies on a resource-based and not on a a-territorial model of tourism development. By linking the resources that are deeply rooted in the territory, a system can be created. Exporting it to various contexts becomes a challenge. Creating a tourist itinerary requires promoting public intervention policies that aim to protect and promote it. It is essential for the regional and European institutional levels to recognize the importance of paths of naturalistic and historical-artistic interest that are linked to typical production. Just as with the Rural Development Policy, doing so validates the importance of such an innovative model of sustainable, slow, and proximity tourism, one that allows for the rediscovery of the most authentic cultural roots through the sharing of a common heritage and considers rural landscapes themselves as heritage [46]. By doing so, such a model fosters territorial development.

For hundreds of years, since men embarked on journeys and it has been possible to transmit indications on maps, a need has been felt to draw lines that joined points corresponding to places, thus forming itineraries. These, in history, have been displayed on atlases, maps [47], and other media, up to the virtual ones available today. These last are very common, downloadable from the websites of the Italian Regions, environmental associations, slow mobility groups and communities, as well as uploaded to devices with files of different formats (e.g., .gpx, .kmz) and appropriate apps. The itineraries can be of the most varied lengths: of thousands or hundreds of kilometres, as well as of only a few dozen. For some years now, in Europe, interest has been shown in reconsidering the dense network of routes that were developed in the Middle Ages thanks to the pilgrimages to reach Rome. Itineraries have also been developed (including the so-called Cammini in Italy) linked to both religious and lay people who moved about in order to carry out their activities (see, for example, the map on the website [camminiditalia.cultura.gov.it/cammini](https://camminiditalia.cultura.gov.it/cammini),

accessed on 21 December 2023). All of these should also be proposed as an experience to today's tourists and hikers, who are sensitive to the principles of sustainability. There are long routes that may focus on naturalistic and panoramic features—such as the 7000 km “Sentiero Italia CAI” through the Italian Regions and the “Alte Vie delle Alpi”—or cultural aspects such as the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes>, accessed on 21 December 2023). The Council of Europe and the European Union collaborate in the creation and success of Cultural Routes [48] in four macro regions: the Baltic Sea Region, Danube Region, Adriatic and Ionian Region, and the Alpine Region. The European Union itself has financed international projects for the development of routes (both transnational and within regions of member states) but linked in a transnational network [49]. The term *itinerary*—from the Latin *iter*—immediately recalls the journey and the need to have a route. We thus have adjectives coupled with itineraries to specify their prevailing characteristics or the means used: naturalistic [50], religious [51,52], and cultural itineraries [53,54], wine tourism such as the recent examples discussed in [55,56]; olive oil tourism, gastronomic and food tourism [57–59]; literary, archaeological [60], cycling, equestrian, agritourism [61–63], etc. Sometimes the itinerary is linked to illustrious people in the world of food, such as famous gastronomes. An example is the “Via Artusiana”, which winds its way in Italy between Romagna and Tuscany [64]. On other occasions, there is a specific word that describes the itinerary or a close-knit group of routes: in Italy the “Via dei Castagni/Chesnut Trail” (in Piedmont), the “Sentiero del Castagno/Chesnut Trail” (in Sud Tirol—Bozen), the “Vecia Via della lana/Old Wool Trail” (in Lessinia in Veneto, in the Province of Verona) and the “Via del ferro/Iron Trail” (in Lombardy in the Province of Bergamo), etc. Sometimes a path that was not initially food-related is reinterpreted and associated with it [65]. The itinerary, therefore, is the connecting tool between those who offer the benefits of a territory and the user, as well as—a now very common fact—being produced by means of new technologies by hikers and travellers themselves and then published and shared on social networks. Every guide now uses this kind of assistance. Moreover, since 2000 and even today, tourism and agricultural policy documents—including supranational, national, and regional laws—make explicit reference to this instrument. The itinerary therefore assumes not only a cultural but also an economic value of territorial promotion in all its aspects. Referring once again to Italy, it is mentioned 30 times at national level in the law constituted by the Strategic Plan for the Development of Tourism 2017–2022 (PST) [66]. This lists all the possibilities regarding the creation, promotion, and operating methods of the itinerary. The same is true of Regional tourism laws and their annual Tourist Implementation Plans (PTAs). For the Veneto in the northeast of Italy, see the PTA for 2023 [67], in which the word itinerary appears 45 times. As stated above, some sections of collateral plans (such as the Rural Development Programmes) also make explicit reference to itineraries with regard to policy. All these Plans contribute in their implementation to creating the “Itinerary” instrument, which thus becomes a tourist product. This paper will be dedicated to this instrument in relation to the RDP, focusing on the actions of the Veneto Region.

### 3. Objectives

The key objective of this research is to understand the role played by tourism within the (EU) RDP of the Veneto, paying particular attention to the *Itinerary* as a tool for promotion of the territory and of local food products. In doing so, we have concentrated on the focus areas of the priority no. 6, investigating the following type of interventions for the 2014–2020 RDP [68]:

- no. 6, focusing on 6.4.1 “creation and development of diversification of agricultural enterprises” and 6.4.2 “creation and development of non-agricultural activities in rural areas”;
- no. 7, with a focus on 7.5.1 “infrastructure and information for the development of sustainable tourism in rural areas” and 7.6.1 “maintenance, restoration and requalification of the cultural heritage of villages and the rural landscape”.

In addition to Priority 6, we also considered Measure no. 19.2.1.x “Information activities for the development of knowledge and usability of rural areas” (LEADER 2014/2020) [69], often used together with the others.

Our investigation was aimed at identifying correlations between the choice of certain types of intervention of a tourist nature—even secondarily—and their representation by tourism in the local area. The types of intervention on information and infrastructures for tourism, as well as on the redevelopment of cultural heritage, emerged of interest, in particular to public entities. Following the findings, we went on to collect evidence in interactions with public and private stakeholders, focusing on the LEADER areas. Studies show, in fact, the importance of the role of stakeholders—and the related theory—in the development of sustainable tourism [35] (p. 3), and [70].

Using semi-structured interviews, we examined critical issues associated with the implementation to grasp the degree of incisiveness particular to the measures which place the tourist route at the centre of a rural development discourse.

#### 4. The Area under Study

##### 4.1. The Veneto: A Region of the Italian Northeast

The Veneto is an Italian Region in the northeast, containing 563 municipal areas (LAUs). It has a surface of 1,839,049 hectares, divided into three altitude zones: mountain (29%), hill (15%) and plain (56%). The Region can be further subdivided into eight zones, based especially on their different physical characteristics:

- (a) the Alpine interior, the northernmost in the Eastern Dolomites, with easily identifiable mountain groups and corresponding to LAG no. 1 (Figure 1);
- (b) the external Alpine one, a narrow band to the right of the River Piave (where the Park of the Belluno Dolomites is situated and corresponding to LAG no. 2);
- (c) the Prealpine belt, running transversally from east to west, with medium-high mountain characteristics from 700 to 2200 m. above sea level and well-differentiated areas: Alpi Prealpi, Grappa Group, Asiago Plateau, Piccole Dolomiti (with the Pasubio Group, the Lessinia Plateau and Monte Baldo, which slopes westwards down to Lake Garda). This belt descends in altitude with hills that—in the south—plunge down towards the plain. This large area corresponds—proceeding from east to west—to LAGs nos. 2, 4 and 8, respectively;
- (d) the hilly area, in the northern part of the zone around Treviso, where LAG no. 7 is situated, with the hills of Montello and Asolo and the UNESCO area from Conegliano to Valdobbiadene where Prosecco D.O.C.G. (Controlled and Guaranteed Denomination of Origin) is produced;
- (e) the extremely urbanized plain, in the central part of the Region;
- (f) the Paduan plain, south of the isolated Euganean Hills famous for the largest area of thermal baths in Europe [71]. This area lies in LAG no. 3;
- (g) the coastal plain, northeast of Venice (LAG no. 9);
- (h) the low plain of Verona and the Polesine, between the Adige and Po rivers (LAGs no. 5 and 6).

