



European Network for  
Rural Development

# EU RURAL REVIEW

## No 29



# LEADER ACHIEVEMENTS



## European Network for Rural Development

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) is the hub that connects rural development stakeholders throughout the European Union (EU). The ENRD contributes to the effective implementation of Member States' Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) by generating and sharing knowledge, as well as through facilitating information exchange and cooperation across rural Europe.

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# Introduction

## THE SEVEN LEADER PRINCIPLES IN A CHANGING WORLD

LEADER is one of the longest standing, most successful and popular European-wide initiatives. Originally the only one where local communities played a central role in both designing strategies for the development of their areas and selecting projects to be implemented, it is now applied more widely, beyond rural areas.

The LEADER method was born some thirty years ago in the form of 217 pioneering Local Action Groups (LAGs). Now, it is implemented by an impressive network of almost 2800 LAGs, each of which can count on hundreds of active citizens, covering 61 % of the rural population in the EU. As Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), the LEADER method has been adopted by three other EU Funds (the Regional, Social and Maritime funds) and adapted to cover cities, coastal areas and key social issues. Outside the European Union, local people stretching from the Western Balkans, Turkey, Georgia, Africa, Latin America and China have been testing the LEADER method.

Few other EU-wide actions are able to achieve the extent of policy reach and voluntary participation from communities as LEADER does. The method's continuing applicability and adaptability reflect a huge potential for involving precisely those people who often feel most left out of global and European trends.

There are many reasons for the success and resilience of LEADER over time. One of the most important is that it is much more than a random collection of inspiring local projects. The LEADER approach is dependent on the integrated implementation of its 'seven principles', delivering real results for and by local people. This defines LEADER as an active methodology and not simply a funding programme.

When the seven principles are well applied, the LEADER method can achieve its full potential. Indeed, one of the main recommendations from the 2018 ENRD seminar on LEADER was to, "Distinguish LEADER rules from the mainstream – design an enabling delivery system for the LEADER method."<sup>(1)</sup>

This EU Rural Review explores how the LEADER principles are interpreted today by people who have been deeply involved with implementing LEADER in rural communities across Europe.

The authors' views provide insights about how the principles work in practice, how they deliver results and ensure sustained performance over time. Importantly, the following seven articles show how the principles are adaptable to deal with the emerging challenges and opportunities facing rural areas deriving, amongst others, from climate change and other environmental challenges, migration, and shifting boundaries and interrelationships between rural and urban local areas.

The first three articles (pages 4-18) deal with the **bottom-up approach**, the **local area-based approach** and the **partnership approach**. Readers may be struck with the passion and enthusiasm with which these three principles are described. They are referred to as 'precious' principles that inspire the 'imagination' and joint action of rural

(1) Recommendations from ENRD Seminar Rust, Austria 15-17 October 2018, [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-seminar-leader-acting-locally-changing-world\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-seminar-leader-acting-locally-changing-world_en)



communities. They have taken root because they empower local people and recognise them as the ‘best experts for the development of their own locality’, the local communities or areas they identify with. The principles provide guidance about ‘how’ to proceed rather than defining precisely ‘what has to be done’. Local communities can dare to be different, there is no guarantee of success, but there is the opportunity to achieve fundamental change. LAGs can act as local think tanks, constantly evolving and renewing their partnerships, the links with other territories and the methods for involving local people.

The article on the **integrated approach** (page 19) shows how LEADER can concentrate on certain target groups like young people or migrants and build linkages both within and between value chains and between other funds and programmes. LEADER acts as a catalyst to create the conditions for larger scale investments, including from other sources, if needed, as well as for responding to smaller scale community initiatives which deal with specific local challenges – as in Smart Villages.

**Networking** (page 24) allows ideas successfully tested in one place to ‘snowball’ firstly through networks of local actors in the same community, then to other rural areas, then nationally and finally across Europe and even beyond. At its core though, networking remains first and foremost a matter of human connections.

**Innovation** (page 29) is LEADER’s ‘trademark’. In the context of LEADER it means thinking creatively ‘out of the box’ to find practical solutions to day to day challenges. Change, and making a real difference, does not have to be rocket science: innovation under LEADER can also be evolutionary and/or incremental.

Finally, the **LEADER principle of cooperation** (page 35) is ‘a breath of fresh air’. Partners cooperate and link with one another in the LAG’s area, between LAG areas and across borders. Working together by including local people at these different levels brings new perspectives, bridging between local concerns and wider international issues and trends such as climate change or the growing interest in remote co-working, ‘slow’ and sustainable tourism and food and the need to tap into the potential of young people.

### The ENRD Contact Point

#### USEFUL ENRD LEADER RESOURCES

The **LEADER Toolkit** is addressed to all actors implementing the LEADER approach or CLLD in other EU Funds. It is both a guide book for a beginner and a reference source and check list for those who are more advanced.

[https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-toolkit\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-toolkit_en)

The **LEADER Cooperation webpage** provides useful guidance, detailed information on eligibility and other rules related to transnational cooperation and tools for transnational cooperation projects.

[https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-cooperation\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-cooperation_en)

The **ENRD LAG database** allows Local Action Groups (LAGs) to get in touch, network and cooperate with each other.

[https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/lag-database\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/lag-database_en)



# 1. The bottom-up approach

© LAG Tygiel Doliny Bugu

The spirit of LEADER is that locals are the best experts for the development of their own locality. They share an area-based identity and sense of belonging and this gives them the drive to pull together and contribute to their community. This connection forms the strongest foundation for a bottom-up approach. LEADER is about being ‘done by’ communities, not ‘done to’ them.

THE POWER OF LOCAL

MEET AND MIX

THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE PROCESSES

BUILDING THE FUTURE BOTTOM-UP

## BY JULIËTTE HUIS IN ‘T VELD – VAN DE RIET

Juliëtte is an independent advisor and ‘connector’ in rural development. She has been working with LEADER for over ten years, first as a LAG member and since 2015 as the manager of the LEADER LAG Noordoost Twente in the Netherlands. Juliëtte is specialised in the participation and empowerment of local communities. She strongly believes in the power of local people to develop their own territory.

## INTRODUCTION

Local development is about connections. A project evolves from a point of energy; from individuals with ideas and the enthusiasm to share them with others. You need people. You will find them all around you – gathering at the (sports) association, in the clubhouse, or at the community centre, working the land, or walking through town. The future of local development lies in the hands of the community. They – you – can do it together. These hands are exponentially stronger when joined as a network. Your initiative can support others and you are

then empowered to develop your own community. You are led by passion for what is yours and unique.

This is the essence of the bottom-up approach in LEADER: you develop an area through local knowledge and effort. You do this together with the community, to not only strengthen and energise your direct surroundings, but also to contribute to a stable and close-knit living environment.

What does LEADER's bottom-up approach actually entail and why is it so special?

## THE POWER OF LOCAL

The spirit of LEADER is that locals are the best experts for the development of their own area. They share a common place-based identity and sense of belonging.

The local territory is where their hearts lie, whether their forefathers worked the land or as relative newcomers. Many have seen the landscape or village change over the years and they understand the unique needs of their community. This place-based identity generates connections that a top-down process could hardly achieve. It also provides a common objective: working together to improve the area. Thus, the place-based identity is the strongest foundation for a bottom-up approach.

Let us assume that we empower these people and assist them in the development of their territory. We will then be working from the bottom up and we will be tapping into the full potential of the local area. To facilitate this, it is important to establish conditions defined together with the inhabitants, not through simple participation but by informing and consulting with them. The bottom-up approach is about collective development and decision-making.

Alongside the residents, it is also important to involve local stakeholders such as businesses, educational



© LAG Höga Kusten

### LAG HÖGA KUSTEN (SWEDEN)

'Landsbyggare' is a project of the Swedish LAG Höga Kusten that aims to create a positive view of entrepreneurship in the High Coast of Sweden and to challenge the existing negative perceptions of living and working in the countryside. According to the project leader, Eva Jilkén, "Through 'Landsbyggare' people can be part of an active physical and digital community with other enterprises in the countryside."

The project used skill development days, inspiring social media campaigns and awareness-raising activities for the general public. It organised seminars that created opportunities for long-term partnerships, community building and innovation through the LEADER method. The social media campaign #Landsbyggare, which positively portrays the High Coast of Sweden, reached a broad target group that may potentially want to move to the region.

According to Eva Jilkén, "Already 15 other regions want to implement the same bottom-up strategy of 'Landsbyggare' within their LEADER communities. Together with these regions, we are thinking about a national movement to show the opportunities offered by the rural countryside to all people in Sweden."

<http://leaderhogakusten.se/vart-lag/>

institutions, local networks, as well as local government. This can be done with the help of the Local Action Group (LAG), as the example of the Swedish LEADER area Höga Kusten shows (see box page 5). LAG Manager Jenny Edvinsson explains: “Our LAG works in

a threefold partnership with the public, the non-profit and the private sector. This triangle is crucial for us in Sweden. Local non-profit organisations play an incredibly important role in rural development. Swedish associations run local shops, gas stations, sports

clubs, facilitate the start-up of social enterprises, promote tourism and organise events, a model that is not particularly common in Europe. The ‘Landsbyggare’ project shows the real power of local people”.

## MEET AND MIX

The strength of LEADER’s bottom-up approach lies in the direct contact with local partners, who can communicate with one another and express the diverse needs and interests within the area. The success of a LAG depends on its capacity to involve people from across all groups within the local community, to give a voice to women, the young, elderly, disabled, Roma and migrants. LAGs can connect and involve those who could previously have seen themselves as outsiders, including with regard to local decision making.

The sharing and communication of different perspectives and interests creates insights. Open communication is an essential part of local development and the basis for a long-term and stable development of the region.

One of the most important conditions for a successful bottom-up approach is that local partners connect with one another in person. Face-to-face meetings provide opportunities for individuals, government, businesses and organisations with various backgrounds, skills and interests to meet and mix. This creates a robust foundation for innovative initiatives and connections.

To establish really open communication between the bodies, organisations and individuals involved and foster a sense of ownership, transparency is key. It concerns both the decision-making process and the definition of tasks and responsibilities. The active

involvement of local stakeholders in a project can overcome people’s initial lack of trust, especially in the case of innovative projects, and show that people’s views really count.

The Slovak LAG Malohont started out labelling local products of its region with only 12 local producers on board, but this has steadily increased to 37 (see box on this page). According to LAG Manager Miroslava Vargová, “The fact that regional producers were actively involved in the development of the label and the certification of products convinced other producers more easily and quickly than any formal presentation.”



© LAG Malohont

### LAG MALOHONT (SLOVAKIA)

In 2015 the LAG set up a scheme for branding regional products. Local producers can apply for the label for products complying with specific criteria, including local manufacturing, use of local resources and traditional techniques. The label is awarded by a certification committee which includes local producers, representatives of local businesses and LAG members.

