

## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATORY APPROACH IN THE REGION OF VALENCIA (SPAIN)

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**Abstract.** This paper addresses the exercising of local development in Spain, particularly in the Region of Valencia. At the end of 1980, a professional position was created to form part of the public administrations, who would be responsible for attracting economic resources, diversifying economic activities, taking advantage of the capacities and possibilities of the territories, and encouraging the creation of employment opportunities. These activities have been conducted from a holistic and integrated perspective, in which professional geographers participate from both an applied and training point of view. The objectives of this publication, based on a survey carried out in 2019 involving 114 professionals belonging to the Federation of Technical Personnel in Local Development Management of the Region of Valencia (ADLYPSE) and in-depth interviews, are to explore: a) the academic profiles; b) the type of actions carried out in the territory; and c) the importance of these actions, highlighting the close relationship between Geography and the management of territorial resources. Among the results, it is worth highlighting that, despite the importance of these experts in the promotion and management of the territory's resources, they have no professional recognition in many of the region's municipalities since they have been limited to managing subsidies and financial aid, and have an excess of bureaucratic tasks. Therefore, the professional profiles of technical staff in local development should be adapted to the real needs of the territories in which they work, since an industrial or tourist municipality will have different priorities to a rural municipality with a small population. The importance of training, in general, and geography training, in particular, is also underlined. Of the five university master's degrees that are currently active in Spain, having a clear link to local development, three are led by geographers.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Local development is a territorial strategy of a global nature in which multiple factors and approaches, situations, cultural and socio-economic contexts, the attitudes and aptitudes of technical professionals, politicians and citizens all play a part. The concept has been studied from a range of different approaches (Sanchís, 2006; Garofoli, 1999), among which the following are worth highlighting: the territorial approach (Allende, 1987; Di Meo, 1987; Mabileau, 1993; Vázquez, 1993; 2005; Zapata, 2001; 2009, Martínez-Puche *et al.*, 2000; Pérez and Carrillo, 2000; Martínez-Puche, 2001; Vachon, 2001); the socio-economic approach (Perrin, 1991; Valcárcel 1996; Villasante, 1998; Ybarra, 1998; Albuquerque, 2002; Ponce & Martínez-Puche, 2003; Sanchís, 2006; Noguera, 2016; García, 2007; Martínez-Puche *et al.*, 2008); the cultural and institutional approach (Vázquez, 1984; Sánchez, 2005; Precedo 2007); the administrative approach (Arrandis, 1996; Esparcia, 2009; Canales and Pérez, 2002) and the economic/entrepreneurial approach linked to the social economy and cooperativism (Costa, 1995; Caravaca, 1999, Chavez & Monzón, 2001; Sanchís & Cantarero, 2003; Becattini, 2004). This professional position considers the social, economic and technological evolution that forces professionals who work in the territories to adapt to these changes as well as the administrations in

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which they work (Di Meo, 1987; Scott & Storper, 2007; Saubens, 2008; Vázquez, 2010; Vazquez, 2011; Berger-Masson, 2013; Mazzucato, 2018; Galasoet *al.*, 2018).

It is essential to approach local development policies from an evolutionary perspective, and the territory as a system that interacts with all the factors and resources. It is also important to value the work undertaken by local development professionals in attracting economic resources (subsidies), which have a notable impact on the promotion of planned strategic initiatives; to promote community participation, networking and cooperation with other territories for developing socioeconomic synergies, taking into account that their work is carried out in a specific municipality. Moreover, notable nuances in the application of actions and basic concepts are required (Alburquerque, 2007):

- local development is not only municipal development. The local productive system, which includes, among others, the series of relations and productive and commercial connections that explain the productive efficiency and competitiveness of the economic base of a given territory, does not necessarily coincide with the administrative boundaries of a municipality or province.
- local development is not only endogenous development. Many local development initiatives are also based on taking advantage of opportunities for exogenous dynamism. What is important is to know how to “endogenise” these external opportunities within a locally determined development strategy.
- local development is a territorial and bottom-up approach, but it must also seek interventions from the other decision-making levels of the state (province, region and central government) so as to facilitate the fulfilment of the objectives of the local development strategy. An efficient coordination of the different territorial levels of public administrations and a coherent integrated context of the different development policies between these levels are therefore required. Top-down decisions are also important for the local development approach.
- local development is not limited to local economic development alone. It is an integrated approach in which social, environmental, cultural, institutional and human development aspects must be considered. Despite this, in the context of local development policy practices, the term “development” is still confused with “growth”. Thus, while “growth characterises only the increase of economic dimensions (production rates), development refers to processes that relate both to the diffusion of the effects of growth in society as a whole and to the acquisition of autonomous growth. Hence, it implies qualitative transformations and the alteration of social and economic structures” (Sagredo, 1984, p. 48).

To continue with the analysis of this concept and the elements it comprises, Dalla Rosa (1999, p. 37) argues that development is not a theory, but a practice in which “mistakes can be made, but it has the obligation to achieve results. Development is a political choice, a reinvention of the future. It is distinct from growth, although development without growth is not possible. These notions should not be confused: facilities and infrastructures are necessary, but they are only means, not ends”. With respect to this view, Carpio (2007, p. 12) raises various related questions, among which worth mentioning is that: “development is not reduced to the realisation of individual projects, it does not depend on an expert’s report. Public aid often goes to research offices, whereas local development, above all, needs to encourage and mobilise the actors”. Both authors emphasise the need to shape a new sensibility, different to the one that the world powers are creating as the dominators of mass media. It is also necessary to consider the meaning of the model of development we want. “It is a question of fostering a new sensibility. It is a question of a scheme of values and the key words are participation and commitment” (Dalla Rosa, 1999, p. 38).

