



## Cape Verde: Long live our LEADER

**Twenty years of applying a LEADER-type approach in Cape Verde has significantly reduced poverty in this deprived country and stemmed the rural exodus, while strengthening democracy and community-led local development.**

*Samuel Thirion, TOGETHER<sup>1</sup> network*



The Cape Verde archipelago off the coast of Senegal consists of 10 islands, most of which are volcanic origin. It has a total population of around 400 000.

A former Portuguese colony that became independent in 1975, Cape Verde served for centuries as a stopping point on the triangular slave trade with South America and a place of exile from Portugal. This diverse origin of the inhabitants has given rise to a specific Afro-European culture in which traditional songs and music play an important role. It is also a society with a strong solidarity, particularly at work, to face the adversity of the natural environment.

The climate is arid, and rainfall is sporadic with several years often passing without rain, leading to a series of deadly famines, a sore point throughout the country's history.

It was not until 1947 that an alert was issued at international level under the impetus of Amnesty International, which led to the colonial power providing food aid. This aid was then enhanced, especially after independence, by the organisation of collective projects employing many workers

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<sup>1</sup> The co-founder and director of the INDE NGO, and the designer of the SPIRAL participatory approach at the Council of Europe, Samuel Thirion has accompanied the process in Cape Verde described in this article since its inception. He is currently Secretary-General of TOGETHER, an international network of regions that are developing the SPIRAL approach.

that made it possible to reforest desert areas and provide the country with roads and rural infrastructure on all the islands. Initially provided by the central government, the management of these projects has gradually been decentralised to the level of local community groups, thus allowing the construction of certain infrastructure in villages.

Despite these measures, emigration has remained high. Even today, three out of four Cape Verdeans live abroad. Primarily rural, the country has enjoyed a particularly high growth rate since its independence, largely due to the increase in income coming from those who have emigrated, but with the risk of accelerating the rural exodus to the country's two urban centres – Praia, the capital (pop. 130 000), and Mindelo (pop. 72 000).

Politically speaking, the Republic of Cape Verde has enjoyed since 1991 a formal representative democracy, strongly established at national and local levels. Stable government is maintained by an essentially two-party system that includes the former independence party (PAICV).

### **LEADER approach**

This context made it possible from the 1990s onwards to launch a decentralised approach inspired by the LEADER programme<sup>2</sup> then in full swing in Europe. This approach has gradually become part of the Cape Verde's institutional and political landscape and has made this small country a remarkable laboratory for decentralised governance down to the village level.

The story begins with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Specialising in the fight against rural poverty, this Rome-based United Nations agency operates on the basis of very low-interest or even zero-interest loans granted to the governments of the least developed countries, including Cape Verde, in an effort to eradicate poverty in their rural areas.

IFAD operates on a programme basis, each programme being the subject of a loan agreement with the government concerned. This results in a rather lengthy preparation process, leading to a project document which, in most cases, is rather inflexible. The limitations of this top-down approach emerged in the evaluation reports and led some IFAD officials to seek more bottom-up approaches, relying on the local communities themselves.

In Cape Verde, for example, the final evaluation of the IFAD programme carried out in 1996 by the Portuguese NGO, INDE, and the discussions that followed led to the proposal to use the LEADER approach as a model for designing a new programme.

As early as 1996-1997, negotiations began with the government, leading to the launch in 2000 of a completely new national programme to combat poverty in rural areas (*Programa de Luta contra a Pobreza no meio Rural / PLPR*). The fact that the programme was no longer attached to the ministry of agriculture, as were all previous IFAD programmes, but directly to the prime minister's office has proved decisive.

All the principles of LEADER were adopted: local partnership, bottom-up approach, a global grant on the basis of a concerted territorial strategy, decentralisation of financing decisions and ex-post control of expenditure.

A three-year skills acquisition phase was set up with demonstrative actions in villages, leading to the creation on each island of LEADER-type local partnerships (called Regional Partner Commissions or CRP). The objective was to ensure that the majority of the village inhabitants, especially the most disadvantaged, participate in them through a genuine bottom-up approach. Methodological support was provided by INDE, in conjunction with the National LEADER Coordination Unit and the LEADER groups in Portugal, and the LEADER II European Observatory in Brussels.

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<sup>2</sup> Launched in 1991, L.E.A.D.E.R. (*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale / Links between actions for the development of the rural economy*) has over the years become the reference instrument for community-led local development.

## From island to village level

During this first phase of skills acquisition, development officers were hired by a local operator until they obtained an employment contract with the local partnership (CRP).