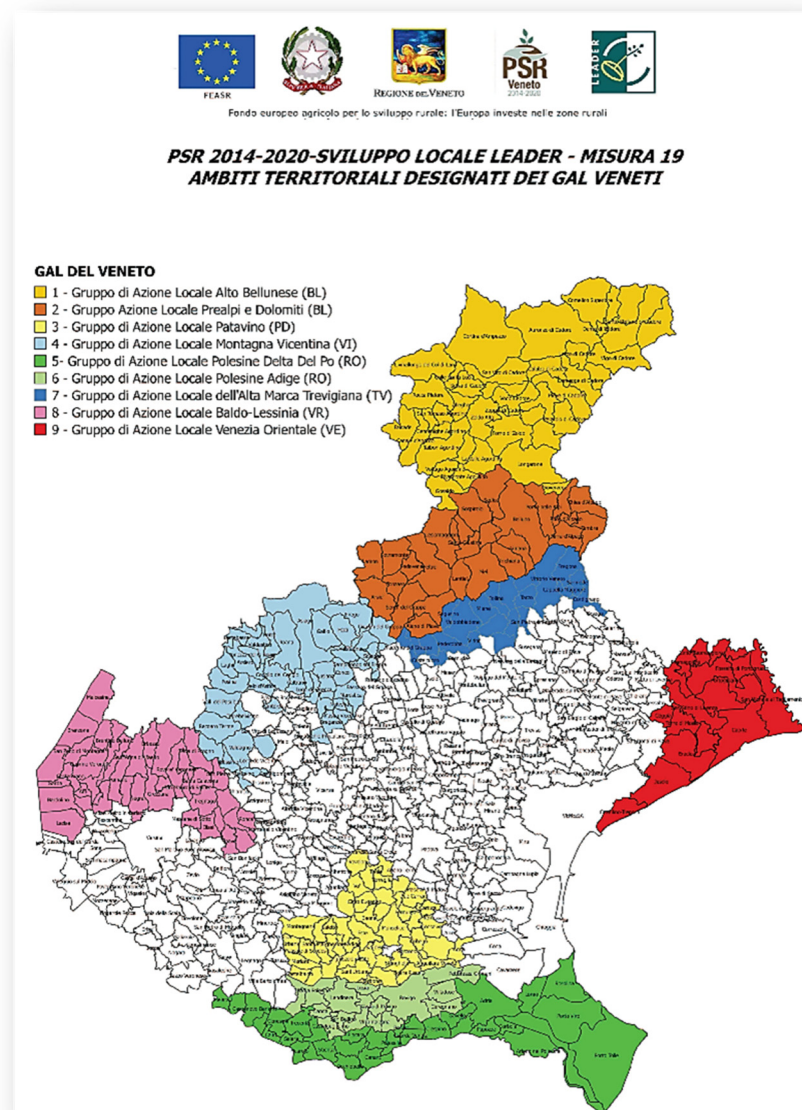
As can be seen from this brief summary, the Region is characterized by several very diverse environmental frameworks, as is its agriculture.

##### 4.2. Veneto Municipalities by Degree of Rurality and Type of District Tourism

In such a scenario, for the purposes of Regional rural programming, already in the 2007/2013 RDP municipalities were divided into five categories (Table 1 and Figure 2) [72] (pp. 10–13):

- A. Urban hubs.
- B1. Rural urbanized (rural areas with intensive specialized farming).
- B2. Urbanized (rural areas with intensive specialized farming).
- C. Intermediate Rural Areas.
- D. Rural areas with generalized development problems.





**Figure 1.** LAGs 2014–2020 in the Veneto Region: 9 LAGs. Source: Approved Local Development Programmes of the LAGs of the Veneto Region (DGR 1547 of 10 October 2016). See LAGs in p. 12 of this paper.

Given the complexity of the Region, it should be remembered that there is also another subdivision, made for tourism purposes. The Veneto's municipalities have in fact been grouped institutionally into five types, defined as Districts: (1) Seaside, (2) Mountain, (3) Thermal—Spa, (4) Lake, and (5) Artistic Centres. This last category includes both municipalities that are real “cities of art” and a large number of municipalities that do not belong to the other categories. This classification is made with respect to a homogeneous type of offer [https://statistica.regione.veneto.it/banche\\_dati\\_economia\\_turismo.jsp%CB%90scheda=b3#topArg](https://statistica.regione.veneto.it/banche_dati_economia_turismo.jsp%CB%90scheda=b3#topArg) (accessed on 3 November 2023); [73] (pp. 86–101).

#### 4.3. The Value of Food in the Veneto Region and Wine as a Typical Product

Throughout the Region—except for the Provincial capitals—the agri-food system plays a very important role [74] (pp. 102–120). The main supply chains can be identified: all of them represent agricultural landscapes [75] that are promoted as tourist and hiking itineraries which are also aimed at informing about agri-food products and the various stages of production. These various products—fresh or processed—can be found in dif-

ferent types of outlets or (also extremely diverse) restaurants, as well as being featured during events. These are often also specifically focused on agricultural products and animal husbandry: festivals, winery visits, concerts with tastings, walks and runs with refreshment points, etc.

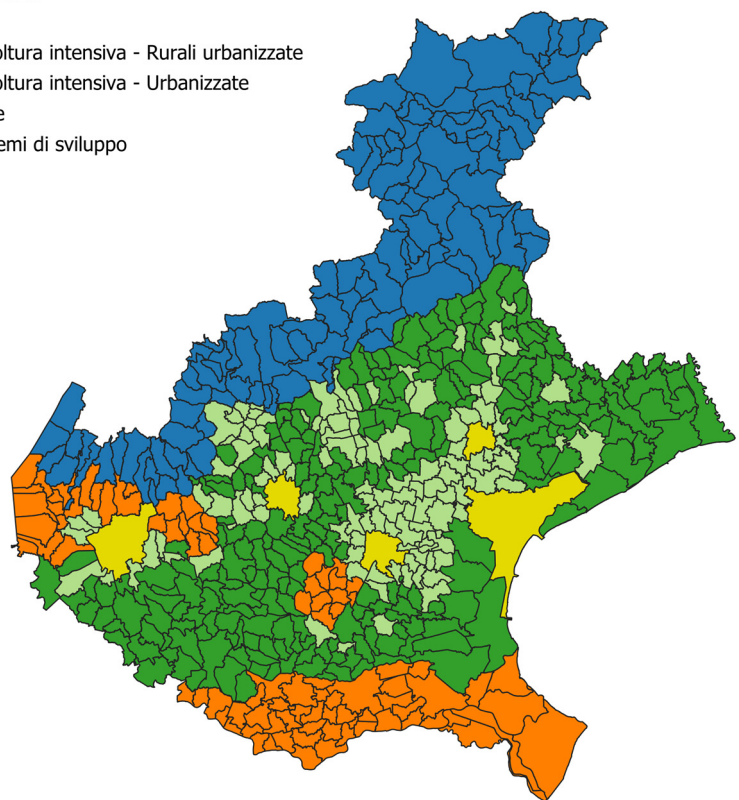
**Table 1.** Number of municipalities by type of area/degree of rurality in the Rural Development Programs for 2007–2013 and 2014–2020.

Type of Area	No. of Municipalities RDP 2007–2013	No. of Municipalities RDP 2014–2020 (see Figure 2)
A. Urban hubs	5	5
B1. Rural urbanized (rural areas with intensive specialized farming)	102	241
B2. Urbanized (rural areas with intensive specialized farming)	269	124
C. Intermediate Rural Areas	88	88
D. Rural areas with generalized development problems	117	105
Total	581	563

Source: The Veneto Region.

Classificazione comuni 2014-2020

- A: Poli urbani
- B1: Aree rurali ad agricoltura intensiva - Rurali urbanizzate
- B2: Aree rurali ad agricoltura intensiva - Urbanizzate
- C: Aree rurali intermedie
- D: Aree rurali con problemi di sviluppo



**Figure 2.** Municipalities according to their rurality class, 2014–2020 (cf. lines 254–261). Source: Rural Development Programme for the Veneto 2014–2020, p. 13.

The main product sectors are: (1) large-scale crops (wheat, maize, rice, soya, sugar...), (2) fruit and vegetables (with about 25 main products), (3) wine, with 10 Typical Geographical Indications (I.G.T.s), 29 Denominations of Controlled Origin (D.O.C.s) and 14 Denominations of Controlled and Guaranteed Origin (D.O.C.G.s) all labelled P.D.O.s for the EU, (4) olive oil (with 2 Protected Designations of Origin—P.D.O.s), (5) milk and live-

stock production for meat (cf. <https://www.regione.veneto.it/web/agricoltura-e-foreste/qualita-prodotti>, accessed on 17 October 2023).

The Region must also be considered for its outstanding products. This excellence is regulated at national level with production accorded the status of Protected Designation of Origin (18), Protected Geographical Indication (18), and Traditional Guaranteed Specialities (3) (cf. <https://www.regione.veneto.it/web/agricoltura-e-foreste/qualita-products>, accessed on 17 October 2023). In addition, in 2023, 390 products of the Veneto are included in the National List of Traditional Agri-food Products (L. 12.12.2016, no. 238) [76,77]. These are distributed and grouped as shown in the table below (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Traditional food products of the Veneto Region (art. 12, paragraph 1, L. 12/12/2016, no. 238).

Type of Product	No.
Non-alcoholic beverages, spirits, and liqueurs	11
Fresh meats and preparations made from them	101
Fats	1
Cheeses	34
Natural or processed vegetable products	125
Fresh pasta and bakers' wares, biscuits, cakes, and confectionery	77
Gastronomic products	3
Preparations of fish, shellfish and seafood, and special farming techniques for these	23
Products of animal origin (honey, and various dairy products excluding butter)	15

Source: processed by R.G. Rizzo from data of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry: <https://www.politicheagricole.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/19693>, accessed on 17 October 2023.