In Spain, the first local development initiatives were marked by a bias towards economic and employment generation. In the mid-1990s, local development was related to a job-creation strategy, since this was “undoubtedly the problem of the Spanish economy at the end of the 1980s” (Vázquez 1993, p. 133). The change in development strategy in Spain coincided with the arrival of the first democratic governments and the decentralisation of the state (the creation of the Autonomous Regions), so that local development was implemented by the Autonomous Regions and the democratic City

Councils as an appropriate strategy to create employment and restructure local and regional economies. On the other hand, local development arose as a response to the crisis situations of the 1970s and 1980s, which brought about drastic changes (the globalisation of the economy, socio-cultural and technological transformations). The effects of the policy of productive restructuring promoted by the National Government and the adaptation prior to the country's accession to the European Community (high unemployment rate, control of inflation, public deficit and balance of payments) should also be added.

According to Vázquez (1993), a large part of the conceptualisation of local development policies applied from 1989 onwards is due to the will and commitment of small working groups operating in international organisations who understood the significance and scope of local initiatives to boost productive adjustment, halt the growing unemployment in many municipalities and, in short, better regulate the economy. According to the same author, territorial theories of development defend the strategic superiority of small businesses in development processes. These theories of authors such as Friedman and Weaver (1979), Sach (1980), Stöhr and Tödting (1979; 1981) are based on the idea that each territory is the result of a history in which the institutional, economic and organisational environment has been shaped, giving it its own identity and enabling it to provide strategic responses to the challenges of globalisation. This approach has been enriched in the current century with a participatory and proactive model. It has led to the incorporation in local development policies of elements such as social capital, territorial cohesion, the qualification of the workforce and the transferability of knowledge and good practices, among other tangible and intangible aspects related to governance and participatory strategies (Bellandi and Sforzi, 2003; Martínez-Puche & Sanchiz, 2016; Martin *et al.*, 2019; Di Meo, 1991; European Commission, 2005; Mazzucato, 2018, Galaso *et al.*, 2018). These issues have strengthened not only the financing of local employment initiatives, but also qualitative and evaluation parameters, which conceive local development not only as a project (having a beginning and an end), but also as a polynuclear and continuous, lasting process, in which synergies are established with the values of the territory (Table 1).

Table 1

Evolution of local development policies in Spain

	Traditional Model (Before 1980)	Flexible Model (Between 1980–2000)	Participatory and Proactive Model (Since 2001)
Dominant strategy	Polarised development Functional Vision	Diffuse development Territorial Vision	Polynuclear Development. Proactive Territory Governance and Territorial Cohesion
Aims	Quantitative growth Major projects	Innovation, quality, flexibility, entrepreneurship,	Quality, commitment, knowledge capital. Opposite to the mere acquisition, optimisation of resources (tangible and intangible).
Mechanisms	Redistribution. Mobility of capital and labour	Mobilisation of endogenous potential. Use of local and external resources	Social capital and Human Resources qualification. Transferability of knowledge Transferability of knowledge and experience (bank of good practices).
Organisation	Centralised management. Financing for companies. Public administration of resources	Local development management. Service provision. Intermediate organisations.	Process versus Project. Concertation, cooperation and concreteness. Public participation and sustainable planning.

Source: Adapted from Vázquez (1993), Alonso and Méndez (2000). Own Elaboration.

Thus, Stöhr and Taylor (1981) advocate for bottom-up development strategies that offer opportunities for improvement to individuals, social groups and local communities and allow them to mobilise their capacities and resources. In this way, they propose initiatives to affix the population in

the territory, promote local agriculture and generate employment opportunities. In short, alternative actions to those of the traditional model of industrial and macroeconomic development of large companies located in metropolises (Gutiérrez, 2003). Over the years and due to the greater complexity that has developed in societies, especially in rural areas, issues such as addressing depopulation, establishing the young population and women and economic diversification, in many cases, based on the interrelationships with the primary sector (Albadalejo *et al.*, 2007), have been acquiring greater weight (European Commission, 2005; Saubens, 2008).

In this sense, the work of geographers and their holistic perception of the resources of the territory, particularly in the rural environment, is important, as stated by Paul Claval (1998, p. 238). Thus, the trait that best defines “the specificity of the geographer is his infinitely renewed ability to devote to the world a lucid and astonished gaze: they must know how to recognise what is expressed by the play of physical, living or mental forces already known, and to grasp what is new and what raises questions. Geography is first and foremost a discipline that looks at the world and the society that inhabits it. To train a geographer is to question the origins of this complex capacity to transfer raw data to what is already known, and at the same time to discover in it the unusual, the unseen. To learn to be a geographer is, therefore, to become unaccustomed, to place oneself in an unusual perspective and to question the evidence of the senses” (Fig. 1).

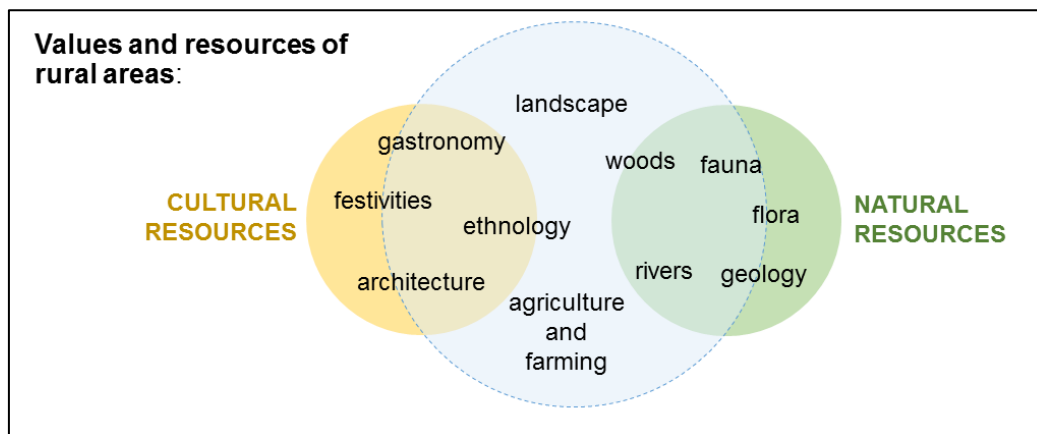


Fig. 1 – Integrated and territorial approach. Own elaboration.