Thanks to the involvement of producers from its early stages, the project rapidly gained the confidence of the population. The labelling system initially involved 12 local producers and now includes foodstuff and craft products from 37 local growers and producers. It will soon expand to include accommodation, services and events in the region. This initiative has now been joined by four neighbouring LAGs.

The LEADER funding used for the project was allocated from the 2007-2013 programming period and covered the initial set-up of the project. LAG Malohont then devised a way to make the labelling system financially more self-sustaining through contributions from local producers, municipalities in the LAG territory and small projects from the self-governing region. The initiative has greatly improved the economy of the Malohont region and is hoping to receive more stable regional or national support.

<http://www.malohont.sk/aktuality.php>

## THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE PROCESSES

A sound bottom-up approach should give the local people the power to make the majority of decisions. Responsibility promotes active participation.

The bottom-up approach is an excellent tool for facilitating collective processes, but other conditions for local development under LEADER include a Local Development Strategy (LDS) and a strong network of local stakeholders.

Mireille Groot Koerkamp, manager of LAG Salland in the Netherlands (see box on this page), recalls how, “The foundation for the Local Development Strategy in Salland was drawn up in 2012 for the 2014-2020 period. Right from the start, Salland worked to involve all stakeholders: residents, businesses, organisations and government. The LAG aimed to operate not only as an advisory committee for the area, but also to establish a regional process and strengthen the network of local partners.”

Combining the LAG’s LDS with existing resources provides a solid foundation and a head start to the project, particularly if a strong network of local stakeholders exists already. My own experience with the LAG Northeast Twente in the Netherlands (see box on page 8) also taught me that placing the decision-making responsibility fully in the hands of local people allows a LAG to respond quickly to local challenges and facilitates spin-off projects.



© LAG Salland

### LAG SALLAND (THE NETHERLANDS)

As LAG Manager Mireille Groot Koerkamp explains, “Improving our rural area requires innovation, but we are often guilty of applying old solutions to new challenges. We have ingrained patterns of thinking. In our way of listening, we look for recognition and confirmation of already existing judgements.” To prevent this, LAG Salland shaped its Local Development Strategy (LDS) using ‘Theory U’.

This method is based on the dismissal of that which is already known in order to create the conditions for the development of new ideas for local development. It is considered to help political leaders, civil servants and managers develop new and effective patterns of behaviour, taking better account of stakeholders’ perspectives.

The LAG organised 50 individual interviews, two work conferences and nine ‘Salland cafes’, involving over 500 participants in total. The results of these activities fed into the LDS, but also stimulated the area process called ‘The strength of Salland’. In the end, approximately 400 individuals contributed to the LDS.

<https://www.dekrachtvansalland.nl>

© LAG Noordost Twente



**LEADER NORTHEAST TWENTE (THE NETHERLANDS)**

This LAG’s membership consists only of local inhabitants, who enjoy full decision-making authority. The local government is involved in the LAG but is not a member.

LAG Northeast Twente is the founder of the Twentse Noaberschaps Fonds, a new regional foundation which finances small-scale citizen social initiatives. The fund was created by the LAG in cooperation with the neighbouring LAG Southeast Twente, the private sector and the province and is run by local volunteers. It joins together the knowledge network of the two LAGs and their LEADER approach with funding from a provincial programme called 4D.

<http://www.leadernoordosttwente.nl>

**BUILDING THE FUTURE BOTTOM-UP**

Society is changing and LEADER is evolving along with it. Challenges in local area-based development are shifting. In addition to well-known challenges in social and economic development, new challenges are emerging related to the circular economy, biodiversity, climate change and social inclusion of third country nationals. Each of these elements is ideally suited for an approach that is embraced by local

communities and facilitated by Local Action Groups.

There is no one blueprint for local development in Europe. Each area holds its own development opportunities. With an integrated LEADER/CLLD approach, the method can take the lead and tackle the specific challenges of a territory through people working together towards collective action. This is the power of LEADER.

It all starts with a philosophy, a vision for the development of an area. The core of integrated territorial development revolves around individuals taking the initiative and achieving results. This process can be supported by the Local Action Groups and LEADER coordinators (LAG managers), individuals who stimulate, facilitate and support such bottom-up, local processes and actions.



## 2. The area-based approach

© Lesvos Local Development Company ETAL S.A.

LEADER is a philosophy, a way of life, more than a mere programme. There are many sources of European funding for local projects. What makes LEADER one of the most well-respected approaches in rural development is its emphasis on locality. This, together with the interplay of its six other methodological features, differentiates LEADER from other national or regional rural development instruments.

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IMAGINATION WILL TAKE YOU EVERYWHERE

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THE POWER OF THE 'TOPOS' (PLACE)

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RURAL AND URBAN

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CHALLENGE AS AN EVERYDAY ACTIVITY

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### BY ANASTASIOS (TASOS) M. PERIMENIS

Tasos is the CEO of Lesvos Local Development Company S.A - ETAL S.A., a private company founded in 1992 by municipalities, the Agricultural Association and the Chamber of Commerce of the island of Lesvos, Greece. For the past 20 years Tasos has been responsible for planning and implementing the Local Development Strategy. He writes articles and studies, manages projects on the ground and is actively involved in European LEADER networking.

## INTRODUCTION

As a practitioner of LEADER for two decades now, I have concluded that the most important factor to implement any development programme is cohesion and cooperation between all local stakeholders. Cooperation often starts with imagination.

Benedict Anderson writes that, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."<sup>(1)</sup> Here 'imagined' does not refer to 'imaginary' but to a sense of belonging

formed and reformulated at the granular level in society; a dynamic, constant rebuilding of social cohesion. This is both a major principle and a challenge of the LEADER method.

Imagination, in the LEADER philosophy, consists not in making things up but in envisioning something we cannot see, but which is nonetheless real, something that binds people together and moves them towards a common goal within their local communities.

## IMAGINATION WILL TAKE YOU EVERYWHERE

Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge because it allows us to escape the predictable. "Logic can take you from A to B," he wrote, "imagination will take you everywhere." In order to work, a system must be able to

absorb the unavoidable tension between the visions of different groups. Communities must imagine and re-imagine themselves in view of a common – imagined – goal. LEADER is able to do this most effectively by creating cohesion and not imposing

it, by inspiring imagination and not eliciting conflict.

People identify themselves with LEADER projects because these are specifically designed and developed in their own area and provide answers tailored to local needs. LEADER

© LAG Parc Naturel Haute-Sûre Forêt d'Anlier



### LAG PARC NATUREL HAUTE-SÛRE FORÊT D'ANLIER (BELGIUM)

In 2003 the Nature Park Haute-Sûre Forêt d'Anlier watershed was recognised as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. After the nature park's management plan was drawn up in 2007, the LAG stepped forward and outlined a specific territory near the park, based on its defining landscape, cultural heritage and social and economic context.

The LAG worked with local farmers to build bridges and fences to protect the park and its water courses. Awareness-raising activities stirred people's collective imagination and mobilised more than 40 000 people.

The LAG also developed an innovative 'social farming' project, in which farmers and local inhabitants cooperated to produce local goods within short supply chains. However, when farmers and members of the communities just outside of the 'eligible area' became interested in participating, the LAG had to refuse.

The LAG has continued to develop its activities and currently operates across four themes: education, environment, landscape and heritage, and agriculture and tourism.

<http://www.parcnaturel.be>

(1) B. Anderson (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York.

provides an organic framework in which people see themselves as stakeholders in the projects and not ‘just implementers’ of some vague European project imposed on them. When there is balance between public and private governance and where local leaders concentrate their resources into a specific local strategy tailored to the area, the projects can generate more impact and be more sustainable.

Donatien Liesse, the LAG Manager of Parc Naturel Haute-Sûre Forêt d’Anlier (see box page 10), notes that, “LEADER works very well in areas with cohesive territorial characteristics, such as a natural park, but LEADER should not be hindered by constraints including financial issues or local politics. The LAGs should be able to use local resources and should enjoy uninterrupted activity in order to secure and maximise their impact.”

Unfortunately, the area-based approach is not flawless. A community is defined by a multitude of factors which are difficult to condense into a single boundary. Those on the borders of the areas may feel connected to one or both communities (the one ‘inside’ and the one ‘outside’) and therefore be, or feel, left out from potential benefits.

## THE POWER OF THE ‘TOPOS’ (PLACE)

In a Europe blessed with boundless natural and cultural diversity, LAGs have learned to define their local areas – and plan their Local Development Strategies (LDS) – examining carefully common traditions, historical and community ties, local identity, sense of belonging, common needs and expectations, and vision for a better future. These are all the characteristics that should primarily define a LEADER area – and they all relate to its geographical, economic, social and natural characteristics rather than its administrative borders. It is nearly an anthropological approach.

How deprived is a rural area with sparse population compared to a more densely populated area? How reliant is an area on specific economic activities, such as agriculture, forestry or fisheries? How strongly are these economic activities connected with the social fabric of ‘the place’? What are the natural and cultural characteristics that define people’s lives and create a common identity? In other words, to what extent do communities ‘imagine’ themselves as such? The answer points to LEADER as a way to stir the imagination of the community.



### LAG/FLAG LESVOS LOCAL DEVELOPMENT COMPANY ETAL S.A. (GREECE)

The Lesvos Local Development Company ETAL S.A., established in 1992, also acts as a FLAG (Fisheries Local Action Group). Its Local Development Strategy (LDS) is centred around the sustainable use of the island’s natural and cultural resources. Its aim is to make Lesvos a better place to live for its rural communities.

The LAG/FLAG’s signature project for the last 15 years has been the development of a trails network in the nature and culture of Lesvos. Today the network consists of 38 well-signed trails which were built step-by-step throughout the island, based on the historic rural paths connecting villages and local communities, revitalising remote villages and the traditional connections among them.

The local authorities made the LDS a priority. Local businesses diversified their activities to link to the trails network. These have become one of the main attractions of Lesvos and are at the core of international sporting events and outdoor activities like birdwatching. The project helped diversify tourism on the island from mainstream to experience-based alternative tourism, making remote local communities more visible.

When the recent refugee crisis had a very abrupt and negative impact on Lesvos’ tourism prospects, with a 65 % decline in arrivals from tour operators from 2015 to 2016, the trails project offered a concrete response. Sport events organised around the trails attracted specific groups of tourists and at the same time included teams of refugee athletes who started to participate in running events on the trail network, helping them take part in the social life of the island.

<https://www.etal-sa.gr/el/>

Lesvos (Greece) is an island on the fringes of Europe. A LDS focused on a network of trails has helped improve the status, visibility and economy of its remote rural area and almost reinvented the image of the island as a tourism destination (see box page 11).