We will here provide some insights on wine: an iconic food product of the Veneto Region, which is also highly attractive for tourists. According to the 2022 Report on the economic situation in the Veneto's agri-food sector [78], wine production (including organic production) is widely represented and is also increasing (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Area under production, quantity of wine produced, and quantity of grapes harvested in 2022.

Province	Area in Production (ha)	Production Quantity 2022 (hL)	Quantity Harvested 2022 (t)
Belluno (BL)	216	22,220	28
Padua (PD)	7234	967,910	1214
Rovigo (RO)	206	21,668	27
Treviso (TV)	41,512	5,617,277	7121
Venice (VE)	9663	1,220,648	1527
Verona (VR)	28,491	3,143,631	4021
Vicenza (VI)	7386	876,383	1104
Veneto	94,708	11,869,737	15,042

Source: Veneto Agricoltura estimates based on Veneto Region and Istat figures cf. [71] (p. 55).

The Region is in first place for the export of wine. The types of wine are very varied, with D.O.C. (Controlled Denomination of Origin) and D.O.C.G. products labelled Amarone, Valpolicella, Prosecco, and Soave being particularly well known.

The entire production chain is represented. Moreover, the most important international trade fair is held annually in Verona: Vinitaly, with 93,000 visitors in 2023 and over 1000 buyers from 68 countries. The Ente Fiera also organizes a varied programme of events abroad throughout the year: "Verona on the road". The CIRVE, the CREA, and the Higher Technical Institute for New Technologies for Made in Italy in the Agro-Food and Wine Sector, too, are all top-level training and research bodies in the Veneto, as are the Departments of Sciences and Technologies for Viticulture and Oenology at the Universities of Padua and Verona.



The cultivation of vines occupies large areas in the Provinces of Verona, Vicenza, Padua, Treviso, and Venice, above all in the hills but also on the plains. The resulting monocultural vineyard landscape is mechanized, regular, geometric, extensive, and somewhat intrusive, often at the expense of biodiversity [79–81]. There are 16 Wine Routes. The members are made up of private wineries and cooperatives, as well as makers of typical food products such as ham factories, food companies and oil mills, municipal governments, wine/oil protection consortia, and others. Furthermore, these have been joined by *agriturismi*, hotels, restaurants, wine bars, and trattorias, which have arisen everywhere.

In general, the wineries are small or medium-sized, although large ones do also exist. More and more, in recent years, there has been a propensity for welcoming visitors in the cellar. The structure of the wine world can therefore provide a very widespread offer of services at a territorial level. This activity of the producer companies has been regulated since 2017 by the Law of 27th December, no. 205, art. 1 paragraphs 502–505 and by the Ministerial Decree of 12 March 2019 “Guidelines on the minimum quality requirements and standards for the exercise of wine tourism”. During tastings, wine is “paired” with foods of the territory, and also with other local activities. “Consistent with the definition of “wine tourism” referred to in article 1, paragraph 502, of the law of 27 December 2017, no. 205, are considered wine tourism activities, for the purposes of this decree, all training and information activities aimed at the production of wine in the territory and the knowledge of wine, with particular regard to geographical indications (PDO, PGI/Protected Geographical Indication); educational, cultural, and recreational initiatives carried out in the wine cellars and vineyards, including educational harvesting; the activities of tasting and marketing of the wineries’ production, also in combination with food, to be understood as cold agri-food products prepared by the farm itself, also handled or processed, ready for consumption, and having the requirements and standards referred to in Article 2, paragraph 1 and 2” [82].

Nowadays, in general, companies involved in wine tourism have welcoming premises and have been renovated in recent times thanks to the Plan of Conversion and Restructuring Viticulture (PRVV) for 2013–2017 and the RDP for 2014–2020 [83] (pp. 6–9). Many of them are also located in historic villas about 4243 between the Veneto and Friuli includes [IRVV: [www.irvv.net](http://www.irvv.net), accessed on 4 November 2023]. Overall, it can be said that wine, food, and territorial culture influence each other and stimulate tourist experiences [9] (p. 11) in rural environments and villages [84] (p. 203), [85].

Sustainability is a crucial factor in the wine sector [86]. For years now, the OIV, the International Organisation of Vines and Wine, has been providing guidelines for sustainable viticulture [87,88]. Since 2018, the Veneto Region has promulgated the “Regional Programme for a Sustainable Wine Sector”, in which the producer must plan (with a time schedule) the results to be obtained in the various processes of environmental, economic and territorial sustainability, in conjunction with the Protection Consortia [67]. In-depth studies have been carried out on the behaviour of wine businesses, verifying the determinants of their adherence or obstacles to sustainable agronomic practices [89,90].

## 5. The Measures Implemented in Rural Development Programs and the Local Action Groups

### 5.1. The Examined Measures in the 2007/2013 and 2014/2020 Periods

As mentioned above, the need to set specific targets has led in all RDPs to the designation of “diversification of the rural economy”. In the period 2007–2013, looking at the measures proposed in the RDP of the Veneto Region, two stand out as ways to reach this goal: nos. 311 and 313 [91] (pp. 522, 534). To these—tangentially—we could add no. 323a [91] (p. 547) which, in addition to providing interventions to improve the living conditions of rural populations, also aimed to increase the attractiveness of rural areas through the recovery, redevelopment, and enhancement of the historical-architectural heritage; the enhancement and qualification of the rural landscape; and interventions for the cultural enhancement of rural areas. The Measures are divided up into Actions.

Measure 311 (“diversification into non-agricultural activities”) was addressed at agricultural enterprises. It included measures aimed at promoting the multifunctional role of businesses. More specifically, we find here a reference to tourism in Action number 2, “Development of agritourism”.

Measure 313 financed local and regional authorities, agritourism associations, associations for the management of wine roads and typical products, tourism promotion consortia, partnerships between public and private actors, consortia of associations, and local promotion boards. These measures were aimed at promoting what is on offer for tourists in rural areas (primarily tourism related to agriculture, food and wine tourism, and agritourism). Among the five planned actions:

- number 1 (“itineraries and certification”) was intended to encourage the identification and improvement of recognised main routes and/or the creation of connections with the main network of routes and/or routes already promoted (such as those of wine routes and typical products) and tourism related to cycling or horse riding;
- number 2 (“accommodation”) was intended to support the implementation and/or adaptation of small collective structures and infrastructures, including the necessary equipment;
- numbers 3, 4, and 5 aimed to promote “services” for the design and implementation of tourist packages as well as “information” and “integration of the tourist offer”.

Although with technical changes and modifications, in 2014–2020 we also find the line proposed in the previous period. More specifically, Measure 311 is related to 6.4.1 and 6.4.2, respectively. Measure 313 is replaced by Measure 7.5.1. The content of no. 323a is now—to a large extent—covered by 7.6.1 «Recovery and redevelopment of the architectural heritage of the villages and the rural landscape» (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Comparison between Measures articulated by type of intervention in the programming periods 2007/2013 and 2014/2020.

RDP 2007/2013	RDP 2014/2020
M311 «Diversification into non-agricultural activities»	M6.4.1 «Creation and development of diversification of agricultural enterprises» M6.4.2 «Creation and development of non-agricultural activities in rural areas»
M313 «Incentives for tourist activities»	M7.5.1 «Infrastructure and information for the development of sustainable tourism in rural areas»
M323a «Protection and upgrading of the rural heritage»	M7.6.1 «Restoration and redevelopment of the architectural heritage of villages and rural landscape»

Source: L.S. Rizzo.

Our study related to the application of these Measures involved all the municipalities in the Region, although a more profound survey was conducted in the more marginal and rural ones (D, C, and also B1) (Figure 1) where the Local Action Groups operate (cf. Sections 5.2 and 7.2).

The Measures and their Interventions are financed by the EAFRD Structural Funds through various calls issued by the Region and the LAGs. The beneficiaries may be public, private, or mixed entities, depending on the calls. However, LAGs can have a dual function, as issuers of calls and users.

## 5.2. Local Action Groups and LEADER Areas: Some Useful Notes for Discussion

In the European Union, place-based local development (CLLD) is the paradigm adopted to stimulate progress in peripheral areas [13].

Over time, the EU’s LEADER initiative has made it possible to test the above approach in rural areas; it was then fully integrated into the fourth axis of the Rural Development

Policy as early as 2007. This sought to align the application of the new territorial measures of the CAP to a model that is participatory, inclusive and community-led, sustainable, multi-sectoral, multi-actorial, and with multi-level governance. It relies—although not for all the measures that can be implemented—on innovation, cooperation, and synergy between entities active in the rural area [92] (pp. 1–2), [93].

To involve local actors, measures were devised—in the two programming periods discussed—dedicated to the LEADER areas. For the period 2007–2013, examples of this were in particular: Measure 410 (“Implementation of local development strategies”), which enabled Measures 311, 313, and 323a to be activated through calls managed by the LAGs themselves but in conjunction with the RDP; and Measure 421 “Implementation of cooperation projects (between LAGs)”, often focusing on tourism.