Local Development Agents (LDAs), also known in the regulatory framework as Employment and Local Development Agents (ELDAs), play a fundamental role since they are responsible for implementing local development initiatives. However, there is little research that focuses on them (Lansu *et al.*, 2013) compared to the abundant bibliography on the conceptualisation of the idea of local development or development policies, especially rural development policies. Therefore, it is important to determine which are the elements associated with this figure, since it can condition how these policies are executed. Therefore, the research questions raised in this study are:

- Q1. Are local development professionals a key element for the management of the territory's resources?
- Q2. Are differentiated profiles needed, beyond training requisites, in which the integrated and geographical vision of the territories helps these professionals make strategic and effective decisions in their workspaces?
- Q3. Territories respond to differentiated needs in relation to their problems, resources and locations (rural, tourist, industrial). Therefore, should local development professionals act from a more strategic perspective and tailor their actions to the real needs of their territories? Is this possible in the current regulatory and public policy framework?

Within this context, the main objectives are:

- to analyse in depth academic profiles, the nature of the actions carried out in the territory and the importance of these actions, highlighting the close relationship between Geography and the management of territorial resources, although the local development professional is transversal.
- to establish the importance of a holistic and strategic vision of the actions derived from local development professionals
- to analyse the importance of training and education that professionals undertake from an integrated perspective
- to assess the strategic role of these professionals in the territory, with the need to establish networks within the city councils (with other professionals) and outside them (with other territories), to share and learn from experience.
- To empower these professionals, who are subject to intense bureaucratic work that limits the creativity and diversification of their actions beyond the management of subsidies.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the proposed objectives, various methodologies have been used. First, a review has been made of the bibliography and regulatory framework on aspects related to local development agents in recent decades, and more specifically in the Region of Valencia (Fig. 2). The aim is to establish the “state of the art” with regard to the evolution of local development agents, their functions and their professional profiles.



Fig. 2 – Location of area of study.

Second, data have been collected with the help of a survey. This action seeks to enrich the fieldwork and update the data available in the bibliography and in other recent works. The survey (a semi-structured questionnaire) was distributed among all the associates of the Federation of Technical Personnel in Local Development Management of the Region of Valencia (ADLYPSE-Comunidad Valenciana) between November and December 2019. It should be noted that the whole procedure was carried out preserving the anonymity of the participants. The questionnaire has a total of 44 items and is structured into four sections:

- Section 1: Area of work, who undertakes it, the degree of satisfaction with their professional performance and recognition as a professional.
- Section 2: Responsibilities and coordination of projects and measures, objectives of the entity, scales of work.
- Section 3: How we “see ourselves” and are seen as local development professionals, the degree of usefulness of local development professionals and the degree of resources managed.
- Section 4: Roles, profiles, training, age, gender, type of contract, education, qualifications.

The semi-structured questionnaire includes both open and closed-answer questions. The latter, unlike dichotomous yes/no questions, allow us to measure attitudes and determine the level of agreement of the respondent with the statements proposed. For many of the responses we used the Likert scale. This is a measurement tool that it is particularly useful in situations where we want the person to qualify their opinion. In this sense, the response categories have helped us capture a greater diversity in the respondents’ answers and the intensity of their opinion towards the statement.

We received responses from a total of 114 professionals, both associated (67.9%) and not associated (32.1%) with ADLYPSE-Comunidad Valenciana (Fig. 3). Of the responses received, 56.3% (n= 63) were from the province of Alicante, 27.7% from Valencia (n= 31) and 17.9% (n=20) from Castellón (Fig. 4). From a total sample of 600 working professionals, according to ADLYPSE-Comunidad Valenciana, we obtained 114 responses. This means that there is a confidence level of 90%, with a margin of error of 7%. Of these, 264 received subsidies from Public Employment and Training Service of the Region of Valencia (LABORA), 150 were consolidated professionals and the rest (190) were employed in other occupations related to associations, local action groups (LAGs), and those associated with the promotion of entrepreneurship and collaborative work (private entities).

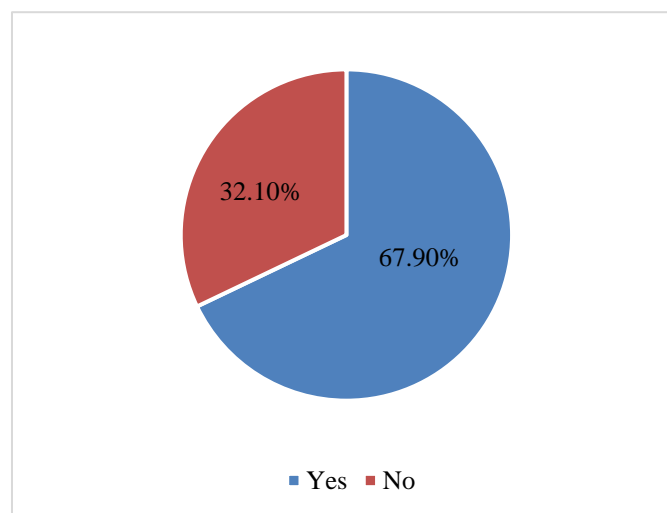


Fig. 3 – Are you a professional associated to ADLYPSE-Comunidad Valenciana?  
 Source: Professional profiles survey (2019); Martínez-Puche, 2021. Own elaboration.