The Lesvos Trail Project is an example of how LEADER empowers an area to exploit its endogenous potential, to support and diversify its economy and to react to social and financial

crises. It shows in practice what an active alliance of local stakeholders can accomplish. When great numbers of migrants crossed the Aegean and arrived on the Lesvos coast seeking refuge, this highlighted the potential for enormous tension in the community. The LEADER philosophy did not solve the big issue, but made its edges smoother. Lesvos became an island of solidarity. LEADER is a way to imagine a better community, built not on fear but on courage, on imagination and an unbeatable determination.

Fani Galinou, a small hotel entrepreneur in the Eressos village in Lesvos, notes: “Through LEADER we managed to offer alternative routes to the visitors of our village that even we as inhabitants re-discovered. The Trails Network is part of all our social events and gives value to our products, and we are happy to see the connection build up with the nearby Petrified Forest of Sigri Trails. We needed to be part of it and we need even more trails in our area now because they show who we are.”



© LAG Parc Naturel Haute-Sûre Forêt d'Anlier

## RURAL AND URBAN

The area-based approach is intertwined with the other six features of LEADER, but it is decisive because once an area is defined correctly, the path of implementation becomes easier.

LAGs need to know their area very well to create a common vision with which local stakeholders will identify. Stakeholders will be motivated and committed. Partnerships will form with strong ties. Stakeholders will start

building trust, the most important ingredient for success in the process. A local vision must win people's minds first.

What are your needs? What connects you to others? How can you use new tools to adapt to a global change that affects you? How innovative can you be? Are you risk-averse or a risk taker? How resilient can you be in the face of challenges such as climate change or outmigration? LEADER

can place the real stakeholders in an area at the forefront of discussions in local communities by asking these questions.

The adaptability of the LAG strategies allows for reconsidering and redefining the 'areas of impact' regularly, based on territorial but also population criteria and taking into consideration even urban aspects of local development. The LAG Desarrollo Rural Mariñas-Betanzos,

Spain (see box page on this page) has developed a LDS which integrates rural and urban areas to help them face new challenges deriving from climate change. For LAG Manager Jorge Blanco Ballón, “The best way to provide sustainable answers to such new issues is to have an area-based LDS that empowers small rural areas in connection with urban areas.”



© Asociación de Desarrollo Rural Mariñas-Betanzos

### ASOCIACION DE DESARROLLO RURAL MARIÑAS-BETANZOS (SPAIN)

The Spanish Asociación de Desarrollo Rural Mariñas-Betanzos acts as the LAG of the rural communities close to the city of La Coruña in Galicia, Spain. Its ‘Food Plan’ is a strong strategic approach to promote short circuits for local food, improving biodiversity and sustainability in farms. The plan is linked to a biosphere reserve territory (Mariñas Coruñesas e Terras do Mandeo) and involves youth and farmers. The sustainable Food Plan approach, started in the previous European programming period (2007-2013), built up gradually and has led to strong economic, social and environmental benefits. These include the set-up of new organic farms, new distribution channels and awareness raising activities in schools.

Given the proximity to the city of La Coruña, the LAG worked on complementarities between larger and stronger communities closer to the city and smaller rural communities further away. Through the LAG’s area-based Local Development Strategy, the comparative advantages of the different communities (e.g. a vibrant tourism infrastructure, strong local food production, interesting natural areas) feed into each other. Smaller rural communities have been empowered and become more visible.

The fact that several municipalities in the LAG area are part of the same hydrographic basin reinforces the commitment to a forward-looking project and the understanding of its environmental implications.

<http://marinasbetanzos.gal>

## CHALLENGE AS AN EVERYDAY ACTIVITY

For 29 years, LEADER has been in all our lives, whether rural, insular, mountainous, or even urban. It is still as vibrant as in the early days when high hopes and great expectations led the way. LEADER today is more mature and has learned lessons from its past. It has paved the way for effective policies and practices. It has developed credibility. All those involved should take pride in associating their professional and personal work with their locality.

The next few years will be at least as interesting as the past, with new challenges and threats but also new opportunities. LEADER will continue to help integration and social cohesion, minimise the isolation and marginalisation of rural areas. Building on their strong local community ‘roots’, LAGs can become more outward-looking and engaged with the key challenges of our time both inside and outside their territorial boundaries. The LEADER philosophy will not have

a problem to adapt to our rapidly changing world, because change is at its core.

LEADER has the potential to give us our rich inner world back, the world of our community. And because what is now proved was once only imagined, our collective imagination as LAGs will be the very fabric from which every piece of the puzzle that we call community comes together.



### 3. Local partnerships

© GAL Culturalité en Hesbaye brabançonne asbl

When first introduced, LEADER's horizontal governance structure – the LAG – was a unique approach to implementing rural policy and was viewed by many as a 'disruptive local governance' concept. LEADER broke with the top-down governance tradition and instead embraced the local partnership approach and bottom-up mandate to empower rural people in addressing their local needs.

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LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH AN ADDED VALUE

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PARTNERSHIPS BEYOND BORDERS

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PRECIOUS PRINCIPLES AND CONCERNS ABOUT THE FUTURE

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#### BY GABRIEL O'CONNELL

Gabriel is CEO of Monaghan Integrated Development (Ireland) for the last 17 years. He has a strong experience in the field of rural and community development with the LEADER method, including as a former executive member of the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) and an active member of its Rural Development Strategic Policy Group. Gabriel believes that the bottom-up approach holds significant potential for effectively designing and delivering on the Smart Village agenda.

## INTRODUCTION

As one of the core seven operating principles of the LEADER method, the local partnerships approach is fundamental and is closely linked with the bottom-up principle, because it embraces local knowledge, passion and expertise from a broad base of local stakeholders. In principle, Local Action Groups (LAGs) transform the people, who were previously the passive ‘beneficiaries’ of a policy, into active partners and drivers of their area’s development. But lots of things affect the operation of a local partnership, not least the autonomy afforded to the local stakeholders in the development and delivery of their Local Development Strategy (LDS), their mandate and the local governance structure applied by their Member State.

The local partnership – the LAG in the LEADER context – has been described as the ‘pivot of the Community-Led Local Development method’ and is the trustee of the LDS for its area. Since the early days of LEADER, projects are funded on the basis of the local partnership adhering to the criteria, objectives and priorities set out in the LDS.

The LAG partnership also has a critical role to play in mobilising project promoters, initiating LAG-led strategic projects and cooperation opportunities. It is a decision-making partnership where no single sector, be it public, private or non-profit holds the majority of the votes.

LEADER benefits from the ability of LAGs to bring together stakeholder coalitions in a partnership, who pool their resources and expertise, and who create synergies and enable innovations that are not possible when agencies or organisations work in silos. This horizontal structure and mode of collaborative governance implies that partnership principles pertain at board and sub-board level of activities. It also implies that LAGs engage with bottom-up and traditional top-down agencies and at all tiers of governance – both formally and informally.

Effective partnership working requires flat governance (rather than vertical) structures and that agencies and communities engage with one another in a spirit of collaboration, based on an equal footing.

## LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH AN ADDED VALUE

Local partnerships are about using the collective knowledge of communities to analyse the area’s needs and to collaboratively co-design the most appropriate solutions. Thus, the collective knowledge and understanding of the partnership is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

LEADER partnerships increase the capacity of those involved by exchanging knowledge and building working relationships which might not normally happen. The outcome of effective partnerships are local projects designed to address local needs and which enjoy widespread community support and a strong sense of local pride and ownership.

For Marie Langhendries, Manager of LAG Culturalité en Hesbaye Brabançonne (Belgium – see box on this page), “LEADER brings together partners from the public (municipalities, provinces) and private (associations, businesses, farmers,



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### LAG CULTURALITÉ EN HESBAYE BRABANÇONNE (BELGIUM)

One of the most recent LAG projects is called ‘Mille-feuilles’ (‘1 000 leaves’). It has the twofold aim to both actively protect and enhance biodiversity and to foster dialogue between farmers, citizens, associations and municipalities around the topics of biodiversity and the environment.

The LAG has discussions with interested farmers about the best places to plant bushes and hedgerows on their land. It organises and funds planting activities by groups of volunteers (citizens and associations). The farmers commit, with the help of volunteers, to protect and manage the bushes. Every year the LAG organises a dinner to gather the ‘Mille-feuilles’ community and strengthen the links between the participants.

<https://culturalite.be/?Millefeuille5>

citizens) sectors to meet and share their points of view and their visions for the area. This dynamic enables the sharing of energies and resources. Collective decisions have been shown to generate stronger community support and a stronger engagement with projects.”

Right from the earliest stages of the development of the LDS, the LEADER method provided a framework to encourage people to work towards common goals, even where there might initially be conflicting views. LAG staff often receive specific training to facilitate and guide this collective process. Some LAGs extend this training opportunity also to LAG members, including local private and public stakeholders (citizens, businesses). The German LAG LEADER-Regionalmanagement Göttinger Land trains ‘village facilitators’ in methods and tools to support village development processes and projects (see box on this page).

LAGs can become a ‘hub’ in their territories for anyone interested in proposing projects to support integrated local development. In some Member States this concerns not only helping access EAFRD support from LEADER but also other regional or national funds<sup>(1)</sup>. The LAG



© LAG LEADER-Regionalmanagement Göttinger Land

### LAG LEADER-REGIONALMANAGEMENT GÖTTINGER LAND (GERMANY)

The LAG gives its members the opportunity to participate in workshops and seminars on participative working methods which are offered by the German National Rural Network. In addition, the LAG has developed a professional training called ‘Dorfmoderation’ (‘Village facilitator’). Local people are trained in methods and given tools to support village development processes and projects.

The LAG has become a reference for the people in the area and is seen as a one-stop shop for getting information on funding possibilities for local projects.

<http://www.goettingerland.de/lplus/index.php>

Culturalité en Hesbaye Brabançonne for instance actively aims to position itself as an information hub for its local area. It offers advice and

support to municipalities, producers and associations who are looking for and applying for funding regarding projects that foster local

### MONAGHAN INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT CLG (IRELAND)

Monaghan Integrated Development CLG (MID) is the Local Development Body implementing the LEADER Programme in the border region and province of Ulster. MID is a keen advocate of the partnership approach and has been using the model for over 25 years.

By using the partnership approach, MID harnesses the motivation and expertise of local communities, statutory agencies and social partners to develop and deliver a range of support programmes which are closely attuned with the needs of the local community. This includes services in the fields of social inclusion, local employment, health and wellbeing, volunteering and business start-up courses. Once engaged with MID’s services, people can transition through the services and benefit from coordinated support, for example receiving skills support while looking for a job and then appropriate training and guidance to eventually start their own small local business.

<https://mid.ie>

(1) A proportion of Member States have enabled some CLLD LAGs to implement a Local Development Strategy using more than one ESI Fund under CLLD provisions of Article 32 of Reg EU no 1303/2013.

collaboration and partnerships. Similarly, the other LAGs presented in this article and the Austrian LAG Regionalmanagement regio<sup>3</sup> (see box page 22) have all come to

be seen as ‘one-stop shops’ for local development in their communities.