A figure confirming the role of the tourist lever regarding the 2nd Pillar of the CAP in the Veneto comes from an examination of the documents for evaluating the period 2007–2013. It reveals that about 70% of the resources and projects of local strategies were devoted to the enhancement of rural tourism through the involvement of a wide spectrum of public and private beneficiaries of the local economy and society [94] (p. 61).

In the period of 2014–2020 in the Veneto, Measure 19 aimed to allow Local Action Groups to enhance local resources by encouraging environmentally sustainable and socio-economic activities to contribute to the long-term development of the territories and their communities. This was done mainly through sub-measure 19.2.1, which provided for the possibility of activating Measures 7 (with the exception of 7.3.1), 8, and 16 of the RDP.

If we consider the European Union with 28 members from the point of view of where agriculture has a significant role, in the period 2014–2020 we can see how Local Action Groups extend territorially over many municipalities. The LAG is a public–private collective actor which over time “has become a Development Agency” [95] (p. 164), [96] (p. 35) in rural development policies [36,97–99]. The LAG team is usually large and consists of representatives of different public bodies (municipalities, Provinces, mountain unions, mountain communities, etc.) as well as private sector organisations (both agricultural and non-agricultural trade associations, wine routes, oil routes, Area Programmatic Agreements—IPAs, banks, universities, consortia, etc.).

A LAG takes the form of an organisation inspired by a bottom-up participatory approach that combines the LEADER system and Community Led Local Development (CLLD) [96] (pp. 35–38), [100]. At the same time, however, it adheres to top-down, State and Regional EU institutional policies and regulations. It thus embodies multi-level governance. Each LAG implements participatory integrated local development strategies through a multi-annual Local Development Plan (LDP) and, as regards RDPs, through the LEADER approach. It has, in fact, the prerogative to issue calls relating to measure 19 of the RDPs, defined as “Local Development LEADER Support” [101]. However, LAGs may also be beneficiaries of other measures [2] (p. 8).

In Europe, instituted in 1988, the LAGs were 217 under the LEADER I Programme (1991–1994). They increased in later stages of the same Programme (LEADER II and LEADER+). The LEADER Programme was, so to speak, incorporated into the Rural Development Programme, which had 2350 LAGs in 2007 [102] (p. 143). In the 2014–2020 RDP there were over 3000 ([https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/implementing-lags-and-local-strategies-1\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/implementing-lags-and-local-strategies-1_en.html), accessed on 11 October 2023; [103]) [104,105].

The LAGs in Italy from 2007–2013 to 2014–2020 underwent a process of amalgamation or in some cases were abolished.

As for the Veneto Region, the LAGs from 14 in 2007–2013 became 9 in the following period (Figure 2):

1. LAG: Alto Bellunese (BL);
2. LAG: Prealpi e Dolomiti (BL);
3. LAG: Patavino (PD);
4. LAG: Montagna Vicentina (VI);
5. LAG: Polesine Po Delta (RO);

6. LAG: Polesine Adige (RO);
7. LAG: Alta Marca Trevigiana (TV);
8. LAG: Baldo-Lessinia (VR);
9. LAG: Venezia Orientale (VE).

## 6. Materials and Methods

### 6.1. Data Sources Used

In this research, the physical, procedural, and financial monitoring data of the RDP of the Veneto Region for the programming periods 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 were used. Those Measures and actions that contain objectives of corporate diversification were chosen such as, for example, the development of agritourism, the development of non-agricultural activities (crafts, tourism, services), the creation of infrastructure and information for the development of sustainable tourism (such as upgrading and securing existing routes), and the recovery and upgrading of rural heritage.

The actions chosen for 2014–2020, if the calls were issued by LAGs, fitted into a container called “Key Projects”. Many of these key projects had specific objectives for the upgrading of sustainable tourist routes. Of the 1293 applications funded by these actions, 518 were included in a Key Project, for a financial value in June 2021 equal to over 34 million Euro (out of the 94.5 million made available for the chosen actions).

### 6.2. Procedure Implemented

In conducting the study, two types of analysis were utilized (Sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2): (a) a quantitative one, which is based on the data discussed in Section 6.1; (b) a qualitative analysis was carried out via semi-structured interviews. The authors and an expert from the Veneto region gathered the list of interlocutors prior to conducting the interviews. We chose the most common method for statistical analysis when there is simultaneous presence of quantitative and qualitative variables (see Section 6.2.1). Out of all the available ones, we chose the ones that provided better explanations of variability (i.e., In correspondence analysis, it is referred to as ‘inertia’).

#### 6.2.1. Statistical Analysis

In order to achieve our objective of understanding how the Measures have been able to stimulate the creation of tourism in rural areas, it was necessary to analyse the relationship between the RDP actions, the territory benefitting from funding, and the beneficiaries themselves. Given the qualitative and quantitative nature of the variables of interest, it was considered appropriate to proceed with correspondence analysis: this technique aims to identify the relationships between the modalities of several qualitative characteristics through the graphical representation in a Cartesian space of minimal dimensionality (normally two axes), favouring a synthetic understanding of the relations between the modalities of the variables.

As a result of the anonymization of the collected data, each municipality of residence of the beneficiaries has been assigned to the tourist area to which they belong; this, as regards the Veneto Region, is—as mentioned earlier—one of the following: Seaside area; Mountain; Thermal; Lake; Art cities (see Section 4.2).

Two independent analyses were carried out, depending on whether the issuing organisation was the Veneto Region or a Local Action Group.

In both cases the correction of Benzecri’s inertia was applied: this allowed to optimize the explanation of the variability of the first two factors at 99.1% for the analysis in which the issuing organisation was the Veneto Region and at 94% in the case of the LAGs.

The variables used for each of the two analyses were as follows:

- Veneto Region: issuing organisation:
  - Tourist area (district).
  - Type of intervention.
  - Legal nature of the beneficiary.

- Interventions performed.

The secondary variables were:

- ATECO (Attività Economiche/Economic Activities).
- Type of municipality (according to the type of rurality; cf. Section 4.2).
- OTE (Technical Economic Orientation) [106,107].
- LAG: issuing organisation:
  - Tourist area.
  - Type of intervention.
  - Legal nature of the beneficiary.
  - Interventions performed.
  - Diversification activities (Type of intervention—e.g., T.I. 6.4.1).
  - Company size.

The secondary variables were:

- ATECO.
- Type of municipality.
- OTE.
- Key project.
- LAG name.
- Scope.

An analysis was also carried out for the previous programming period, 2007–2013, but both because of different characterisation of the interventions and for the lack of definition of scope of interest and key project, we preferred not to proceed with the publication of the results and comparison with the 2014–2020 programming period.

#### 6.2.2. Qualitative Analysis

At the same time as the quantitative survey, a qualitative survey was carried out based on semi-structured interviews with the LAG Directors. Of the 9 LAGs operating in the Veneto Region, the focus was on the following six: Prealpi e Dolomiti LAG; Alta Marca Trevigiana LAG; Montagna Vicentina LAG; Baldo-Lessinia LAG; Polesine Po Delta LAG; Venezia Orientale LAG.

With the exception of the Eastern Venice LAG, all the sample LAGs agreed to be interviewed. The meetings were all held in July 2022.

Having used the tool of semi-structured interviews, the interlocution proceeded focusing on a common track in order to compare the answers. In this regard, we started by exploring the genesis of the participatory process that led the LAGs to identify key areas of interest and projects (with related themes). Subsequently, for each measure, the interlocutors were asked to make a brief effort to identify: (a) the function most exploited by the choices that could be deduced from the questions (i.e., tourism, social, or crafts); (b) the territorial extent of the operations financed (i.e., concentration, polarisation, or dissemination); (c) criticality and strengths of the “measure” instrument; (d) awareness and competence of public and/or private actors (i.e., potential beneficiaries) of the instrument; (e) the role of the route/route element (in particular for M7.5.1) in the enhancement of the territory and the agri-food chains; (f) the role of the itinerary as a means of disseminating knowledge to the experiential tourist of the stages of processing/production of food, which was then served/sold; (g) trend of growth or not of the territory, with respect to the use and knowledge of the tools that the Rural Policy makes available.

## 7. Results and Discussion

### 7.1. The Correspondence Analysis

Before proceeding to the discussion of the results of the correspondence analysis, it is best to highlight the amount of funds disbursed and the number of beneficiaries of the funds themselves. Given the objective of the analysis, it was preferred to divide the



data by type of rural municipality and tourist area. In view of the nature of the types of assistance considered, both for LAG and Regional calls, the largest number of beneficiaries is concentrated in type D municipalities, and therefore the highest value of the funds disbursed is to be found here (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Number of funded applications and aid granted by type of rural municipality and type of institution <sup>1</sup>.