However, the survey focused on the members of ADLYPSE-Comunidad Valenciana. It is worth highlighting the difficulty in obtaining directories of DLAs or ELDAs, apart from professional groups, as there is no joint census given the existence of different profiles, the diversity of functions and the fact that this figure was introduced into many town councils, entities and organisations as European Business and Innovation Centre (CEEIs) and former LEADER offices and Local Action Groups (LAGs), Territorial Employment Pacts, Consortia and Associations of Municipalities) only very recently.

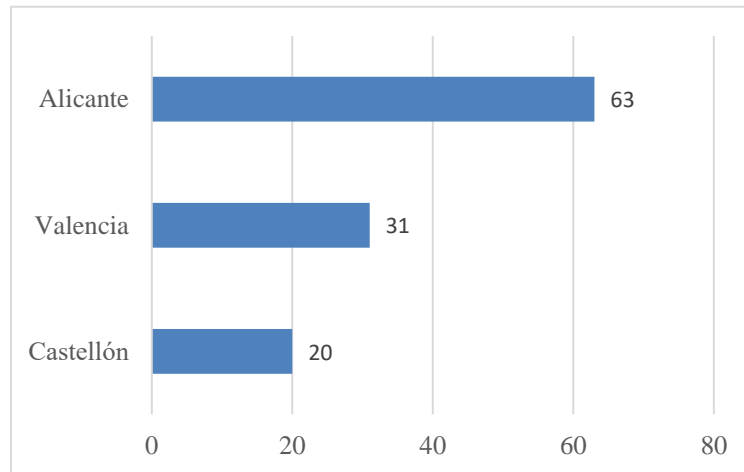


Fig. 4 – Participation of local development agents in the Region of Valencia by province.  
*Source:* Professional profiles survey (2019); Martínez-Puche, 2021. Own elaboration.

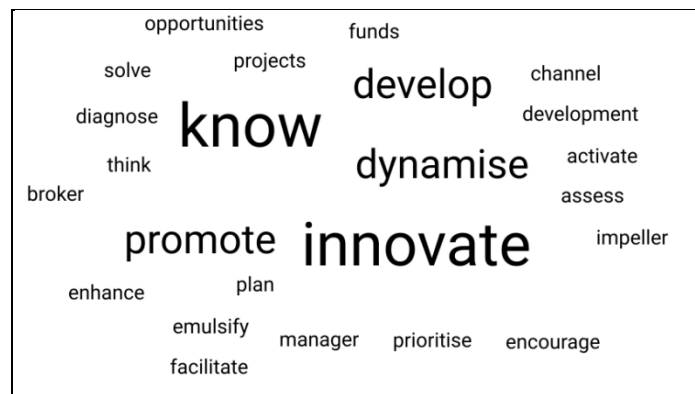


Fig. 5 – Highlights of the main attributes of local development professional practice.  
*Source:* Focus group. Own elaboration.

Thirdly, in June 2022, during the training course held at the University Business Foundation (FUNDEUN) with local development professionals, we took the opportunity to carry out a group dynamic on 65 participants from the town councils of the province of Alicante. They were asked three questions, which they had to answer very briefly in order to establish a final word cloud with the most repeated terms. The first part consisted in matching their main attribute with a verb. The second question asked them to identify the main function in their professional practice. And, among the numerous actions and programmes they manage, they were asked to highlight the main action. The results can be seen in Figures 5 and 6.

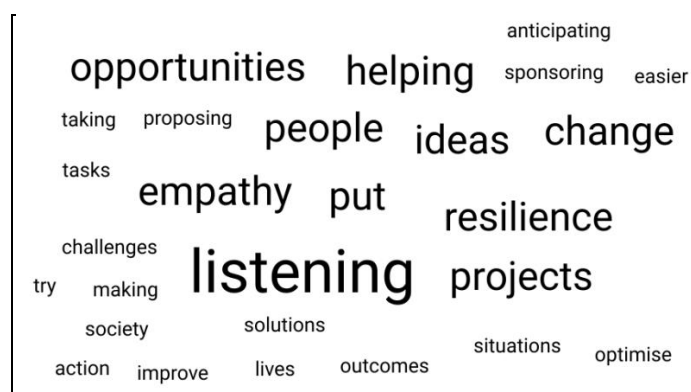


Fig. 6 – Highlights of the main actions of the local development professional practice.  
*Source:* Focus Group. Own elaboration.

### 3. RESULTS

For more than three decades, local development managers have been attempting to generate and attract to the municipality as many economic resources as possible, as well as to manage social and environmental resources. The partial subsidisation for the hiring of technical personnel in local development management have never limited the actions on a social, environmental or cultural level or any other type, as long as they are focused on local development.