In my own experience with Monaghan Integrated Development CLG in Ireland

(see box page 16), programmes like LEADER act as the engine for a local developmental approach, helping LAGs deliver a broad suite of initiatives to our rural communities.

## PARTNERSHIPS BEYOND BORDERS

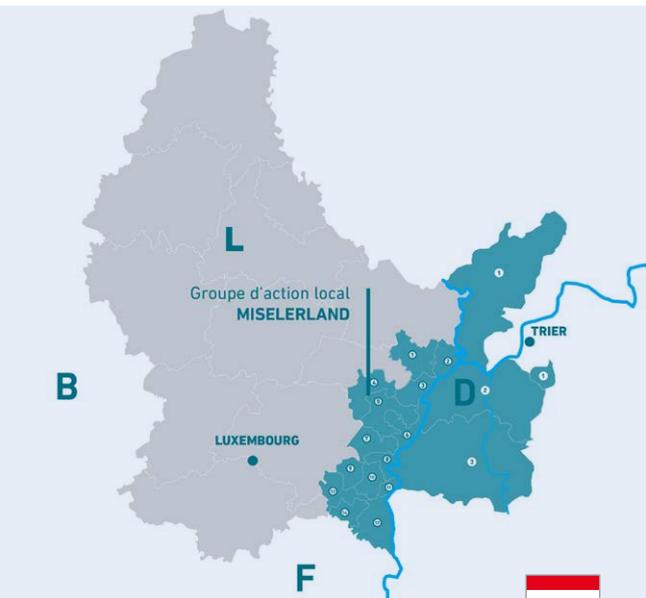
The local partnerships principle links clearly with the bottom-up and the area-based approach and can extend across administrative or geographical borders. In 2015, the two LEADER areas on the borders of the rivers Mosel and Sauer developed the first joint strategy involving two neighbouring LEADER areas located

in two different Member States, Germany and Luxembourg (see box on this page). Their shared work has activated cross-border partnerships including between political, business and community interests that allow people to start joint initiatives. For Thomas Walrich, manager of LAG Miselerland (Luxembourg), despite

the challenges of such an endeavour, “LEADER is an important support instrument that has given the efforts on the ground a reliable framework for action.”



© LAG Miselerland



### LAG MISELERLAND (LUXEMBOURG)

The Luxembourg LEADER territory Miselerland and the German LEADER territory Moselfranken lie on both sides of the rivers Mosel and Sauer. The common border along the rivers is open and permeable to people, goods, services and ideas. People in the two areas share a common language and history and many cultural elements, as well as a landscape characterised by viticulture. Daily cross-border commuter rates reach 65 %.

Given the commonalities and links between the two areas, in 2015 the two LAGs decided to develop a common strategy for the positive development of the entire region. This is the first joint transnational LEADER Local Development Strategy (LDS).

The process is guided by a steering group involving six members from each LAG. Cross-border partnerships between local businesses and community groups and contacts between policy-makers have been established, and joint projects and working groups have been developed, for example on mobility. School exchanges and guided tours allow people to get to know each other across borders and are strengthening social cohesion. The LDS is based on a vision for a European Neighbourhood Region which is gradually overcoming administrative and intellectual borders.

<https://leader-miselerland-moselfranken.eu/en/miselerland/>

## PRECIOUS PRINCIPLES AND CONCERNS ABOUT THE FUTURE

Today the LEADER approach is acknowledged as a successful example of social innovation at local and institutional governance level. LEADER/CLLD is not the only example of social innovation at governance level, but, in my personal view, it is a brilliant one. As Robert Lukesch<sup>(2)</sup> reminds us, LEADER, “only unfolds its virtues if the seven operational principles are applied as a package” rather than as an *à la carte* menu.

The LEADER/CLLD method is now applied in the other European Structural and Investment (ESI) funds and in some national programmes, but the principles of authentic ‘bottom-up’ and ‘local partnership’ approaches are not always fully applied. Therefore, we must be vigilant and not take for granted the application of the very precious LEADER principles and their unique added value to rural development.

In recent years, key policy documents and position papers on rural development have acknowledged the importance of local partnerships and/or the merits of LEADER as a development approach in its own right. Examples include the 2016 Cork 2.0 Declaration on the future rural and agricultural policy in the European Union<sup>(3)</sup>, the OECD’s ‘Rural Policy 3.0: A people-centred approach to rural development’<sup>(4)</sup> and ELARD’s 2016 Tartu Declaration<sup>(5)</sup>.

A recurring theme linked to these documents is the need they highlight for more empowered and

accountable local communities acting within an enabled LEADER/CLLD framework free from any excessive top-down bureaucratic constraints. Integrated strategies and multi-sector approaches need to build on the identity and dynamism of rural areas.

Some LEADER practitioners have expressed concern about ensuring LEADER partnership principle values and about the effects of changes to the applicable Regulations. Such changes proposed include removing the explicit requirement of having “no single interest group representing more than 49% of the voting rights” of the LAG and “at least 50% of the votes in selection decisions to be cast by partners which are not public authorities.” Some practitioners suggest that changes to these elements could make the LEADER method less effective at LAG level and impede its implementation.

We need to ensure that the principle of ‘partnership working’ continues to be a cornerstone of LEADER in the new legal framework, so that it is fully employed in our LEADER LAGs and that the capacity building and training required to ensure this is fully addressed. The new Common Provisions Regulation provisions for CLLD and LEADER, and Member States’ programming of LEADER in the new CAP Strategic Plans, should continue to address administrative difficulties encountered in the current period. It is critical that both the regulatory proposals for LEADER/CLLD, and how they are then implemented, continue to protect the important principles and ways of working for Community-Led Local Development.



© LAG LEADER-Regionalmanagement Göttinger Land

(2) Robert Lukesch, keynote paper for the ELARD international conference LEADER Reloaded, Évora, Portugal, September 2018, p. 16 <https://leaderconference.minhaterra.pt/nwst/files/I21-20181009XLEADERXRELOADEDXPAPERXROBERTXLUKESCH.PDF>

(3) [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/cork-20-and-future-rural-development\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/cork-20-and-future-rural-development_en)

(4) OECD (2019) *Rural 3.0. People-centred rural policy*, p. 18 (Table 5), <https://www.oecd.org/rural/rural-development-conference/documents/Rural-3.0-Policy-Highlights.pdf>

(5) ELARD conference Renewing LEADER/CLLD for 2020+; Celebrating 25 years of LEADER in Europe!, Tartu, Estonia, November 2016, <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/tartu-declaration-leaderclld.pdf>



## 4. Integrated and multi-sectoral Local Development Strategy

© Ralf Lienert, European Union, 2016

LEADER is a territorial policy which addresses the diverse needs of the rural population, thus it is multi-sectoral by nature. An integrated approach to the intervention facilitates a more coherent response to rural development issues and supports synergies between different actions.

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INTEGRATING LOCAL PEOPLE

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INTEGRATION ALONG THE VALUE CHAIN

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INTEGRATION IN MULTI-FUNDED STRATEGIES

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THE ADDED VALUE OF 'INTEGRATED AND MULTI-SECTORAL'

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NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTEGRATION – TOWARDS THE FUTURE LEADER

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### BY JEAN-PIERRE VERCRUISSE

Jean-Pierre has worked for 25 years on local development, including 15 years within the LEADER Observatory. In 2007, he became a policy officer in the European Commission, where he was in charge of fostering Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) in the framework of the EMFF and overseeing the work of the FARNET support unit. He has now retired but is still engaged in CLLD projects in Europe and beyond.

## INTRODUCTION

From its inception in 1991, linkages have been at the core of the LEADER approach, explicitly stating that, “Actions and projects within the business plan should not be individual and separated measures (...) but should be coordinated and well-integrated in a coherent whole.”<sup>(1)</sup>

The principle of integration has been applied for a long time by development NGOs and is a key feature of development policy. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>(2)</sup>, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, the concept of ‘integration’ is at the core of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Member States, “Recognise that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.”<sup>(3)</sup>

Many large development NGOs have adopted an integrated approach to eradicating poverty as they see it as the only way sustainability can be achieved. They recognise that a development intervention should be focused on a village (or a group of villages) and undertake action on all aspects, including food, water, education, health and the economic empowerment of women. “Small is beautiful, scale is necessary.”<sup>(4)</sup>

In LEADER, integration can take different forms but always consists of fostering linkages within the strategy, the area, the partnership and with the outside world. However, this does not mean supporting everyone and everything equally at the same time, but rather establishing priorities and focusing on certain aspects.

## INTEGRATING LOCAL PEOPLE

LEADER is managed locally in order to address local needs effectively. The local population should not be regarded as ‘beneficiaries’ or the ‘target group’, but as actively involved in the development of projects.

The Finnish LAG Keskipiste is an example of this (see box page 21). Since 1996 they have centred the Local Development Strategy (LDS) on supporting economic activities, with a then pioneering focus on young people. The strategy sees (local) youth as a resource that can be activated with the right support and funding.

Today the LAG works to bridge the gap between pilot projects for youth entrepreneurship and

full-time business and creates new links among young people through collaborations.



© Versosto

## INTEGRATION ALONG THE VALUE CHAIN

In this type of integration, a series of projects addresses different segments of the value chain such as the production of raw material, processing,

and marketing of final products. This facilitates synergies within the value chain and thus helps capitalise on any resulting added value.

An outstanding example is the Spanish Valle del Jerte (see box page 21). The LAG was established under LEADER 1 (1991-1993) as one of the places

(1) *Assessing the added value of LEADER. Rural Innovation Dossier n°4* (1999), LEADER Observatory.

(2) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

(3) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

(4) This is the slogan of BRAC, an NGO based in Bangladesh which started in 1972 and claims to have already lifted over 100 million people from poverty. <http://www.brac.net>

where the LEADER method was to be tested, and it is still in operation. Today, the main partners delivering the strategy include the cherry producers' cooperatives, the tourist board and the association of municipalities. The LAG has developed an integrated strategy 'from field to fork' promoting their renowned cherry and has achieved impressive results.



© Versosto

### LAG KESKIPISTE (FINLAND)

The Keskipiste LAG has been active in LEADER since 1996 and is still going strong today, having already supported nearly 900 projects. The area covered by the LAG is in the centre of Finland, far from major towns and cities, and benefits from a pristine natural environment. There are only four inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> and due to the lack of higher education facilities nearby, young people must leave the area to go and study in cities. Bringing them back can be a challenge.

The LDS fosters a positive image of the place, makes young local people feel part of a bigger picture and motivates them to build their future there. The LAG pioneered the use of ERASMUS+ funding to bring young volunteers from other EU countries to the area, including to work on transnational cooperation projects. As can be seen, local connections are key to the LAG.