Type of Municipality	No. Funded			No. Granted Aid (Euro)		
	LAG	Veneto Region	Total	LAG	Veneto Region	Total
A—Urban centre	8	10	18	1,023,891	1,059,520	2,083,410
B1—Rural urbanized	150	161	311	10,038,650	17,776,014	27,814,664
B2—Urbanized	16	35	51	1,235,799	4,314,798	5,550,597
C—Significantly rural	188	78	266	14,952,453	7,747,929	22,700,381
D—Predominantly rural	446	201	647	22,895,681	13,479,699	36,375,379
Total	808	485	1293	50,146,473	44,377,959	94,524,432

<sup>1</sup> Last update: June 2021. Source: Adg EAFRD Reclamation and Irrigation using RDP monitoring data, Veneto Region.

Considering, however, the tourist area, it is possible to note that most of the beneficiaries and the funds granted are concentrated in “cities of art” and in the mountains (Table 6). In this case, too, we note consistency with the objective of bringing development possibilities to areas with greater needs, since many municipalities in the Veneto in areas with development problems are classified as art cities or located in mountain areas.

**Table 6.** Funded applications and aid granted by type of tourist district and type of institution <sup>2</sup>.

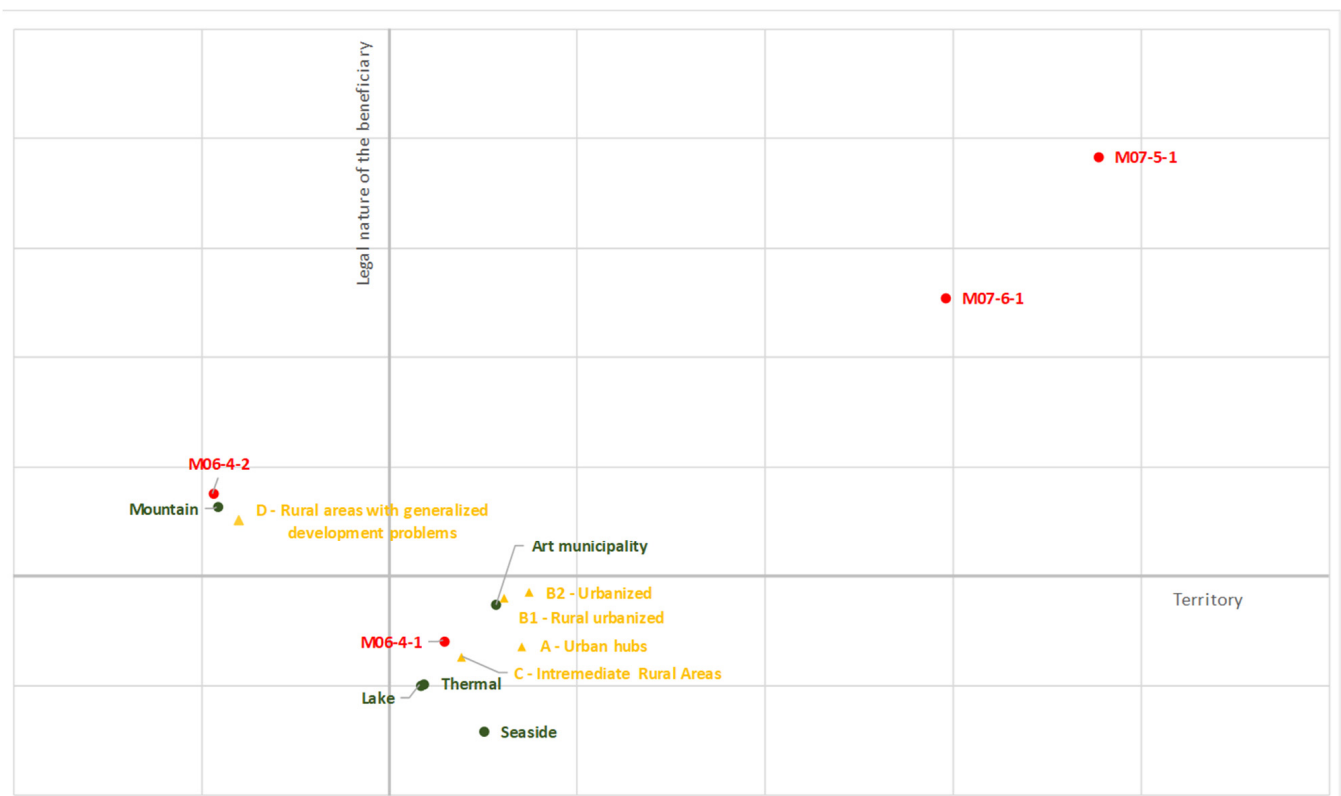
District	Funded			Granted Aid		
	LAG	Veneto Region	Total	LAG	Veneto Region	Total
Seaside	41	5	46	1,898,529	685,119	2,583,648
Art municipality	319	271	590	25,598,320	28,462,485	54,060,805
Lake	31	25	56	19,289,77	3,106,302	5,035,279
Mountain	411	176	587	20,502,543	11,656,989	32,159,533
Thermal	6	8	14	218,103	467,064	685,167
Total	808	485	1293	50,146,473	44,377,959	94,524,432

<sup>2</sup> Last update: June 2021. Source: Adg EAFRD Remediation and Irrigation on RDP monitoring data, Veneto Region.

As regards the illustration of the results of the correspondence analysis, since two independent analyses were carried out—depending on whether the issuing body of the calls was the Veneto Region or a Local Action Group—two separate explanations will be made.

With regard to the calls issued by the Veneto Region, the two dimensions that emerged as being able to synthesize the variability of the data available can be summed up in the dimension of the territory (projected on the *x*-axis) and the dimension of the legal nature of the beneficiary (as regards the *y*-axis). This means that depending on where the variables of interest are placed in the Cartesian space, there will be a greater correlation with the axis direction.

To make it easier to read the data, it was decided to break down the variables into two separate graphs, in such a way as to reveal more clearly the correspondences that emerged. In the first graph the following variables were projected: types of intervention and spatial information (Figure 3). In the second, the variables inherent in economic activity, the types of intervention, and the interventions carried out were projected (Figure 4).



**Figure 3.** Regional calls: tourist area, type of rural municipality and type of intervention. Source: data processed by A. Traiuo.

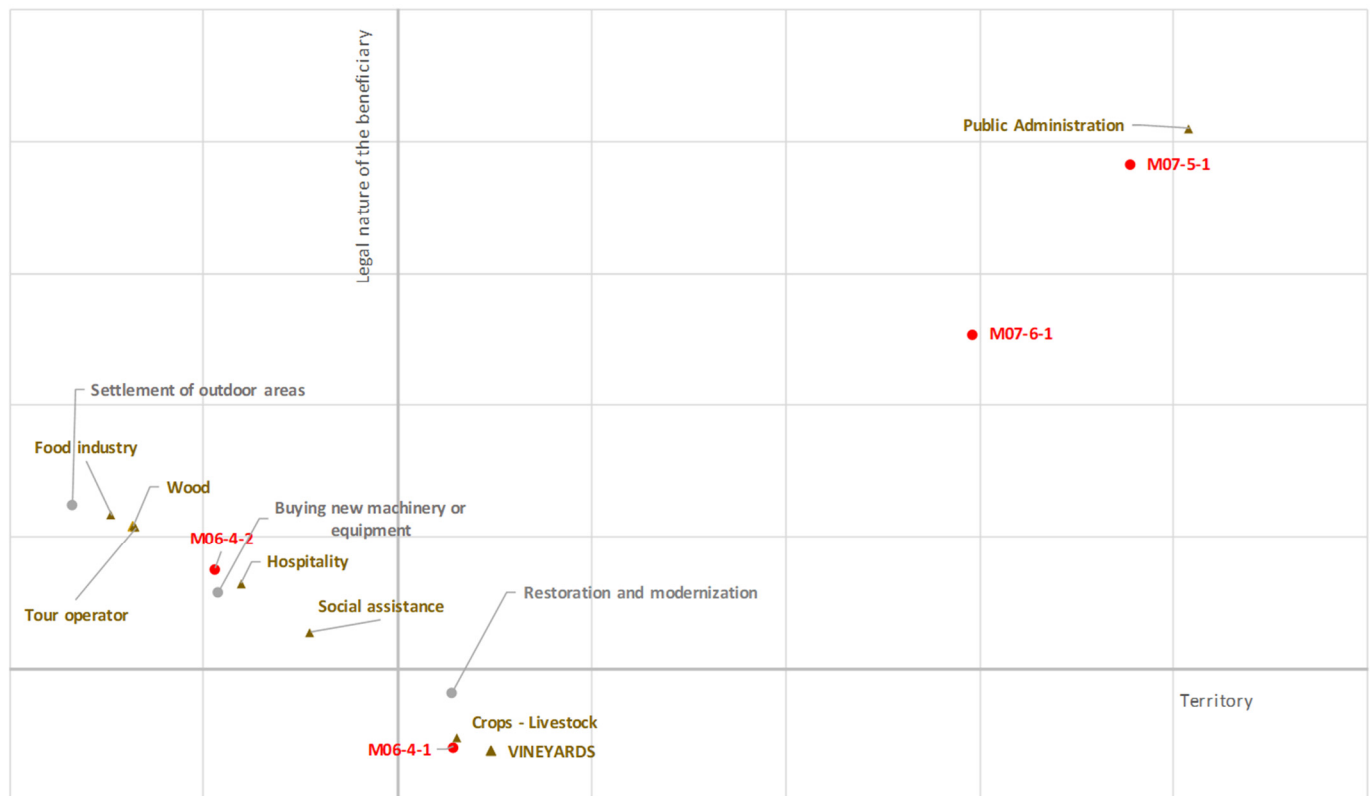
It can be noted that in the mountains, there is a preference for focusing on non-agricultural activities, especially in the spheres of accommodation and catering, the food industry and woodworking, mainly through the purchase of new machinery and equipment. The remaining agricultural municipalities of the Veneto are oriented towards the diversification of businesses: in fact, the main beneficiaries are farms with crops and livestock and those producing wine, with interventions mainly involving renovation and modernization.