Before analysing the responses obtained in the four sections into which the survey was structured, it is necessary to analyse the regulatory framework of the figures of LDAs and ELDAs. The Orders of July 15, 1999 (National government) and the Order of November 29, 2000 (Regional government) establish the bases for the granting of public subsidies for the promotion of local development and the promotion of projects and companies classified as I+E. Article 8 specifies the functions that ELDAs carry out. The profile and functions are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Profile and functions, according to regulations of ELDAs

PROFILE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technician with knowledge of the socio-economic reality of the municipality.</li> <li>• Analytical and relational skills.</li> </ul>
FUNCTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialogue between the business community in the area and the public administration at all levels of representation. Public administration at any level of representation.</li> <li>• Identifying idle or underused resources, of business projects for local economic promotion and innovative initiatives for the generation of employment in the local area, identifying new activities and entrepreneurial possibilities.</li> <li>• Dissemination and encouragement of potential opportunities for creating activity among unemployed people, promoters, entrepreneurs and collaborating institutions.</li> <li>• Technical support in the initiation of business projects for their consolidation into companies that generate new jobs, advising and informing on the technical, economic and financial viability, and, in general, on business launch plans.</li> <li>• Support for business promoters, once the companies have been set up, providing technical support during the first stages of operation, through the application of business management consultancy techniques and assistance in the appropriate training processes to contribute to the smooth running of the companies created.</li> </ul>

*Source:* Order of July 15, 1999; Order of December 29, 2000. Own elaboration.



An analysis of these regulations clearly reveals that their functions are: to establish strategic plans, carry out diagnoses and comprehensive proposals to seek new opportunities from a socioeconomic point of view. Their role also includes finding ways to qualify and place entrepreneurs and the unemployed. Without a doubt, these activities and functions give local development a greater dimension than that perceived by supralocal administrations and citizens. And they are not entirely incompatible with the complementary actions of tourism, youth, career guidance or environmental agents.

For this reason, there are authors who point out that some town councils have not established defined functions for this role, apart from the public calls for applications made by LABORA. This limits the real capacity for intervention in the labour market, and a real process of social change is not generated, as their actions are limited to the management of programmes and public calls for employment (Calvo and Lerma, 2008a). In addition, an excessive dependence on subsidies has hindered the work to be carried out by local development agencies. In this sense, some things have not changed much in the last three decades as reflected by the responses of the participants in the focus group. Thus, the employment programmes applied only have a temporary nature, which prevents adequate planning or a foresighted management of the needs of the activity. This means a high turnover of technicians (understood in the broadest sense of the term) who have a short-term vision for their activity and who are maintained with extended subsidies. This aspect prevents the full implementation of actions in the field of motivation, which is left to the presumed professionalism of the human resources hired (Calvo, 2008). According to the respondents of the survey, there is still a high percentage of single-person agencies (66.2%), with a significant increase in the number of agencies with at least two professionals (16.9%) (Fig. 7).

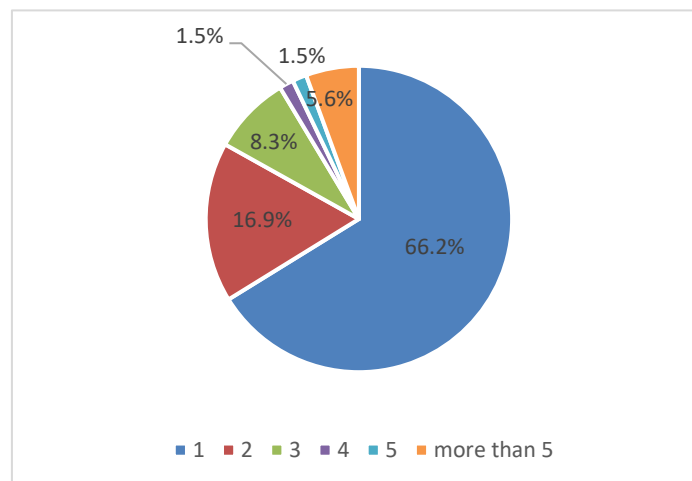


Fig. 7 – How many members are there in your Local Development Agency (2019)?  
 Source: Professional profiles survey (2019); Martínez-Puche, 2021. Own elaboration.

Local Development Agencies expanded and matured during the 2001–2010 period, and consequently the number of LDAs increased both in Spain as a whole, but also in the Region of Valencia (Table 3). The year 1999 marked a turning point in the regulation of the ELDAs: the order of July 15 brought about the definitive consolidation of this professional figure. In turn, between 1999 and 2003, there was a progressive transfer of the management and control of active employment policies to the different autonomous regions (Calvo and Martínez-Puche, 2012), with all of them assuming these competences and creating their respective autonomous employment services, which, in the case of the Region of Valencia, was the Valencian Employment and Training Service (SERVEF), created in 2001 and currently called LABORA.

Table 3

Establishment date of Local Development Agency (2019)

Establishment date	Local Development Agency (%)
Before 1990	9.9
Between 1991 and 2000	26.8
Between 2001 and 2010	57.7
After 2010	5.6

Source: Professional profiles survey (2019). Own elaboration.

In relation to the administrative entity on which they depend, 68.2% of the agencies belong to a municipal department (council), with consortiums and associations of service providers also being prominent. It is also striking that a high percentage of the LDAs surveyed (59.2%) did not come to be in the municipality in which they practiced, or even in municipalities of the Region of Valencia (Figure 8). This would raise another working hypothesis to be explored in other studies regarding the relationship between professional performance, the link between these professionals and the territory in which they work and their greater or lesser degree of commitment and efficiency. Is it better to be a native of the municipality in which this work is carried out due to the greater knowledge of the place and its people? Or, on the contrary, is it preferable, in jobs of this nature, to not be a local person in order to be able to carry out the functions with a greater degree of independence and objectivity?