This training phase led to a more advanced proposal, validated by both IFAD and the government, to adopt the principles of the LEADER approach not only at island level, with the CRPs, but also at village level. The aim was to create a kind of micro-local partnership in each village, in the form of association of inhabitants (called Community Development Association – CDA) capable of developing a village strategy and ensuring its implementation, with the CRP ensuring coherence and consistency throughout the island.

The demonstrative actions of the three years of skills acquisition have been a lever to achieve this by inviting the inhabitants, gathered in village assemblies, to freely decide together actions that would enable the most needy families to be lifted out of poverty. Thus, IFAD's desired targeting of the poorest was carried out by the inhabitants themselves, which proved to be much more effective and efficient.

Through this approach, in just three years the number of CDAs created exploded with around 300 being created, allowing for real participation in the creation of CRPs at island level. CRP members are the CDAs, which are the majority, alongside municipalities and other public and private island institutions. Initially reluctant to accept what they perceived as a 'counter power', municipalities gradually came to understand the importance of the process that includes their own decisions, and they fully embraced the approach. The success of the project led to a CRP law approved by the National Assembly, which de facto incorporates the LEADER-type approach into national governance and the democratic functioning of the country.

## Phases

After the first skills acquisition phase (2000-2003), several further phases followed in the same way as LEADER in Europe. Each phase was the subject of a strategy and of a territorial action plan developed at village and then island level. Its implementation is evaluated annually as well as at the end of the phase.

During the second phase (2003-2007) the programme covered five islands. Following its success, it was subsequently extended to the entire archipelago (except for the two mass tourism islands of Sal and Boa Vista), including some urban areas such as Mindelo.

During the third phase (2007-2012), the establishment of a bottom-up monitoring and evaluation system based on the Council of Europe's SPIRAL approach<sup>3</sup> really stimulated the participation of inhabitants in village associations (CDAs), particularly young people. It gave rise to 'CDA facilitators', at village level, complementary to CRP development officers at island level.

These facilitators are unemployed young graduates who have returned to live in their village and who work on a voluntary basis, as the programme cannot afford to pay them, unlike the CRP development officers. Their participation ensures that CDAs receive additional technical support to that of the development officers in the CRPs, thus refining the LEADER-type approach at two levels: villages and islands. At the end of the third phase, the number of village associations (CDAs) was around 500, with a dense network of facilitators (one or two per CDA).

With the fourth phase (2012-2019), building on its success, the PLPR programme changed and took a new name, POSER (*Programa de Oportunidades Sócio-Econômicas Rurais*). The idea was to go beyond the fight against poverty to include all sectoral policies for socio-economic development: agriculture, fisheries, energy, tourism, services, SMEs, health, education, etc. The function of facilitators at village level took on a new dimension and a skills-building component

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<sup>3</sup> [https://wikispiral.org/tiki-index.php?page=capeverde&redirectpage=Cape\\_Verde#Principaux\\_enseignements](https://wikispiral.org/tiki-index.php?page=capeverde&redirectpage=Cape_Verde#Principaux_enseignements)

through 'cascade training' sessions was introduced. This would provide them with training in the development of economic activity and thus ensure their long-term settlement in their village. The objective is for each facilitator to become a specialist in a field corresponding to his or her economic activity, and be a relay for the ministry of this speciality at the service of several neighbouring CDAs, while remaining attached to his or her own CDA. The organisation of small local exchange groups between neighbouring CDAs makes it possible to pool acquired skills. Thematic networking of the CDAs is also proposed.



*Graduation of the development officers who will then train some 700 facilitators in the villages (1 or 2 per CDA).*

However, difficulties in implementing this new programme have caused a considerable delay in the implementation of the animation component. And it was only in 2016 that the cascade training sessions for the facilitators really began. The good news is that in the meantime the internet network has spread to all rural areas in Cape Verde, allowing each facilitator to have a smartphone. A direct communication system could then be set up between CDAs, CRPs, ministries and technical assistance NGOs, thus allowing for a real decentralisation of services in the villages.

Unfortunately, the return of the programme to the ministry of agriculture at the end of 2016 following a change of government has reintroduced a sectoral approach with an essentially agricultural focus, and most of these measures have been or are being abandoned. It remains to be seen how the programme will be evaluated by IFAD and the government in 2019.

In addition, the constitution of a Federation of PRCs, currently in the process of being set up, could ensure greater autonomy for PRCs. The future of the process therefore remains uncertain and will depend on these developments, both on the part of the government and donors and on the organisational capacity of the PRCs themselves.