As may be expected, the types of intervention relating to information/infrastructure for tourism and the upgrading of the cultural heritage are highly correlated with public administrations, while diversification and incentives for extra-public activities correlate with private owners.

Also in the case of the calls issued by the Local Action Groups, it was preferred to break down the information into two separate graphs.

In the first graph (Figure 5), information on the issuer LAG, the type of intervention and the area of interest has been isolated, while in the second graph (Figure 6), the information shown is the field of interest, the type of economic activity, the type of intervention, and the interventions carried out.

In this case, the two dimensions are identifiable with the same types of intervention, in turn closely related to the type of beneficiary: in the *x*-axis the legal nature of the beneficiary, to discriminate between the types of intervention: 6.4.2 (private) and 7.5.1 and 7.61 (public). On the other hand, in the *y*-axis we find the type of intervention 6.4.1, related to farms, and 6.4.2, related to other types of private initiative activities.



**Figure 4.** Regional calls: type of economic activity (ATECO), no. of interventions and type of intervention. Source: data processed by A. Trabuio.

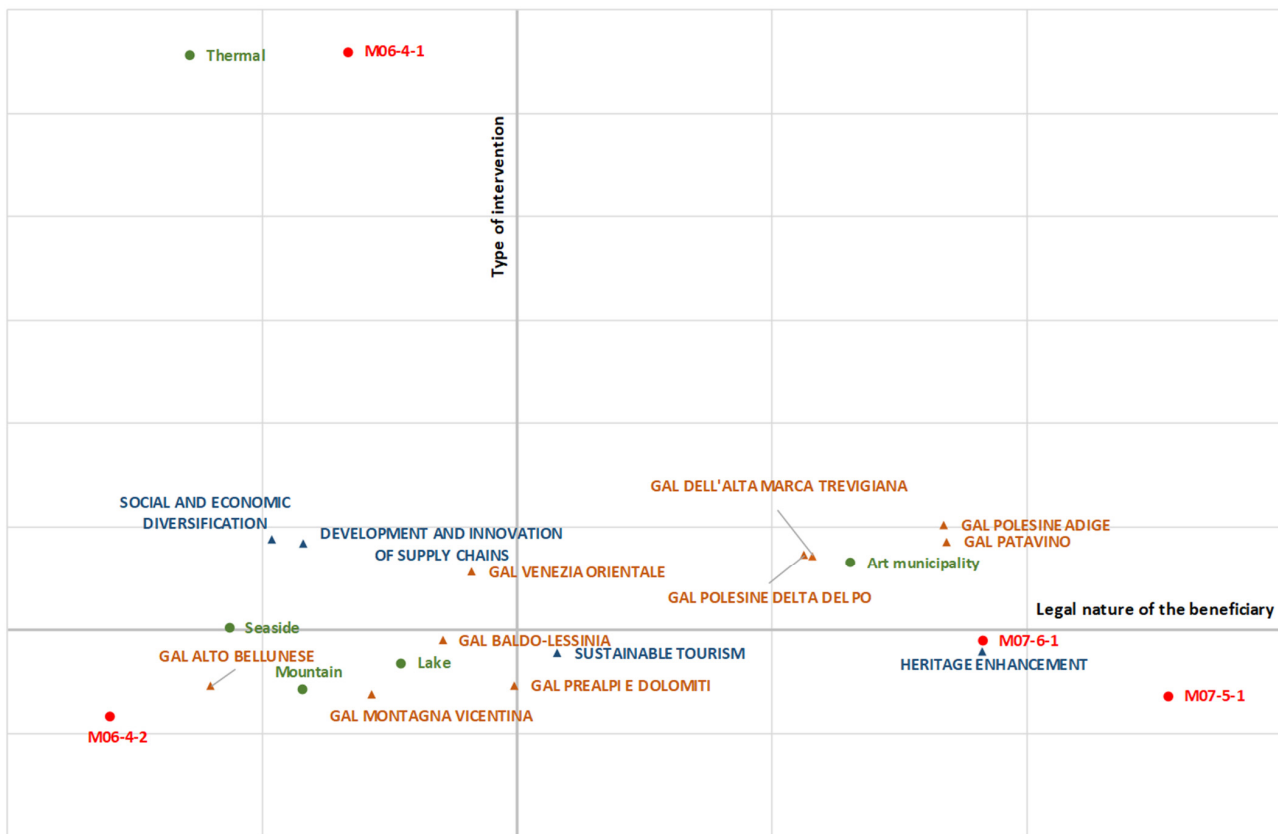
From the territorial point of view, the beneficiaries of the Mountain, Seaside, and Lake clearly prefer measure 6.4.2, while those in the Thermal-Spa category have chosen 6.4.1 and the rest of the Veneto's municipalities have focused on 7.5.1 and 7.6.1.

In the preparation of their Local Development Programme, each LAG could define several areas of interest on which to concentrate its resources, so consequently the interventions are also related: valorisation of heritage, with interventions 7.5.1 and 7.6.1, is aimed at restructuring and modernization and initiatives regarding information/tourism, while for 6.4.2 the related areas of interest are corporate diversification and the development of supply chains, with the purchase of new equipment and computer programs.

Sustainable tourism is the most common area of interest in both areas.

## 7.2. Outcomes of the Qualitative Analysis

The six LAGs mentioned have created quite a lot of key projects (19), which is the result of intensive work started with previous programming periods (2007/2013 and LEADER) and implemented through listening and/or focus groups with various local public and private stakeholders. The expressions of interest, the needs expressed, and the stimuli highlighted by these actors during the complex process of consultation with the territories were summarized in areas of interest, then merged into the key projects. This development shows that the intermediation of the LAG on the one hand and the strategic choices it makes on the other are significant in highlighting the objectives of the key projects. This role is also determined by the fact that the administrative boundaries of the LAGs are often the result of an aggregation of several composite territorial areas, with different physical-economic-sociocultural characteristics that require intermediation in order to create an efficient system.