A flagship project that stemmed from an ERASMUS+ exchange is the Versosto cooperative, a structure helping young people grow their business ideas, providing training, mentoring and peer support. Set up in 2017, Versosto has over 60 members aged 16-21 and a turnover of €240 000. The project has increased the young members' interest in entrepreneurship and has motivated some of them to stay in, or later return to, rural areas. The cooperative was set up in the framework of the LEADER project 'Silta' ('bridge'), which was a finalist in the 2019 ENRD Rural Inspiration Awards.

- <https://www.keskipisteleader.fi/fi/in-english>
- <https://www.versosto.fi>
- [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/silta-bridge-youth-entrepreneurship\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/silta-bridge-youth-entrepreneurship_en)



### LAG VALLE DEL JERTE (SPAIN)

The Jerte Valley, in northern Extremadura (Spain), is famous for its cherries. Trees grow on terraces carved out of the high mountainsides of the valley and create a unique view when they blossom in spring.

The LAG built an integrated strategy around the image of their famous cherry, supporting actions all along the value chain, 'from field to fork'. Activities include supporting the development of tourist products and activities, training producers, branding and marketing (including working with cooperatives of local farmers to secure the recognition of the cherries under an EU Protected Denomination of Origin PDO - 'Cereza del Jerte'), establishing traceability and quality control, and diversifying into other cherry-based products (such as liquors, jams and pastries).

Over 25 years the strategy has created more than 150 new enterprises, created or maintained over 1 000 jobs and provided training for approximately 20 000 people. Tourist accommodation increased from 150 to 2 000 places and cherry exports by cooperatives and organisations of local producers rose from 10% to 60% of the production, while around 100 local products have been developed.

The LAG is now developing a 'Smart Tourist Destination' project to offer a better tourist experience, but also to increase the quality of life of the local population.

<https://cerezadeljerte.org/en/jerte-valley/>



© LAG Valle del Jerte

## INTEGRATION IN MULTI-FUNDED STRATEGIES

A multi-sectoral strategy can also receive support from different sources of funding, targeting different development strands. Integration helps the Local Development Strategy gain coherence and create synergies.

An example of this is the LAG Regionalmanagement regio<sup>3</sup> in Austria (see box on this page), which uses funding from multiple EU, national and regional sources to support its multi-sectoral and integrated strategy. The LAG manager, Stefan Niedermoser, feels that, “If you work only with one sector, you don’t need LEADER.”

To illustrate the concept of multi-funding, Stefan Niedermoser quotes an Irish colleague: “LEADER is like the locomotive, whilst the different funds

are like the wagons: the more you can add, the more people you can involve in the process and the further you will be able to go.”



© LAG Regionalmanagement regio<sup>3</sup>

### LAG REGIONALMANAGEMENT REGIO<sup>3</sup> (AUSTRIA)

The LAG Regionalmanagement regio<sup>3</sup>, in Tyrol and Salzburg, became a LEADER Group in 1996, one year after Austria joined the EU. It originally covered five municipalities and 9 000 inhabitants in the beautiful Pillersee valley. Its success attracted other people and the LAG has grown to include 13 municipalities and 45 000 people.

The current Local Development Strategy was prepared in a real bottom-up fashion, with nine working groups involving over 850 people extending and building on previous experience. These meetings showed that the strategy should address needs going beyond the farming sector. This led to a further developed multi-sectoral and integrated strategy, which clearly benefits from multi-funding.

The LAG’s budget comes from two main sources: LEADER, providing a fixed amount of € 4.1 million (of which 80 % from the EAFRD, around 10 % from the Austrian Ministry and around 10 % from the Tyrol province), and a variable amount of funds from other sources at EU, national or regional levels, including a € 1.2 million allocation from the ERDF. These other sources of funding are mobilised on an ad hoc basis on request from project holders, who see the LAG office as a one-stop-shop for information and advice to help develop local projects.

LEADER provides a stable source of funding; however, it is necessary to avoid gaps between funding periods, which may result in the LAG losing key stakeholders.

<https://www.rm-tirol.at/en/regions/regio3-pillerseetal-leukental-leogang/our-area/>

## THE ADDED VALUE OF ‘INTEGRATED AND MULTI-SECTORAL’

The number of people working in the primary agricultural sector has been in decline for many years<sup>(5)</sup>. The impacts of this situation on rural areas can include

depopulation, a lack of young farmers and environmental issues linked to land abandonment on one hand or the use of more intensive farming techniques on the other.

In this context, an integrated and multi-sectoral territorial approach is key to sustainability. Such an approach helps address the needs of the overall rural population and

(5) [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/eu-rural-areas-primary-sector\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/eu-rural-areas-primary-sector_en.pdf) and [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/facts-and-figures/performance-agricultural-policy/cap-indicators/context-indicators\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/facts-and-figures/performance-agricultural-policy/cap-indicators/context-indicators_en)

of vulnerable groups, including farmers, families, small businesses, young people, women and migrants. Different sections of the local population are mobilised around the strategy, based on their needs. By facilitating their cooperation, the

strategy strengthens the local social fabric and makes communities more resilient.

A multi-sectoral and integrated approach leverages development on the assets of the area, in different

sectors, using local knowledge and investments. Importantly, this approach allows adjustment of the intervention to evolving needs in a flexible way.

## NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTEGRATION – TOWARDS THE FUTURE LEADER

Evaluating past programmes and making constant improvements is key to LEADER's success. As early as LEADER II (1994-1999), evaluation identified a possible issue with integrated Local Development Strategies trying to support too many small-scale local initiatives at the same time, which can lead to the dispersion of limited funds over too many sectors. In the following programming periods measures were taken to prevent this from happening.

These include: building the strategy around a 'unifying theme' specific to the area; increasing the funds available across Europe (as part of the mainstreaming of LEADER in wider rural development policy); and implementing multi-fund CLLD. The possibility of using Simplified Costs Options to lighten administrative procedures for beneficiaries and LAG managers can also help ease the delivery of integrated and multi-sectoral strategies.<sup>(6)</sup> A combination of these solutions can help scale up LEADER interventions, increasing their scope and the accessibility of the budget available. These options are expected to remain available under the CAP Strategic Planning

framework for the 2021-2027 programming period<sup>(7)</sup>.

A relatively recent addition to the EU community-based approaches is the Smart Villages concept<sup>(8)</sup>, also featured in the discussion of the future of the ESI (European Structural and Investment) Funds. This concept shares and builds on the key elements of the LEADER approach to focus on community/village level innovation<sup>(9)</sup> in a specific way, using opportunities such as the development of information and communication technologies. It has the potential to address global issues locally, including the need for better care for an ageing population and for stimulating decentralised energy production. LEADER and Smart Villages require the same key enabling elements: the capacity to respond flexibly to community initiatives at a local level, backed up by larger scale investments, a conducive regulatory environment and good coordination.

The interaction between LEADER and Smart Villages approaches can be beneficial for both local communities and sub-regional LAG territories. LEADER could help drive the Smart Villages approach by highlighting and linking up community-led innovations.



© LAG Regionalmanagement regio<sup>3</sup>

Smart Villages in turn have the potential to add value to LEADER by taking these innovations further, reflecting on very specific local needs, especially in bigger LAGs where links with each village may be difficult to achieve. Such a combination could ensure that communities continue to play a key role in policy decisions affecting the future of their local area.

(6) The application of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) is one of the ways to improve and simplify the implementation of Rural Development Programmes and LEADER local development strategies. For more information see the report of the ENRD workshop, [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-simplified-cost-options-experience-gained-and-new-opportunities\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-simplified-cost-options-experience-gained-and-new-opportunities_en)

(7) Based on the European Commission's legislative proposals on the common agricultural policy beyond 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/future-cap\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/future-cap_en)

(8) [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal_en)

(9) For more on LEADER and innovation, check article 6 of this publication, page 29



## 5. Networking

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Under LEADER, citizens, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Local Action Groups (LAGs), entrepreneurs and municipalities get together to shape their own future and achieve rural development objectives in Europe. Networking with LEADER is about forging strong links between people, projects and territories, helping overcome the isolation faced by some rural areas and stimulating innovation and cooperation projects. This includes working within the LAG area and local development strategy and connecting LAGs to each other from the local to the wider EU level.

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**OPENING HORIZONS IN RURAL AREAS**

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**STEPPING UP THE GAME**

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**TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKING**

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**BACK TO THE FUTURE**

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### **BY MARIANNE GEATER**

Marianne is a British and French national with over 15 years of experience working as a journalist in Brussels. After nine years working on environmental issues at EU level, since 2016 Marianne has extended the breadth of her reporting to include social policy and rural development. In the last couple of years, she has written a number of articles on the LEADER approach and its implementation both in EU countries (particularly in Portugal) and in third countries (Moldova and Georgia).

## INTRODUCTION

Networking – the idea of coming together to share and disseminate information, knowledge, experience and ideas – is crucial for rural development and is a vital element in the LEADER approach. In the words of Anastasios Perimenis, LAG Manager in Lesvos, Greece (see page 9), "Networking among LAGs has been crucial for LEADER. Through networking, LAGs across Europe can exchange good practices and transfer knowledge and know-how among peers in a natural way – and beyond their territorial boundaries. This results in

better self-evaluation, corrective actions and increased local empowerment."

LAGs work with the local population to identify their needs and find the most appropriate solution. Networking at this local level helps achieve this, by energising communities and helping rural actors improve their business, environment or local services. The National Rural Networks and the ENRD work together with the LAGs and one another in promoting and supporting the networking process on a wider national and European scale.

## OPENING HORIZONS IN RURAL AREAS

Networking allows LAGs to achieve better results. An example of this is the 'Inclusive villages' project recently launched by the Belgian LAG Pays des Condruces. The project targets the elderly living alone that are at risk of falling between the cracks in social services because of their isolation. The LAG worked with different local stakeholders, including citizens, senior citizens' associations, municipalities and non-governmental associations working in the field of social care, to establish a network of 'life assistants', i.e. people from the community who are employed to reach out and provide assistance to isolated elderly people. LEADER networking created an effective safety net for these people.

Networkers are also drivers of change. Bringing stakeholders from different horizons together plays a key role in opening up people's minds to novel ways of doing business.

A good example of this took place in the area of the Hungarian LAG Felső-Homokhátság (see box page on this page), which helped renovate an old farmhouse to make it a rural tourist destination.



© LAG Felső-Homokhátság

### LAG FELŐ-HOMOKHÁTSÁG (HUNGARY)

In 2013 a project promoter contacted LAG Manager Judit Rácz seeking help to renovate an old farmhouse and turn it into a luxury hotel in the middle of the forest. The LAG decided to back the project despite initial scepticism among the locals who saw this as a peculiar idea. The Deak Mansion was reborn.