### **Efficiency, effectiveness and mobilisation**

In any case, the nearly 20-years duration of this LEADER-type approach in Cape Verde will remain a source of inspiration and learning forever. Indeed, it is one of the few global examples of

LEADER principles having been applied in their entirety down to the village level and over such a long period of time.

In terms of impact, the CDA/PRC mechanism and the bottom-up methodology that has been developed in Cape Verde has proven to be highly efficient and effective in the fight against poverty, while enabling the country to achieve its Millennium Development Goals already in 2012.

In particular, the approach has enabled the entire Cape Verdean society to be mobilised in the fight against poverty and in the cause of local development. This mobilisation goes beyond rural communities to reach urban social classes and even international solidarity, thanks especially to the very important Cape Verdean diaspora.

ACDs and CRPs have gained remarkable financial autonomy: they now depend on less than 30% of PLPR/POSER funds to finance local projects. A new development model has thus gradually emerged, based on the settlement of populations in rural areas, whereas previously their dominant aspiration was to go to the city or to emigrate.

This LEADER-type approach has contributed to reversing rural exodus and completely transforming the image of rural areas from places where only those who could not leave remained to attractive places to live. As a result many young people have returned to the countryside. However, this return is still fragile and depends to a large extent on the future development of the programme.

### **Solidarity and empowerment**

One of the key elements of success has been the decision-making autonomy of CDAs and CDPs, combined with the principles of solidarity and co-responsibility for the well-being of all that it has developed. This has led, for example, to the establishment of solidarity funds to acquire equipment or installations (housing, water tanks, fishing boats, agricultural equipment, etc.) either for collective use or to be temporarily loaned to those who need it most. A real management of common goods has been set up and allowed the development of economic activities for people without resources.

Essentially, the success of the process has been based above all on confidence in the ability of people to find the best solutions, which has been a 'small revolution' within IFAD. The choice of actions by village communities has been fully respected, even when they have gone against IFAD's recommendations for predefined economic actions.

In the first years, the actions chosen by the populations were considered to be 'social' actions (social housing, water tanks, etc.). However, the evaluations carried out from 2008 onwards as part of the participatory monitoring and evaluation process clearly highlighted the economic impact of these actions: for example, water tanks have enabled women to no longer spend several hours a day carrying water, thus eliminating back pain and allowing them to better care for their children. Having a home has also opened up the possibility of developing their own economic activity.

These actions have formed the basis for a local development process that purely economic actions imposed from above would not have been able to achieve as efficiently. The respect of the choice of actions by the communities has also contributed to considerably reducing the cost of their implementation. Thanks to local participation, the cost of building social housing has been reduced by a factor of 10, compared to the cost of social housing built with government programmes.



*Furnished path in a village on the island of Santo Antão.*

## **Democracy**

This LEADER-type programme has served as a catalyst to strengthen democracy in Cape Verde. In particular, the process has strengthened the participation of inhabitants in debates and decisions within the CDAs, which were initially limited to a small circle close to the leaders. It instigated a debate on the functioning of community groups with a view to improving their governance, management, internal democracy, partnership, etc.

Cape Verde now appears as a pilot example of complementarity between a well-established representative democracy and a participatory and collaborative democracy, legally recognised through the ACDs and CRPs, which ensure a link between citizens and decision-making bodies.

The danger, however, is that CRPs may become a control issue for political parties. This danger is all the more significant when the authorities remain under the control of a single party for a long time, as was the case during the 2000-2016 period. Shared ethical rules are undoubtedly necessary to preserve the independence of representative democracy and collaborative participatory democracy.

## **Future prospects**

The LEADER-type experience in Cape Verde opens up interesting prospects in terms of sustainable development and new forms of governance in the face of the challenges of the modern world: combating poverty, fixing populations, a more efficient use of resources, protection and transmission of common goods, etc. It also makes it possible to achieve other essential objectives such as solidarity, democracy and citizen participation.

However, the emergence of these new forms of governance remains fragile, as demonstrated by the Cape Verdean process, which over its 20-year history has been challenged on several occasions. Even today, strong doubts remain about its sustainability.

In this respect, we cannot help but draw a parallel with the LEADER programme in Europe, whose founding spirit and principles have been gradually eroded over time. What remains of the hopes raised in the 1990s and 2000s by LEADER and by these forms of decentralisation based on trust in local communities? The issue is important enough to be brought to the level of a public debate at international level.

**More information (FR):** <https://wikispiral.org/tiki-index.php?page=capeverde&redirectpage=Country:%20Cape%20Verde>

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