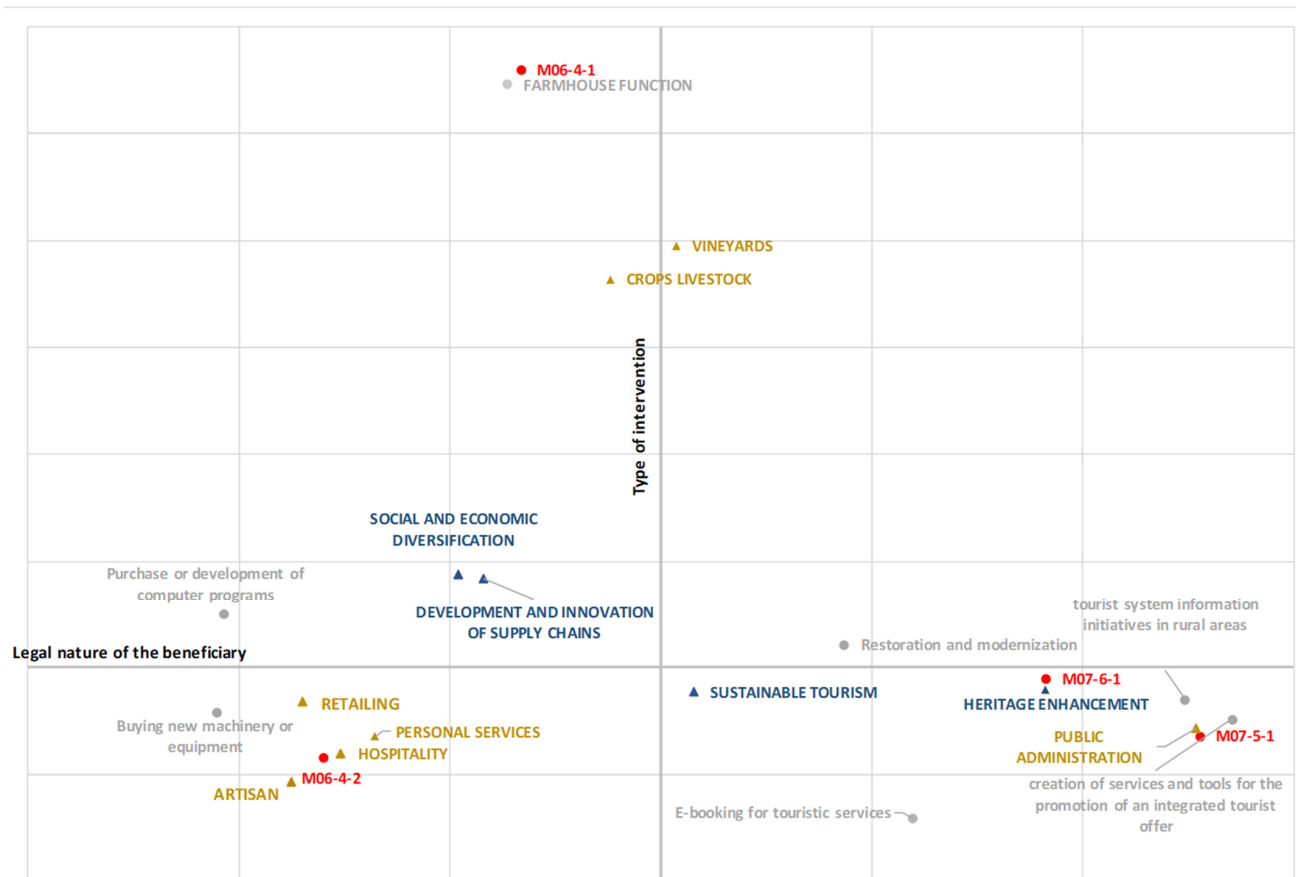
**Figure 5.** LAG calls: Tourist area, LAG issuer, type of intervention and area of interest. Source: elaboration by A. Trabuio.

Although tourism is not the focal point of the policy strategy of the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 RDPs, in setting out the key projects and interventions of the four measures, the territories have moved in pursuit of a sustainable and slow tourism based on the desire to deal effectively with emergencies, and redevelop locations (including those devoted to the production, sale and consumption of food) and spaces in order to offer experiences: experiences focused on the territorial identity conveyed, for example, by the narration of historical events, local know-how, the knowledge of traditional products and agricultural techniques, etc. Examples include the following key projects that have come into being under the Local Development Programmes for 2014–2020:

1. The key projects “Linking/networking of tourist attractions”, “Landscape of the Prosecco Superiore di Conegliano Valdobbiadene UNESCO World Heritage Site” and “Theme Parks” of the Alta Marca Trevigiana LAG (cf. [http://www.galaltamarca.it/homepage\\_eng.php](http://www.galaltamarca.it/homepage_eng.php), accessed on 7 September 2023). All were included in the “Sparkling Hills 4.0” promotion project. The LAG’s strategy has combined the four measures under analysis with M19.2.1 to pursue the objective of enhancing the combination of “sustainable rural tourism/typical products”, also evidenced through the experience of the agri-food landscape (cf. <https://www.offersmarcatreviso.it/en/il-project/>, accessed on 6 September 2023).
2. IN.S.I.E.M. & (Initiative in Support of the Enterprises and Mountain Economy of Baldo & Lessinia) of the LAG Baldo-Lessinia that offered:
  - (a) “Development of sustainable tourism in the hinterland of Lake Garda: the Bardolino Trail”, with the involvement of the municipalities of Lake Garda—Affi, Bardolino, Cavaion Veronese, Costermano sul Garda, Garda, and Rivoli Veronese. The intention of the project is to create a network of its agricultural and historical-cultural jewels, with the aim of “putting in place the Bardolino

(b) “Development of sustainable tourism in the high mountains of Verona: The High Mountain Route” with the aim of giving impetus to hiking and cycling paths that highlight the natural and cultural heritage of the rural areas of the 13 municipalities of the Lessinia Veronese zone [108]. These include the “Dorsale della storia” in the east of the Province of Verona (<https://www.baldolessinia.it/leader-14-20/i-progetto-chiave/>, accessed on 5 September 2023).

3. “Water Iron and Fire” in the Valleys of Vicenza, Astico and Posina, with the Great War itinerary. Here we can find the implementation of a tourism of memory in locations of the First World War (LAG Montagna Vicentina: [https://www.acquaferrofuoco.it/categoria\\_schede/grande-guerra/](https://www.acquaferrofuoco.it/categoria_schede/grande-guerra/), accessed on 5 September 2023);



**Figure 6.** LAG calls: Field of interest, type of economic activity (ATECO), type of intervention and operations performed. Source: data processed by A. Trabuiio.

The highly varied process described above—aimed also at improving the quality of tourist accommodation—has brought out a critical problem linked to the excessive number of levels of governance (i.e., in addition to the LAGs themselves, Destination Management Organizations, Man and the Biosphere (MAB) areas, etc.). The latter makes the dynamics of participation and consultation more difficult by hindering possible synergies and creating redundancy in the use of policy instruments, such as calls for proposals linked



to certain measures. The LAG Directors expressed the need for rationalisation and greater coordination in this respect.

Going into detail about the individual measures, the interviews showed that:

- M6.4.1 was not successful for four out of five LAGs. This outcome is partly attributable to the timing of calls for proposals, which in some cases presented a problem of overlap between the LAG and the Region;
- M6.4.2 has been shown to be of significant interest to the whole sample and has been assessed as innovative;
- M7.5.1. has been a widely used tool in conjunction with key projects and has achieved its objectives in all the LAGs we considered;
- M7.6.1 has in some cases been widely requested by the territory—as witnessed by the measures financed in the Po Delta LAG area; in others it has not been particularly incisive (e.g., the Alta Marca Trevigiana LAG chose to use it only with a minimal, demonstrative function).

The spatial distribution of the interventions varies from measure to measure and from area to area as shown in the summary in Table 7.

**Table 7.** The spatial distribution of the interventions of the applied measures.

LAG	M6.4.1	M6.4.2	M7.5.1	M7.6.1
Prealpi Dolomiti	n.a. *	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Alta Marca Trevigiana	space dissemination	balanced distribution	space dissemination	n.a.
Montagna Vicentina	space dissemination	polarization (Asiago Plateau)	homogeneity	space dissemination
Baldo-Lessinia	n.a.	balanced distribution	balanced distribution	n.a.
Polesine Delta del Po	polarization (Po Delta)	balanced distribution	balanced distribution	balanced distribution

\* n.a.: no answer. Source: R.G. Rizzo, elaboration based on interview analysis, 2022.

The introduction of the “key project” aspect was given a positive welcome. It has proven to be a generator of opportunities that has fostered the creation of networks between subjects that have gone beyond the key project itself. It has helped the LAG to be perceived as a complementary aggregator compared to other entities, rather than just a mere funder of rainfall interventions.

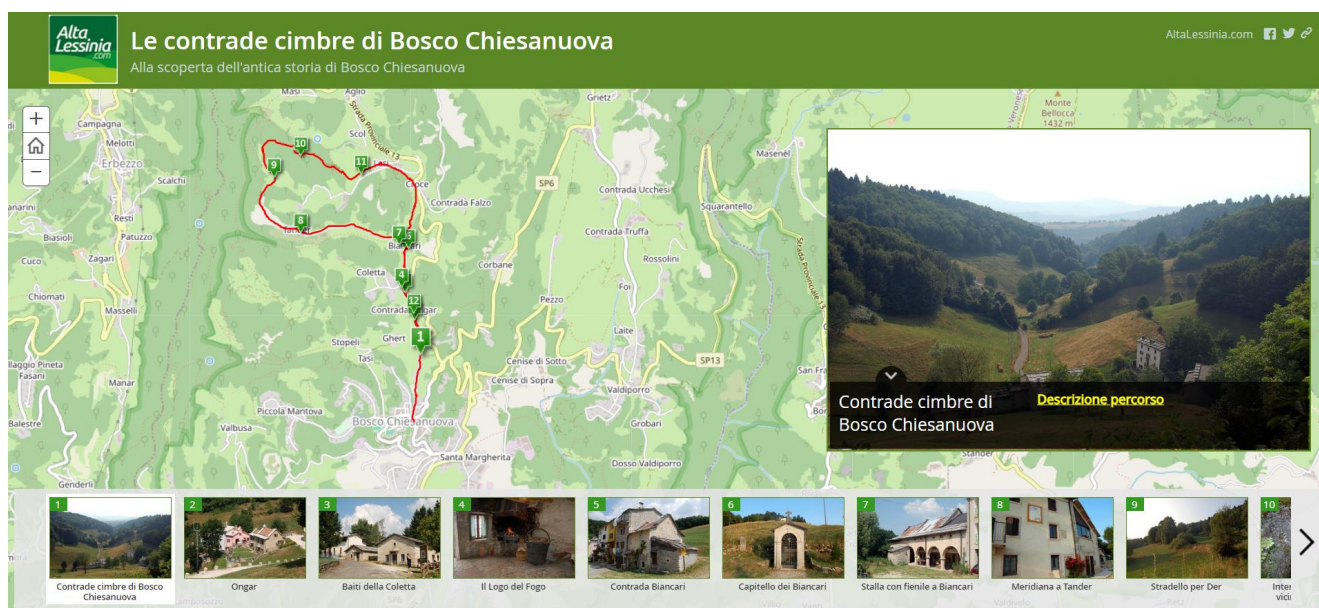
Following the analysis of the data, an attempt was made to gain a picture of the territories involved by placing at the centre of our interpretation the “intervention carried out” element, in particular for M7.5.1 and M7.6.1.: measures that have led to a strengthening of the areas, improving the infrastructure. What appears as a limit of the “measure” instrument is the sustainability and future management of the intervention over time. This later view is not considered at the stage of implementation of the intervention because it is not required by the measure for which the beneficiary has requested from time to time. One might envisage binding the beneficiary more to the result of the intervention and at the same time create a greater culture—especially from a business point of view—that considers the infrastructure itself a tourist product.