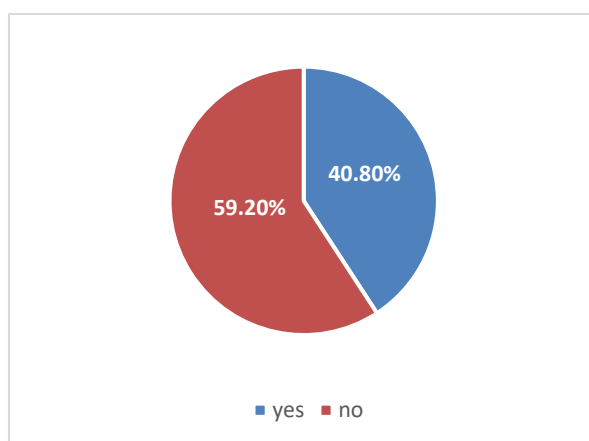


Fig. 8 – Do you work as an ELDA in your home municipality?

Source: Professional profiles survey (2019); Martínez-Puche, 2021. Own elaboration.

In relation to the scope of action, there is a more or less an equal distribution of territories in which local development agencies are found, regardless of their degree of productive specialisation. However, the greater weight of industrial and service-related municipalities is notable, which also employ a greater number of professionals in their local development agencies (Table 4).

Table 4

What is the productive specialisation of your area of influence?

Productive specialisation	Local Development Agency (%)
Mainly industrial	31.0
Mainly touristic	12.7
Mainly agricultural	19.7
Mainly services	36.6

Source: Professional profiles survey (2019); Martínez-Puche, 2021. Own elaboration.

Another issue that stands out is the type of contract available for local development professionals: civil servants (16.7%) and permanent employment contracts (24.5%) are the most representative profiles. Over the last decade, LDAs were conceived as qualified professionals who carried out multidisciplinary functions in structures that were usually (almost 70%) of a single-person nature, who in most cases have not consolidated their jobs (68%). Their professional qualification, however, is not an obstacle to identifying certain training deficiencies and a lack of specialisation caused fundamentally by the complexity and diversity of the tasks they carry out, the single-person nature of the services and the scarce supply of training (González, 2008). In relation to this issue, Martínez-Puche (2021) analyses the Report on the employment situation of technical personnel in the management of local development in the Region of Valencia, commissioned by the ADLYPSE-Federation-Valencian and elaborated by Mellado & Fabregat in 2019.

On December 29, 2000, the Regional Government published the Order establishing the regulatory bases and the general procedure for the granting of subsidies under the public employment programme of social interest and promotion of local development. With this Order, the Regional Government sought to unify and homogenise the variety of public employment postings that had been managed until then. This same regulation states that “employment and local development agents are configured as employees of local corporations or dependent entities whose main mission is to collaborate in the promotion and implementation of active employment policies related to the creation of business activity, this collaboration being carried out within the framework of joint action agreed between the contracting entity and the Regional Ministry of Economy, Finance and Employment” (Pérez, 2001, p. 24). Likewise, it established the maximum amounts of the subsidy and the percentage to be paid by LABORA (up to 80%, up to a maximum of 27,045 euros per year, renewable for annual periods with a maximum of four years).

It was assumed that in the fifth year, the promoting entity should be able to bear the costs derived from the personnel and the consolidation of that job. But often, due to a lack of economic resources or knowledge, political changes or a lack of commitment, this technical position is not consolidated. This means that local development actions have no continuity, especially if we consider that they are medium and long-term projects that in many cases exceed the legislative period of four years. This has produced a paradox, because although it has allowed the creation of a corps of active local development technicians working in the territory, on the other hand, it has prevented the permanence of professionals in the specific territories, who, after four years of performing this role, had acquired a significant knowledge of the problems of the area. Therefore, this accumulated background and the “know-how” appropriate to the territories in which they have intervened is lost. Furthermore, it has led the local entities to “relax” in terms of the decision to create positions in the Municipal Local Development Services, thus ignoring the latent need to create stable, efficient and quality services (Sanchís and Campos, 2005). This is why the four-year extension, articulated by the modification of the Ministerial Order of 1999, published on February 15, 2008, was welcomed.

Although LABORA co-finances the hiring and deployment of technical staff in local development management in the Region of Valencia, it is significant that it makes up only around 25% of the total wages paid to all professionals in said area. The remaining 75% is paid by the local authorities. Therefore, contrary to what is sometimes claimed by certain quarters, the dependence of professionals on this subsidy is limited and it is the local councils who are responsible to a greater extent for financing the hiring of technical staff in local development management.

The Order of the Regional Government of December 4, 2001 includes two novelties to be highlighted in this regard: the creation of a labour exchange and training courses for local development technicians. In fact, from this point on, the selection of ELDA's would be carried out by people who formed part of the labour exchanges articulated according to the rules of constitution and operation dictated by the Regional Government. The personnel aspiring to form part of the job pool had to have a

university diploma or degree, professional experience, while extra-academic knowledge acquired in local development would also be valued. These criteria are still applied at present.

In this sense, it is necessary to understand the difficulty in defining the profile of a Local Development Technician, and this is due to various factors. First, as the reality of each territory in itself is a differential factor and, at the same time, fundamental to promoting endogenous development, the human and professional characteristics of the agent must be in consonance with, and intimately related to, this different and differentiating historical and cultural reality. Second, because attitudes such as intuitive capacity, perception, common sense, the ability to observe, integrated vision, sensitivity, seductive capacity, creativity and commitment do not pertain to any academic field or qualifications, but form part of a nebulous field that is difficult to define. Third, because LDAs or ELDAs need broad training that allows them to work competently in regional and human geographical analysis, economics, sociology, psychology, history, applied ecology, agronomy, tourism, public programme management or business management, to name but a few of the fields of knowledge that directly affect local development (Izquierdo, 2005). Another aspect that has been identified through the surveys is that LDAs become mere hunters of subsidies, which in some way endorses or justifies their job and usually does not take into account the real needs (economic or social) of their territory. Similar statements were made in the study conducted by Calvo (2010).