Since its launch the Deak Mansion has become a central attraction in the municipality. It has created four jobs for locals and now ranks as the second-best wedding venue in the country. It also hosts traditional food events.

For the LAG Manager Judit Rácz, "The success of this rural hotel has been a wake-up call for local businesses who realised they needed to improve the quality of their offer in terms of the quality of food but also the quality of service. It was a challenge but also an opportunity because it forced them to open their minds to other ways of doing things. They realised that providing more interesting services was good for business but also good for the region as a whole".

<http://leaderkontakt.hu>

## STEPPING UP THE GAME

Some networking initiatives prove so successful at local level that the logical step is taking them up a notch to the regional level and beyond. This was the case for Belgium's first farm incubator, launched in 2013 by the LAG Pays des Condruses (see box on this page). For Jean-Francois Pêcheur, the LAG Manager, "This is the perfect example of a local project moving to the regional level thanks to the networking principle of the LEADER method."

"Our approach is that from a local experience, a local network, we systematically aim to move up to the regional level and whenever possible we envisage EU-level strategies. The idea is always to reinforce what we do at local level either by getting inspiration from what is being done elsewhere or by developing and



### LAG PAYS DES CONDRUSES (BELGIUM)

Launched in 2013 by the LAG Pays des Condruses, the farm incubator is a collaborative effort between the non-profit organisation Devenirs ('Futures'), which trains people to become market gardeners, the business incubator Creajobs, the local municipality of Modave (which provided the land), individual business coaches and people who are self-employed.

The LAG identifies older farmers looking for successors to take over their farms and puts them in contact with would-be market gardeners or horticulturists. The latter can test the feasibility of their project on a real scale in the incubator, in a framework that limits risk-taking. If things work out after a test period, the newcomer can settle on a farm permanently.

The LAG makes sure all parties work hand in hand. It also communicates important information about the project to stakeholders and organises training and open days to attract other prospective project holders.

The project was inspired by a French experience and was initially funded through the Erasmus programme. Given the success of the initiative the LAG is working with Wallonia's RDP to extend the concept across Wallonia and Belgium. Three more farm incubators have already been set up.

As the project has gathered momentum, the idea is now to amplify the network at the European level by working with the French movement of farm incubators RENETA (Réseau national d'espaces-test agricoles). The objective is to look into setting up a possible ERASMUS+ project with Italy, Spain and the UK.

<https://www.galcondruses.be>





improving our models,” explains Mr Pêcheur.

Judit Rácz has been working for the LAG Felső-Homokhátság since 2007 and has been an active contributor as well as a witness of the evolution in networking from the local to the EU level.

“We started by organising festivals and events to involve local minority

groups, companies and NGOs in our work, and we still do this. Over time, we realised that a lot can be learned and it is easier to solve LEADER issues by working with other LAGs. This led us naturally to setting up the NATURAMA Alliance of LAGs in Hungary, which involved seven other LAGs in monthly meetings to discuss their socio-economic challenges and solutions.”

As relevant experience accumulated, the LAG ‘stepped up the game’ and got involved in networking on an international scale. The LAG now works with the LEADER Inspired Network Community (LINC) (see box page 28).

For Judit Rácz, the benefits of networking begin first of all with human connections. “In the past I learned a lot about the history of Europe and the world, but through networking all of this becomes real. I know from experience how much CLLD projects help in creating stronger communities in the countryside. I can see and feel what is happening in different countries – from Georgia to Sweden – by talking and working with like-minded local development enthusiasts and LAG managers. Thanks to networking, I can now introduce people to each other from East to West and from North to South, and even though I cannot participate in every project, it makes me happy to help people connect. I have seen projects develop from a ‘Hello, how are you?’ during a coffee break at a networking event and this is a great experience.”

## TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKING

Transnational networking has been supported at EU level from the early days of LEADER and is specifically provided for under the EU legal framework.<sup>(1)</sup> The provision of assistance has extended from the original LEADER Observatory – supporting LAG to LAG networking and project cooperation – through to the current ENRD Contact Point and NRNs who work together to foster networking amongst LEADER stakeholders.

When countries enjoy a shared history and similar issues of concern, transnational networking becomes an unmissable choice to spread their best practices. In sharing these practices LEADER is continuing to build on a rich history of networking between LAGs in different Member States and beyond.

One of the oldest forms of transnational LEADER networking in Europe takes place through the Nordic-Baltic Network supported by the National Rural Networks (NRNs)

from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. These seven countries enjoy a common history and face similar challenges, mainly depopulation, coastal tourism and the pollution of the Baltic Sea. Since its creation in 2008, the network has gone from strength to strength and now runs a competition for transnational cooperation projects. The NRNs involved learn from each other and bring home ideas, experiences and inspiration to share with the LAGs in their respective countries.

(1) Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) (Art. 52 and 54), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32013R1305>

Recent examples of large-scale LEADER networking activities include the ENRD's event 'networX: Inspiring Rural Europe'<sup>(2)</sup> (April 2019) and the joint European Commission CLLD conference 'Post 2020: Local action

in a changing world'<sup>(3)</sup> (December 2019). 'networX' involved over 400 rural stakeholders including almost 200 participants from LAGs and NRNs in actively networking for LEADER. The joint CLLD event

involved the European Commission - DG Agriculture and Rural Development and the ENRD CP in supporting over 80 LEADER LAGs in networking with other local development stakeholders.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

LEADER networking has demonstrated its critical value by enabling creativity, inspiration and greater self-confidence to flourish in local communities. By providing support to micro enterprises, LEADER has encouraged the creation of thousands of jobs, helped promote local products, rural tourism and natural and cultural resources, in a bid to revitalise rural areas.

Today's rural world is a very different place from the one it was about thirty years ago when LEADER was first launched. The focus of many LAGs has now shifted towards other vital issues such as climate change, mobility, generational renewal, nutrition and food supply.

For Jean-Francois Pêcheur, "There are alarming signals everywhere and if we do not all start addressing these

issues collectively the fight will be difficult to win." As part of this he advocates for LEADER to scale up and start financing larger-scale projects, to achieve a bigger impact.

The challenge – and the necessity – for LEADER is to get as many people as possible involved in the process. This requires capacity-building and new ways of working and networking. Hopefully the new European and national Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) networks proposed by the European Commission for the next programming period will satisfy these needs.

### MORE LEADER NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

**ENRD** – the ENRD Contact Point provides a package of networking support for all LEADER stakeholders which is freely available for the network of LAGs and National Rural Networks in 27 EU Member States. ENRD Contact Point support includes providing stakeholders with networking tools, materials, activities and events. Main tools include the LEADER Toolkit, LAG Database, CLLD Partner search and Project Database.

More info: [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld_en)

**ELARD** – the European LEADER Association is an international non-profit association set up to contribute to the LEADER/CLLD implementation in Europe. ELARD joins together almost 2 500 Local Action Groups from 26 countries, including from countries that are not members of the European Union but have adopted and are implementing the LEADER methodology.

More info: <http://www.elard.eu>

**LINC** is a European Conference which combines exchange of experience with sport events and European cuisine. LINC is an initiative from LAGs and National Network Units for rural development in Austria, Germany, Estonia and Finland.

More info: <http://www.info-linc.eu>

(2) 'networX' was an event recognising the value of networking for rural development, demonstrating the results of the past ten years of rural networking and proactively looking at its future. See the highlights report of the 'networX' LEADER session at [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/networx\\_leader\\_highlights.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/networx_leader_highlights.pdf) and presentations at [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/all-about-networx-inspiring-rural-europe\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/all-about-networx-inspiring-rural-europe_en)

(3) This was a major event showcasing how thousands of citizens are successfully using the 'bottom-up' approach for sustainable development in their areas, known as CLLD (community-led local development): [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/cms/farnet2/news-events/events/conferences/post-2020-local-action-changing-world-3-4-december-brussels\\_lv](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/cms/farnet2/news-events/events/conferences/post-2020-local-action-changing-world-3-4-december-brussels_lv)



## 6. Innovation

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LEADER has been a significant policy innovation for the EU and its focus on experimental new approaches has become very successful. Today, LEADER is one of the EU's flagship methodologies for supporting innovation in community development, social inclusion, sustainable development and regional networking. It is known and respected both in EU Member States and non-EU countries for the fresh ideas it brings, the opportunities it offers, and its positive impacts.

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**INNOVATION IN ACTION**

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**STRATEGIC INNOVATION**

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**RURAL GOVERNANCE**

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**NEW IDEAS**

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**EVALUATION AS INNOVATION**

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**LOOKING AHEAD**

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### **BY TIM HUDSON**

Tim's LEADER experience dates from 1996 and includes work as a LAG manager, Scottish LEADER network Secretary, advisor during Lithuania's first call for LEADER-type strategies and evaluator for UNDP LEADER techniques. He joined the ENRD Contact Point in 2008 to launch and produce the EU Rural Review and EAFRD Projects Brochure. He collaborates with the current ENRD Contact Point as a multimedia expert.

## INTRODUCTION

Innovation has always been a core component of the LEADER methodology and so much so that the original Community Initiative's acronym could have been launched as 'LEAIDER'. The specific emphasis on innovation in LEADER however is not always a concept that is simple to grasp for rural communities. In practical terms it means using the LEADER approach to help seek out and foster novel solutions to local problems or to taking advantage of new local opportunities, and LEADER has a strong track record in this area. Hence, one of the key lessons learned from almost 30 years of LEADER experience has been the importance of capacity building. LEADER's possibility to fund capacity building alongside projects can help achieve the right conditions to foster innovation. Time is often needed at the start of a LEADER process to help beneficiaries properly understand the relevance and potential of innovation. This is not always an easy task.

I recall when I first worked with LEADER in 1996, managing a LAG covering Scotland's Loch Ness area. At that time, it often felt easier to persuade people that a large prehistoric monster lived in the locality than it was to persuade rural communities about the merits of innovation for them. The word 'innovation' was considered high-brow and rather academic. It was not a

word that rural communities used in daily life and this was initially an obstacle. Rural residents and their representatives questioned the need for 'innovation' because they felt that focusing on novelties was a luxury and they had more pressing priorities for the EU funds that were being made available through LEADER.

It can take time to shift such doubts, but LEADER has shown that win-win solutions exist through explaining what innovation means in practice. As a result, my LAG's communities began to realise that they could achieve their goals through thinking innovatively. They adapted and, for example, they began to think about 'modernising' their community halls rather than simply 'repairing' them. They learned quickly that by understanding what innovation meant in LEADER they could achieve their priorities as well as test many new ideas.

Once grasped, the concept of innovation can thus be deployed with great effect and deliver real benefits. This has been demonstrated across rural Europe, including by the Loch Ness communities where ingenuity and LEADER helped achieve a broad spectrum of local development priorities – ranging from encouraging local farmers to produce alternative arable crops to developing multi-purpose facilities for rural services.