As we can see, therefore, one of the main results of the work done over the years has been the remarkable capillary infrastructure created through the most various kinds of routes, whose origins, however, often date back to a distant past. This observation is based on an examination of the many changes that all the rural areas of the Veneto have undergone.

Until the end of the 1950s, after the Second World War, the population of the Veneto was in fact mainly rural, with diversified characteristics, traditions, and civil and religious architecture in the various cultural areas of the region (e.g., Lessinia, Cadore, Saccisica, etc.) [109]. The inhabitants lived for the most part in small towns, numerous scattered houses, and hundreds of *contrade*, or hamlets. These are compact aggregations of houses

made of stone and/or wood with different characteristics, peculiar to the area in which they belong, and constructed for agricultural and livestock use. So, given a settlement structure that was not yet centralized, the network for mobility developed over time with, in addition to the main road network, a plethora of rural roads and paths. At the time, these were often travelled on foot and with carts. Then began a massive and widespread exodus from the countryside (the plain and the hills) and the mountain areas [110]. The housing stock, the rustic buildings and the civil and religious buildings, because of abandonment or neglect, suffered considerable degradation. The major and minor road system, however, has more or less preserved its initial framework and is the asset on which it has been possible—with LEADER measures first and then, in the last decade, with RDPs—to intervene and propose to tourists and hikers. Routes are identified that become the object of recovery, restoration, improvement, and the focus of naturalistic, historical-cultural, and gastronomic points of interest, and also of preparation ex-novo. Given the past agricultural nature of the territory, this general recovery of trails could systematically encourage the exploration of what is typical and characteristic. This is in fact also a cultural element for the territory: a reflection of know-how, traditions, techniques, and tools that outline an identity of which food forms an integral part, but which also has a wider value.

The Itinerary is conceived as an instrument of territorial penetration, and of the valorisation of rural contexts and of approach to local cultures. An example of municipalities characterised by this structure consists of Verona's mountain and hill pre-alpine zone, which local scholars and authorities have documented in numerous volumes, accompanied by many mapped routes and training courses for environmental guides (see, for example, the series “Le contrade della Lessinia—itinerari” in 16 volumes published by CTG Animatori Culturali e Ambientali “Lessinia”, edited by Maurizio Delibori from 1991 to 2009). Different bodies and actors have also been involved: the Regional Nature Park, the University [111], various communities, etc. These itineraries are now freely available online on Internet sites with ICT applications, partly elaborated with public contributions—among which the funds are made available by the RDP (Figure 7). All this gradually meets with the aspirations of today's visitor to the suburban territory: often a hiker who has embraced “the philosophy of walking” [112] and the cyclist/ e-biker who appreciates open spaces, but who sometimes clashes with those whose behaviour does not integrate with the spirit of the places they visit.



**Figure 7.** Example of an itinerary in Lessinia: the hamlets of Bosco Chiesanuova. Source: <http://altalessinia.com/tracks/contradecimbrebosco/>, accessed on 4 September 2023.

## 8. Conclusions

All the measures studied were applied all over the region, with a greater spread in areas more rural in nature, as revealed by the research. This resulted in territorial improvement and the promotion of widespread tourism and hiking. In addition, this is in line with contemporary land use patterns that make us value more open spaces and remoteness, which can be easily accessed and utilized for recreational purposes in general. There is a growing segmentation of tourism and service providers. Furthermore, various sectoral policies—like tourism, agriculture, and mobility—have encouraged the rediscovery of small and very small towns, the countryside, the consumption of local products, the widespread heritage, and the practice of sustainable mobility. At the same time, big and medium-sized cities are overburdened with overtourism, which even more justifies the choice of places of undertourism or that allow for short holidays. Given the number of municipalities adhering to the LAGs (areas D and C), we aim to bring attention to them in the remainder of our concluding remarks.

The work carried out by the LAGs in the two programmes leads to a uniform conclusion for the whole sample: the territories have shown a trend of growth, acquiring knowledge and competence thanks to the succession of policies and their implementation [113] (cf. Section 4.2). Also, thanks to the LAGs' action and their continuous dialogue with the actors (i.e., beneficiaries), their propensity to invest has increased over time, as evidenced by participation in the different key projects in all the LAGs. The territories have worked because there has been a policy: it has played a role in changing the “face” of farms (which often become multifunctional) [114] and of rural areas, as well as the experience that those who visit them can enjoy. This is also thanks to the many and diversified infrastructure interventions that have been carried out and the promo-marketing realized. In this respect, it is interesting to note that—with the exception of a single LAG—the five LAGs interviewed stated that they combined the measures analysed in this study with Measure 19—Support for LEADER local development. In doing so, they focused on intervention 19.2.1.x “Information activities for the development of knowledge and usability of rural areas”. This knowledge/usability has been transmitted using the “itinerary” tool as a means to systematize the territorial resources, which has been communicated both with traditional methods (paper guides) and with ICT methodologies, tools, and websites. This has made it possible to carry out interventions that have led to the “simultaneous” solution of rural heritage emergencies and enhancement of elements of the intangible capital of know-how. The route/itinerary tool has been chosen to make known, on the one hand, the territories and their landscapes, and on the other hand to explain the different phases of certain food chains (cf. Section 4.3) that characterise the Region. Take, for example, the “Via delle Malghe” tourism promotion project. It involved the seven municipalities of the Asiago Plateau in the Montagna Vicentina LAG. Routes have been designed for these areas, with the intention of creating a network of 88 dairy farms. By following these trails, the tourist/hiker/foodie has the opportunity to reconstruct the entire production chain of cheese (in particular the Asiago P.D.O.). The activities/services offered range from the taking of the herd up to pastures at the start of the grazing period to milking, cheese making, production and sale of products derived from milk, as well as catering with menus that use them.

At the end of the day, we would like to take up and expand on a number of considerations relating to foods. These foods consist of typical, traditional and “mountain” products that are increasingly frequently proposed throughout the Veneto in annual festivals for each individual product, to the extent that, on the same day, it is not uncommon to find events in multiple venues. Lastly, there is yet another phenomenon! In addition to the frequency and variety of food-related events that liven up the region throughout the year, there is also a tendency to prolong the events themselves over time.

We are now in the implementation of the National Strategic Plan (NSP) of the 2023/2027 CAP (cf. [https://www.reterurale.it/PAC\\_2023\\_27](https://www.reterurale.it/PAC_2023_27), accessed on 12 December 2023). The Veneto Region, like all Italy's Regions, plans and manages public policy interventions

related to Rural Development with the Regional Complements tool for Rural Development. It would be interesting to follow up our study analysing how the recent Measures have been structured to maintain the relationship itinerary/food/tourism to promote rural territories.

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## Nomenclature

ATECO	Economic Activities
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CIRVE	Centro Interdipartimentale per la Ricerca in Viticoltura ed Enologia/ Interdepartmental Centre for Research in Viticulture and Enology
CLLD	Community Led Local Development
CREA	Consiglio per la ricerca in agricoltura e l'analisi dell'economia agraria/Council for Agricultural Research and Economics
DOC	Denomination of Controlled Origin
DOCG	Controlled and Guaranteed Denomination of Origin
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund Rural Development
EAGF	European Agricultural Guarantee Fund
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
LAG	Local Action Group
LEADER	Liaison Entre Action de Développement de l'Économie Rurale
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IGT	Typical Geographical Indication
LDP	Local Development Plan
NSP	National Strategic Plan
OTE	Technical Economic Orientation
PDO	Protected Designation of Origin
PGI	Protected Geographical Indication
PRVV	Plan of Conversion and Restructuring Viticulture
PTA	Tourist Implementation Plan
RDP	Rural Development Programme



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