The analysis of the answer related to their training reveals the diversity of their degrees, but also the diverse weight of this university training. Among the most consolidated, worth mentioning are graduates in Economics, Sociology, Geography or Law, among others (Table 5). In this last category it is worth mentioning graduates in Tourism who have been entering the labour market in recent years and who have been considered as suitably qualified by LABORA in the 2018 call for ELDA vacancies. Not surprisingly, in some Valencian public universities, local development courses are being offered. The following optional subjects stand out: “Local Sustainable Development” (33813) part of the degree in Geography and Environment at the University of Valencia; “Local Development and Sustainability” (33054) part of the degree in Geography and Territorial Planning at the University of Alicante; “Tourism and Territorial Practices in Local Development” (23752) part of the Degree in Tourism at the University of Alicante; and “Government and Management for Local Development” (34975) part of the Degree in Political Science and Public Administration, University of Valencia.

Table 5

Qualifications of practising Local Development professionals. Region of Valencia, 2019

Degree	%
Economics (ADE)	17.6
Sociology	16.7
Geography	12.7
Law	12.7
Labour Relations/Social Studies	8.8
Business Studies	7.8
Higher Technical Engineers	6.9
Social Work	6.9
Labour Sciences	5.9
Tourism	2.9
Agricultural Engineers	1.0
Psychologists	1.0

Source: Professional profiles survey (2019); Martínez-Puche, 2021. Own elaboration.

Another result is that just over 50% of Local Development professionals see themselves as under-utilised and, above all, as undervalued (86.6%). This undervaluation is due to the lack of social

recognition compared to other professions. Thus, on the Likert scale, values 3 and 4 obtained 23 votes respectively and value 5 obtained 26 answers. Moreover, this is exacerbated by wage discrimination, the most voted values being 4 (20 answers) and 5 (36 answers). A further important problem is the consolidation of the position, the most voted value being 5 (50 answers). Another of the factors highlighted by the interviewees is the lack of decision-making capacity and influence, although this is not relevant for the professionals surveyed. They consider the grievances established with other public administration technicians to be more important and above all, the lack of material and human resources for performing their professional tasks.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

“An Employment and Development Agent (DLA or LEDA) is the person selected by the Administration to promote the local development of a specific target area, an undertaking that has to be achieved by involving all the social, political and economic agents converging in this area and acting as an intermediary agent between all of them” (Nofuentes, 1997, pp. 50–51). The definitions relating to these figures, as shown by the bibliographical review carried out, insist that these are the agents who, “after having carried out the relevant studies, will place before the eyes of society the weaknesses, threats, strengths and opportunities that affect this area; thus, all the social agents involved will agree on the need to act in a certain direction in order to remedy the initial situation (Calvo and Lerma, 2008b; González, 2008; Saubens, 2008). Some authors even emphasise that they undertake a role of mediation, promotion and coordination of the development (Sanchís and Cantarero 2003) process since they must listen to and support all opinions, “they must learn to be sensitive to the different existing problems, they must have a great capacity for negotiation and use all their intelligence to channel the development process in an adequate way” (Nofuentes, 1997, pp. 50–51). However, it should be noted that three decades later this has not been the case, as shown by the results obtained in this research and highlighted by Martínez-Puche (2021) when analysing the profile of the LDAs.

Another issue under analysis has been the relationship of the Local Development Agencies of the Region of Valencia with other agents of the territory, particularly the CEEIs, the Valencian public universities, the Provincial Councils, the Chambers of Commerce, the business associations of the territory and structures of social economy. According to the results of the surveys, the groups with which local development professionals work the most are the unemployed and the long-term unemployed, which highlights the fact that most technicians manage grants and subsidies derived from active employment policies, which “limit and stress” our target group. These themes coincide with those examined in the study by Calvo and Lerma (2008b), Vázquez (2010) and Galiana (2012). Other groups would also be included within the context of employment policies and programmes, such as young people, vulnerable groups, the over 45s and women (European Commission, 2005; Vázquez, 2011). In relation to the entities and their assessment, the first entities are the local administrations and entities of the Generalitat Valenciana (LABORA), followed by business associations and groups, and, on a second level, the Valencian universities. In this last case, mention must be made of the implementation of the AVALEM TERRITORI project, dependent on LABORA, on which the Universities Jaume I of Castellón, the University of Valencia and the University of Alicante (Spain), have been working since 2017 (Hermosilla *et al.*, 2017; Martínez-Puche & Lopéz, 2018).

On the other hand, there is also a need to look more closely at the reality of local administrations and other supra-local development structures, as these have undergone significant legislative changes, such as the law on budgetary stability or the so-called “law on contracts”, which have restricted their capacity to act and react. It is very difficult to establish a single profile of technical personnel in the management of Local Development in the Region of Valencia (FUNDEUN, 2006). The public

administration must also perceive the local development professional as a key player and catalyst of municipal and supra-local processes in many areas. But all of this must also be demonstrated through the measurement and quantification of the resources that their actions generate and the synergies that they trigger in the territory (González, 2016; Mazzucato, 2018; Galaso *et al.*, 2018).