## INNOVATION IN ACTION

LEADER's in-built ability to finance and facilitate the type of rural capacity building noted above is widely recognised as a success factor

for the methodology. Frank Kelly from Ireland's Donegal LAG highlights this point noting, "Few project ideas are rejected for LEADER support here

because LEADER allows us time to work hands-on with applicants to nurture rural innovation and design eligible projects".



### DONEGAL LOCAL DEVELOPMENT (IRELAND)

The innovative LEADER project 'Ekso Bionics Exoskeleton' enables rehabilitation of patients recovering from spinal injuries, strokes and brain injuries. The specialist exoskeleton suit can be moved to wherever it is needed, allowing people with neurological injuries or illnesses to recover in their own rural community.

It took only three months to operate at full capacity (30 sessions per week) and the project is now financially self-sustainable. LEADER support helped the beneficiary to employ two full-time project staff, and another four jobs have been created for contractors.

Frank Kelly from Donegal Local Development explains: "Healthcare projects are not generally eligible, but we were able to work with the NGO applicant, the No Barriers Foundation, to draw out their project's innovative features. This process helped us confirm that the project was not providing mainstream healthcare and that it was an essential rural service for a high number of people. It therefore could fit well with our LEADER strategy's social inclusion objectives covering basic services, and its success shows what is possible when entrepreneurship is given a chance by LEADER."

[https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/purchase-eskoskeleton-bionic-rehabilitation-suit\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/purchase-eskoskeleton-bionic-rehabilitation-suit_en)



© No Barriers Foundation

Frank Kelly believes that the technical assistance available through LEADER for animation provides useful flexibility to make more innovation happen than is possible through other rural development tools. “LEADER’s

hands-on approach gives us time to enable new types of useful projects to get started that would not have happened as quickly. An example of this is a project providing basic services to people in rural areas

who need rehabilitation support. The Ekso Bionics Exoskeleton project is very innovative because it is the first time such high-tech equipment is available in our LEADER area.” (see box page 30)

## STRATEGIC INNOVATION

Innovation in LEADER can be encouraged and supported at two levels: individual projects supported by the LAG and at the level of the LAG’s overall strategy, and together they can be mutually reinforcing. Donegal’s success in encouraging rural innovation at project level has been assisted by a formal commitment in the LEADER territory’s development strategy to inspire new opportunities. Fixing such strategic intentions within official documentation is an important factor that can aid LEADER’s ability to catalyse innovation at both project and territorial levels.

Achieving strategic innovation at the level of a LEADER territory is illustrated by France’s Pays de Verdun LAG (see box on this page). Here a digitalisation initiative has been implemented to help fill gaps in digital skills and related infrastructure. Lorraine Caillas from the LAG explains how, “Our LEADER action plan is structured to allow innovative projects. We have decided to use digital technologies as a tool for economic and social development to attract new residents. Rural areas can be more attractive places to live than big urban areas as long as they are connected to infrastructure. The lack of high-capacity broadband in some areas hinders territorial development.”

Gaps in infrastructure or skills still hinder innovation in rural Europe, but projects like Pays de Verdun’s digitalisation initiative underscore the achievements that LEADER



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### LAG PAYS DE VERDUN (FRANCE)

A key LAG objective in France’s Pays de Verdun area is to improve digital skills through an inclusive strategy that improves employment prospects for agriculture, tourism and other rural business sectors. E-commerce websites for farmers, tourists and other local businesses are now in place. These help visitors enjoy the LAG territory’s cultural resources, increase the visibility of rural trades, and provide modern tools for coordinating short supply-chains. Young people are a primary target group for the project’s work to address depopulation pressures and a mobile training unit is in operation to boost digital skills throughout isolated parts of the LEADER territory.

Innovation here relates to the area-wide focus on addressing ‘digital divide’ challenges and the fact that the LAG’s territorial approach to digital inclusion was new. Project elements supported include facilitating networking among digital experts in a community to identify challenges and opportunities for digital developments. The project’s knowledge transfer process has achieved synergies and led to the setting up of services such as ‘fab labs’ or co-working spaces. Together these facilitate digital entrepreneurship among the local population and can also help encourage people to relocate their businesses to rural areas.

[https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/leader-example-2020-goal-digital-territory-france\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/leader-example-2020-goal-digital-territory-france_en)

can make possible. This project also highlights how LEADER can be particularly useful as an innovative complement to larger infrastructure

budgets. Scope exists, for example, to coordinate LEADER strategies with other ESI Fund operational programmes, in order to promote and

optimise uptake of the infrastructure or entrepreneurship measures.

## RURAL GOVERNANCE

LEADER's achievements in skills training are some of its greatest, especially locally-led and locally-customised training. In addition to business skills like digital knowhow, other types of useful new skillsets have also been fostered by LEADER. These include rural governance expertise. If we compare rural governance before and after LEADER it is often possible to see a difference. LEADER's innovative model has successfully introduced (and in many cases mainstreamed) decision-making processes based on partnership and stakeholders' participation, as well as localised strategic planning processes, in rural areas across the entire continent, and further afield.

Several countries neighbouring the EU, as well as in Asia, Africa and the Americas have all acknowledged and adopted the benefits from introducing policy innovations akin to LEADER. Such innovations are used for a multitude of purposes, all of which have been new and therefore innovative in their own context. A noteworthy example is a local development process in Turkey, where Local Action Groups are growing in various parts of the country, supported via the EU-funded pre-accession IPARD programme (see box on this page). 25 Local Action Groups had been created in Turkey under IPARD, whereas now already 55 Groups operate. More are coming.

LEADER often enjoys a 'feel good factor' that can help it attract people's interest, involvement, and contributions. Few other EU-wide

actions achieve the same amount of voluntary effort from citizens as LEADER does. This innovative LEADER characteristic leverages a substantial amount of human capital and remains a beneficial achievement for rural Europe.

LEADER gets rural people involved in rural development probably more than any other policy catalyst. Its innovative bottom-up partnership approach can bring together people with skillsets which, when combined, create new ideas through synergy.



© Unsplash

### A LEADER-INSPIRED EXPERIENCE IN TURKEY

When the LEADER approach started in Turkey some ten years ago, the idea of people from the local public and private sector and NGOs jointly discussing and taking decisions on their development was almost inconceivable. IPARD supported new approaches, consultations and involvement by providing training and animation to the first 25 Local Action Groups. More groups were then established and built their own local development strategies. EU funding opportunities are enabling these LAGs to implement their strategies, provide training and animation, and support small collective projects to boost community life, diversification, rural tourism, the environment and higher value agricultural products.

In the Turkish context the local application of LEADER is a highly innovative rural governance approach which helps communities make common decisions about territorial development and funding priorities.

- [https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/international-cooperation/enlargement/pre-accession-assistance/ipard-initiatives\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/international-cooperation/enlargement/pre-accession-assistance/ipard-initiatives_en)
- <https://ipard.tarim.gov.tr/Default-en>

## NEW IDEAS

**D**emand for new ideas is strong in the countryside and this point is underlined by Jiří Krist, chair of the Czech National LAG Network and the LAG Opavsko. “We are a young movement and as such we are in favour of new ideas. We live in a time when old ways and methods cease to work and innovation is not a choice but a necessity. Many ideas come from networking with LAGs at national and international level.”

Cooperation within the LAG Opavsko partnership led to an innovative idea for financing climate action. It is implemented through a LAG-led credit mechanism for funding energy efficiency investments, combining European and national funds and loans from citizens (see box on this page).

Combining microcredit with micro grants represents a major innovation opportunity for LEADER that could transform and boost the

methodology’s potential for the future. There is a potential for LAGs to test new microfinance ideas in order to help LAG budgets go further while



### LAG OPAVSKO (CZECH REPUBLIC)

The LAG tried a unique financial model to promote low-carbon investments, combining so-called ‘boiler subsidies’ grants financed from European funds with repayable ‘boiler loans’ from national sources.

The loans that are repaid by the citizens return to the municipalities and can be reinvested in other projects aimed at reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions or saving energy. This LEADER innovation helped reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and increased the share of clean sources of heat and electricity used in the area. It also led to significant financial savings for municipalities, companies and citizens, and created skilled jobs in the region.

The project is implemented in 17 of the 52 municipalities in the LAG territory and the LAG is measuring air quality in collaboration with the largest national electricity provider to assess the project’s impacts.

[http://www.masopavsko.cz/dotacni-podpory/kotlikove-dotace/?ftresult\\_menu=dotace](http://www.masopavsko.cz/dotacni-podpory/kotlikove-dotace/?ftresult_menu=dotace)



making investing more accessible and affordable for rural Europe by helping fill gaps in provision of small-scale credit. Rural services

and entrepreneurship could be big beneficiaries from such an innovation in revolving finance for locally-led development and the European

Commission's website on financial instruments ([www.fi-compass.eu](http://www.fi-compass.eu)) contains useful advice about using microfinance.

## EVALUATION AS INNOVATION

LEADER is helping introduce innovative ways of measuring the impacts of local development activities.

In Sweden, the Halmstad University and the Gothenburg University developed the LEADER 'Effektbarometer' (Impact Barometer) in 2018, with funding from the Swedish Board of Agriculture. The Barometer developed impact assessment criteria based on

research on 70 LEADER projects in Sweden and other EU-funded projects. Five Swedish LAGs are now using the Barometer to coach selected project holders to plan for stronger and more long-term impacts, embedding 'impact thinking' in future LEADER projects from their initial phases.

In Finland, the LAG Liiveri has developed a monitoring and evaluation model based on three 'layers':

elements to monitor on an ongoing basis (daily to annually), elements to evaluate once during the programming period, and elements to evaluate for specific projects. They have collected quantitative and qualitative data about the LDS' impacts and developed a model to present effectively the results to different audiences. Their approach is unique in Finland.

## LOOKING AHEAD

This review of LEADER's achievements in promoting rural innovation has shown that LEADER innovations manifest themselves in many different forms. These can be harnessed by LAGs for an assortment of rural development activity extending across climate action, capacity building, economic and territorial development, employment, services, microfinance and much more.

LEADER's proven ability to stimulate innovation gives it a firm foundation to help rural Europe evolve and, in line with the Green Deal goals to transform Europe's economy and society onto a more sustainable path<sup>(1)</sup>, work towards ensuring that 'no one is left behind' in Europe's countryside.



© MeuseTech

(1) The European Green Deal, Communication from the European Commission, COM(2019)640 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2019%3AG40%3AFIN>



## INTRODUCTION

When LEADER was first launched as a Community Initiative it only supported the implementation of local actions that took place ‘in’ local rural areas. Cooperation ‘between’ areas was not included in the EU guidelines at that time. Yet some of the 217 pioneer LAGs and their LAG staff felt there was a need to improve the ‘development support’ in their area, to open themselves up to other areas and to look outside their local intervention sector to find new answers to questions which arose in their local area. They realised that working with practitioners from other areas enabled them to build more efficient Local Development Strategies together.