Currently, with some exceptions where there are multidisciplinary teams, the technical staff of Local Development managers performs tasks that are highly focused on employment, training and subsidy management (Esparcia, 2009). On the other hand, they require training in public administration, knowledge of economics, web management and other subjects related to the territory (knowledge of local, tourist and cultural resources), which they encounter in the daily practice of their profession. FOREM (2000) addresses the training needs of local development agents, as proof of the wide variety of university profiles (degrees) that access these jobs according to this research. However, what is really desirable, and what the idea of economic promotion and local development is based on, is for professionals to be able to carry out multiple tasks beyond the management of employment programmes and subsidies (which, according to the responses, seems to be the main focus of their work, about which some have complaints). Therefore, after establishing what is desirable, as well as what the reality is, we must move towards what is possible and necessary, which, in our opinion, would focus on four pillars:

- the provision of multidisciplinary teams made up of at least two people (in the case of very small municipalities);
- the training of all members in transversal matters of local development (short-cycle and ad hoc training);
- the specialisation of workplaces according to area (employment, training, subsidies, economic promotion, etc.), taking into account the professional profile of each member of the team (employment, training, subsidies, economic promotion, etc.);
- the necessary provision of coordination bodies with other departments of the city council, such as Urban Planning, Equality, Tourism, Youth, etc. But also, with other supra-local bodies and resource management structures, which we have seen LABORA subsidise.

The results of this research also show that it would be necessary to study the possibility of proposing new legal figures for local development agencies, such as foundations, trusts, public companies or autonomous bodies, with the aim of streamlining the work of the agency and providing a better service to citizens and also to address the staffing restrictions from which the local administration currently suffers (González and Pérez, 2012; Clark *et al.*, 2018). The attitude of the technical staff in the management of local development should be highlighted and they should be committed to working with the community and for the community from both private entities (generating services and providing work where the administration cannot reach due to limited resources) and public bodies (city councils, associations of municipalities, territorial pacts and other local development structures).

Local Employment and Development Agents have frequently been absorbed by the “employment” competence that prevails in the professional practice of these technicians. As stated by Esparcia (2009), the DLAs are sometimes viewed by local corporations from a reductionist perspective, limited to applying policies emanating from higher authorities, and even to attracting subsidies. Their training and skills are often ignored and their potential under-utilised with a lack of definition of professional profiles and competencies linked only to economics and law. This is still the case according to the results of the surveys. In this sense, perhaps this situation prevailing in the practice of local development is the same as that which has existed in economic geography for a long time, which became soaked in economicism and lost sight of its mission: the explanation of what makes places different in terms of the characteristics and development conditions of the settled population, and how places with development problems could and should evolve towards progress actions, valuing their potentialities either directly or with external help (Sforzi, 1999). Therefore, we would not be mistaken saying that technical personnel in the management of local development are all professionals who work with a local-territorial perspective and approach in a specific institutional framework in which public administrations and local development

agencies play a key role in the socio-economic promotion of their respective territories, combining finalist policies (employment, social welfare, identity, entrepreneurial culture), sectorial policies (rural development, commerce, industry, tourism) and instrumental policies (continuous training and qualification of human resources, citizen participation and compliance with regulations). All of this is conducted with a notable sense of strategy, territorial planning and medium and long-term actions (process) (Rodríguez, 2009). We can observe that local development, not only from a conceptual but also from an applied point of view, incorporates highly heterogeneous criteria, formats, professionals, profiles and administrative and territorial contexts. The existence of professional associations at the regional level that share the same needs and demands, contrasts with the absence of agreed criteria, homogeneous regulations and administrative recognition in the field of local development professional practice.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

We have analysed the reality of the professional practice of local development technicians in the Region of Valencia. This research is an exploratory study with a quantitative perspective, bound by the census of ADLYPSE-Comunidad Valenciana, linked to professionals from local development agencies and open to all technical personnel in local development management in the Region of Valencia.

The general conclusion is that, in spite of the territorial constraints and the attitude and aptitude of the Local Development Agent (LDAs), there are notable problems which are the same for all, and which arise independently of the scale of action. On the other hand, not everyone is qualified to be a local development agent, because apart from other considerations, it is a vocational job that demands a lot from oneself. Some general conclusions are: there is still no professional recognition of this technical figure; there is no job stability to reinforce their position in the municipal hierarchy; their actions are still limited to the field of subsidies and administrative management; there is still a tendency to be a professional for everything in the municipal hierarchy; there is a tendency to be a “jack-of-all-trades”, which is reinforced by the perception that many politicians and colleagues in the public administration have of LEDAs; there is a lack of training, above all in matters related to the promotion of social skills; the regulations governing local development functions, from the outset, characterise a technician who has many fields of action, but little capacity for action. Undoubtedly, the need for associative corporativism is important in order to be able to fight for the rights and profiles of these professionals in an organised way. The dispersion of academic and professional profiles, together with the lack of definition of professionals working in local development in public or private organisations and entities, does not help to establish a clear definition and specification of what an AEDL really is. There has undoubtedly been an evolution of tasks that have moved towards the specialisation and bureaucratization of local development professionals. And the capacity and creativity in the development of programs and initiatives has been lost, especially in large cities.

We have encountered some limitations due to the degree of response from the professionals surveyed, the lack of definition of tasks and functions, as well as the different contexts (rural-urban, large cities and smaller population centres). In this sense, the article is biased in relation to those who have participated, but it is useful for making a first characterisation of the current functions, actions and perceptions of what a local development professional does in the Region of Valencia and, particularly, in the province of Alicante. Undoubtedly, the professional practice of Local Development is transversal and multidisciplinary, although there are disciplines that are better adapted to the competences to be carried out in the management of Local Development, which are sometimes not taken into account in public calls for applications, as is the case with geography. In this sense, the Professional Association of Geographers continues working to reverse this situation.

In addition, from this article we can also extract the need, after collecting information, to carry out qualitative research, which would explore in greater depth the realities and needs of technical staff in the management of local development. This would require a singularity through casuistry, differentiated

contexts and sizes of entities enabling the establishment of a classification of categories, which could then be useful to the local administration. There are public employment offers and aid for local development projects, but do they really meet the needs of the “subsidised” territories? Advancing the knowledge of these issues would be one of the lines of research to be developed in the future.

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