Under the cooperation activities of LEADER I, more than 300 transnational partnerships were formed. These first voluntary initiatives, reacting to needs on the ground, led to the introduction of a formal concept of cooperation projects as a specific measure under LEADER II (1994-1999) with a dedicated budget. The very existence of LEADER cooperation is thus a direct result of a tangible bottom-up approach... so LEADER-like!

Today, the range of opportunities for cooperation has widened both in geographical terms and in the types of projects that can be implemented.

The EU legal framework currently provides, unless otherwise defined by a Member State Managing Authority, that LEADER cooperation may concern partnerships involving at least one LAG and one or more rural and/or urban area located in the same Member State (interterritorial cooperation), in another Member State, or even rural areas outside EU borders (transnational cooperation).

LEADER cooperation can take various shapes. It may be a simple study trip for actors from one area to another, or an exchange of experience leading to tangible investments and joint actions. Cooperation can be aimed at introducing new approaches to local challenges in the territories of the partner LAGs. But what makes cooperation in the LEADER sense different from other types of twinning projects or networking (even in LEADER) is the fact that, “the cooperation project should be a concrete activity with clearly identified deliverables or outputs producing benefits for the territories concerned.”<sup>(2)</sup>

In fact, this means some very essential things.

## COOPERATION AS PART OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Firstly, cooperation is a tool for LAGs to make their local development strategy a success.

The idea is to use cooperation to do things which link with the rest of the LEADER interventions, but to use cooperation as an asset, a tool which enhances and complements the Local Development Strategy.

The choice of the theme for cooperation actions is thus key to ensuring a strong link between the cooperation activities and the rest of the local actions and for the outcomes to be clearly visible in the areas involved. For instance, the French LAG Pays de Guéret is using a LEADER cooperation project to pursue the objectives of its local strategy – in attracting and

welcoming new people to the area who can drive change – by setting up co-working spaces (see box on

this page). Cooperation offers an opportunity to learn from others and share experiences.



### PROJECT ‘COLABORA’ – LAG PAYS DE GUÉRET (FRANCE)

The focus of the local development strategy of the LAG Pays de Guéret, in central France, is on maintaining an active population and welcoming new entrepreneurs in the area. In line with this, the LAG is using transnational cooperation to set up and manage co-working spaces in rural areas.

The LEADER cooperation project ‘CoLabora’ involves partners from six countries: the LAG Pays de Guéret (France), the Craioibhin Community Enterprise Centre (Ireland), the Vale of Glamorgan Council (UK), the LAG Leipziger Muldenland (Germany) and the LAGs Zied Zeme and Pieriga Partnership (Latvia).

The project includes study visits to co-working spaces in the partner countries together with more formal meetings. The project partners’ aim is to understand the economic advantages co-working spaces bring to rural areas, as well as the practical issues related to the set-up and maintenance of such spaces.

<https://www.agglo-grandgueret.fr/actualites/colabora-les-espaces-de-coworking-en-zone-rurale-au-coeur-dun-projet-de-cooperation>

(2) DG Agriculture and Rural Development (2017), Guidance for implementation of the LEADER Co-operation activities in Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020, Draft version dated 11/10/2013 – latest update: 27/04/2017, p. 9, [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/leader-cooperation\\_guide\\_en\\_update\\_april-2017.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/leader-cooperation_guide_en_update_april-2017.pdf)

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES BEYOND BORDERS

A second important element in LEADER cooperation is the way that cooperation projects really make an impact as they develop tangible actions at two complementary levels: between all partners from different LAGs (joint actions) and also at the local level in each LAG partner's area. These local actions may be financed from a shared cooperation project budget or under the budget devoted to the local strategy, depending on the decisions made by the LAGs. This 'two-tier approach' anchors the project at the local level and makes the impacts of cooperation more visible and tangible.

In the 'Slow Trips' cooperation project (see box on this page) 14 partners



### PROJECT 'SLOW TRIPS' – LAG ZEITKULTUR KERNLAND (AUSTRIA)

Fourteen LAGs from Austria, Luxembourg, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Romania and Lithuania joined forces to develop 'Slow Trips', under the coordination of the Austrian LAG Zeitkultur Oststeirisches Kernland. The project, which started in January 2019, builds on the results of a LEADER project implemented during the previous programming period by the Luxembourgish LAG Atert-Wark called 'CultTrips'.

'Slow Trips' offers 'participative tourism' where the visitors discover and experience the everyday life of the local population through genuine encounters that enrich both guests and local hosts. This form of sustainable tourism adds value to natural resources and cultural heritage while creating new opportunities for local economies. Local tourism businesses and agricultural businesses can diversify their activities to meet the increasing demand for this kind of tourism.

Cooperation enabled the project partners to define a common concept of slow tourism, while each of them has identified relevant places and stakeholders to involve in their area. The project partners are working on a website to improve the joint marketing of their tourist offer.

- <http://zeitkultur.at>
- [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/rural-connections-magazine-springsummer-2019-edition\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/rural-connections-magazine-springsummer-2019-edition_en)



© LAG Zeitkultur Oststeirisches Kernland, Christian Strasseger

from seven EU Member States are working together to define and develop a concept of ‘slow tourism’ as an alternative to classic mass tourism. In parallel, each of them is working with stakeholders in their own area to build a shared understanding of the ‘Slow Trips’ concept and encourage local businesses to diversify their tourism offer in line with this approach.

According to Wolfgang Berger, Manager of the Austrian LAG Zeitkultur Kernland, the move towards slow tourism is pan-European. “The boundaries and key values of this form of tourism can therefore only be determined collectively. That is why ‘Slow Trips’ has been designed as a transnational cooperation (TNC) project. The TNC approach is the best way to understand common opportunities and challenges, and the diverse and specific solutions that are being found. The diversity provides real added value.”

Cooperation can address opportunities, as seen in the examples above, but may also be a very useful way to deal with challenges that go beyond national boundaries. LAGs in Poland and Lithuania joined forces to train young local leaders in their respective rural communities (see box on this page), facing similar socioeconomic issues: a sparse local population, significant youth outmigration and a need for social integration.

“We wanted young people to see both the needs and resources of their closest environment and to develop solutions to local problems based on these resources,” says Agnieszka Wojtkowska, Manager of the Polish LAG Tygiel Doliny Bugu. “We are convinced that community development and social change depend on people – the community, the human being, local leaders. We managed to prepare such leaders for their community.”



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**PROJECT ‘YOUNG LOCAL LEADERS’ (POLAND - LITHUANIA)**

This LEADER cooperation project is the result of a partnership between two Polish LAGs – LAGs Tygiel Doliny Bugu and Let’s Together – and the Lithuanian LAG Nemunas.

Each project partner selected ten aspiring ‘young local leaders’ strongly committed to helping their rural communities improve social inclusion and strengthen community bonds. The project used the local community organisation method to prepare the young local leaders to (re)create community ties based on a sense of identity, using the potential of the region’s traditions, customs and history to strengthen the social fabric of small rural communities.

Three camps were organised between 2018 and 2019. Activities included workshops, training activities and games and culminated in the restoration or improvement of community centres and their surroundings in the three partners’ areas. The project also involved local authorities, institutions and local entrepreneurs who shared knowledge and information on (youth) entrepreneurship.

- <http://www.tygiel dolinybugu.pl>
- <https://vgnemunas.lt>



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## MAKING COOPERATION EASIER

EADER cooperation is a dynamic and relatively easy tool to extend a Local Development Strategy, transfer knowledge and enable individual and collective capacity-building and joint action, as well as add value to rural areas.

Cooperation leads to innovation: confronting practices and working methods requires each partner to ‘think out of the box’, allows experimenting with new approaches and opens their eyes to new perspectives.

Cooperation is also a tool for ‘soft’ evaluation. When working with others, local actors can take a step back from their day-to-day work and see their activities from a different perspective. In addition, exchanges and visits allow

them to get other LAGs’ perspectives on their work.

The administrative framework for cooperation however remains challenging. A first practical issue concerns language. In most cooperation projects the partners choose a common working language in which they write all relevant documents. The opportunity to apply for cooperation funding in this common language, when the selection process is external to the LAG, would facilitate the work.

LAGs in different Member States are currently subject to different rules and different timeframes for the implementation of cooperation projects. Various suggestions have

been raised about how to manage this in the future, including the introduction of a common list of selection criteria, shared calendars for Managing Authorities opening calls for cooperation projects, and even the idea to manage such projects directly at the EU level. In its legal proposals for the 2021-2027 programming period the European Commission has proposed that in the future the LAGs themselves select cooperation projects, a task currently possible also for Managing Authorities.

The ENRD – in cooperation with Member State Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks and Local Action Groups – has developed a set of tools to help LAGs support transnational cooperation in the EU.



© LAG Tygiel Doliny Bugu

At the beginning of LEADER transnational cooperation, technical assistance budgets were available at EU level. They enabled LAGs to cover up to a maximum of 100% of the costs connected with meetings between potential transnational partners, provided they had already defined possible common objectives and tangible actions. This system was a very strong incentive and many Managing Authorities introduced this mechanism in the last programming period.

In the current programming period, preparatory technical support for interterritorial and transnational cooperation projects is available to Local Action Groups if they can demonstrate that they are working towards the implementation of a concrete project.<sup>(3)</sup>

One common aspect of all cooperation projects is the enthusiasm of all those involved! Further to all the benefits it brings, cooperation can be a huge breath of fresh air and once you have been involved in a cooperation project, you just want to start another one because of everything it brings to you and your area.



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### ENRD SUPPORT TOOLS

The **LEADER Cooperation page** ([https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-cooperation\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-cooperation_en)) on the ENRD website includes:

- LEADER Cooperation Landscape – overview of LEADER Cooperation rules in 61 EU countries and regions ('Useful documents')
- LEADER Cooperation fact sheets
- The ENRD guidance to LEADER Transnational Cooperation (TNC)
- The updated DG AGRI Guidance for implementation of LEADER Cooperation activities in Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020 (in 22 EU languages)
- Proposals of the ENRD LEADER Cooperation Practitioner-Led Working Group
- Useful document templates for transnational cooperation projects

Find your cooperation partner using the **CLLD Partner Search**:

<https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/clld-partner-search/en>

and the **ENRD LAG database**:

[https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/lag-database\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/lag-database_en)

(3) DG Agriculture and Rural Development (2017), Guidance for implementation of the LEADER Co-operation activities in Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020, Draft version dated 11/10/2013 – latest update: 27/04/2017, p. 9, [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/leader-cooperation\\_guide\\_en\\_update\\_april-2017.pdf](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/leader-cooperation_guide_en_update_april-2017.pdf)

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EAFRD Projects Brochure  
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