

The Tartu Declaration

Renewing LEADER/CLLD for 2020+

On **22 and 23 November 2016**, the ELARD conference “**Renewing LEADER/CLLD for 2020+; Celebrating 25 years of LEADER in Europe!**” was held in **Tartu, Estonia**.

At this conference, the 140 delegates from 25 European countries representing about 2000 LEADER Local Action Groups of Europe, rural networks, managing authorities and the European Commission, developed the **following vision** for the year 2027 as regards the role of LEADER/CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) and local action groups:

LEADER/CLLD VISION 2027

LEADER in 2027 is an independent, trusted, creative, well-known, solution-oriented movement based on community ownership with a goal of having smart, vibrant rural communities oriented to the needs of their members. LEADER is more visible and works from people to people. Local Action Groups (LAGs) are the basis of regional development, using the LEADER approach, having support, respect, flexibility and trust at the regional, national and European level. The mutual understanding of the LEADER principles interconnects all levels and actors. Local development strategies are based on rural people's real needs and implemented by truly autonomous LAGs. There is a strong trust between stakeholders throughout the delivery chain. LAGs have the capacity to involve the passive actors within their territories and measure the added value of their work both in terms of qualitative and quantitative indicators. Member States/regions are able to design a single CLLD source of funding from the various European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) and implement it under one coordinating body (Managing Authority) following one unique set of rules at the EU level. LAGs have a multi-funded, harmonised approach to transnational cooperation throughout Europe and with third countries as an effective tool for rural development.

Based on the resolutions developed by the delegates of the conference, and with the contributions of several LEADER Local Action Groups Networks **the following declaration**, directed at the European institutions and the Member States, has been adopted.

1. We, representatives of LEADER Local Action Groups, believe that the current political developments in Europe make the **25-year-old LEADER/CLLD approach more important than ever before**. It is a European-rooted bottom-up development approach that can help to counterbalance anti-European tendencies in local communities by contributing to social inclusion and sustainable economic development in the territories where it is applied. Furthermore, the LEADER method is a good partnership tool for enhancing good rural governance and it has been the only instrument that has brought the decision-making as regards European funding to the very local level. By using the LEADER approach, **local communities have taken on the responsibility** for deciding and designing their own living and working environment. Therefore, we strongly support using this potential when designing EU and national policies, and believe **the initiative of communities and their role in rural development should certainly grow in the future**.
2. In order to develop the full potential and overcome the complications we experience today in implementing LEADER/CLLD, we believe **it is vital to improve the efficiency of LEADER/CLLD**. We very much value the support that the European Commission has given and is giving to the LEADER approach and are aware of the need of being accountable for the achievements. But we need **a better dialogue and more efficient solutions to significantly improve the quality of LEADER/CLLD implementation**. Preparation for the programme period 2021-2027 provides a critical opportunity to decide on the changes which are needed in implementing this longstanding approach. We therefore invite the European Commission and Member States **to enter into closer dialogue** with LAGs and their representative LEADER networks and to **trust their experience, which they have gained throughout 25 years**.

3. Since LEADER was mainstreamed in the rural development programmes in 2007, the use of the LEADER method has moved away from its main purpose, which is the empowerment of local communities to shape their living and working environment. Instead of using the method more prominently in rural development programmes as a horizontal axis, as it was suggested by the European Union strategic guidelines for rural development for the period 2007-2013 and the Commission Regulation for that period, a measure-based, over bureaucratized system was created, with a focus on the details of the costs instead of an audience-friendly and development-oriented tool guided towards sustainable and long-term results. Even though this negative development has been stated in a number of evaluations and reports, the practical implementation is getting increasingly worse in the current period, with LEADER being a measure of the RDPs. We acknowledge that there has to be a reasonable balance between substantive development and the use of technical instruments to assure necessary procedures for eligibility and control. Today however there is an imbalance, with the focus lying strongly on sound financial management. This tendency is already having a damaging effect on local and regional development and is not sustainable in the longer perspective and thus can devalue the LEADER method. **The crucial purpose of LEADER – to empower rural communities – must come back into focus** when designing the new implementation framework. **The key principles of the LEADER method have to be re-asserted and treated with full respect** when designing policies and the implementation framework at the Member State and European level. **These principles are:** the bottom-up approach, area-based local development strategies, public-private partnership, innovation, an integrated and multi-sectoral approach, networking and cooperation as well as decentralised administration. **The implementation framework for LEADER/CLLD should support the implementation of these principles rather than be a hindrance.**
4. The LEADER approach has gained a broader perspective in the current programming period under 'community-led local development' (CLLD). The opportunity for supporting the LEADER method from various ESI Funds is without doubt a positive development. It should, however, become clearer which of the Funds should support what, and if some Member States decide to only use the EAFRD for rural LAGs, then LEADER needs to be able to cover the broad spectrum of development actions, which honour the potential of this approach. **The flexibility of selecting a wide range of development actions has to be ensured for LAGs** in order to guarantee the implementation of local development strategies (LDS) according to the real needs and potential of the rural area.
5. The importance of green economy, social inclusion, migration issues, regional clusters, rural-urban linkages, smart solutions and IT technologies is growing in rural development. LAGs are promoters of innovative solutions in their areas. Numerous LEADER areas have chosen innovation as a key component and driving force to implement their local development strategies and give a boost to their areas, which is a very positive development. We must also be aware though, that innovation and 'smart' development should not be imposed top-down as a recipe for resolving all problems in rural areas. Innovation is one of the elements inherent to the LEADER approach, which has to be tackled by rural communities themselves using their own motivation and assessing their needs in this respect. **LAGs have to be provided with sufficient resources and the eligibility conditions to develop their own capability to support bottom-up innovation and organise the networking and training required for local stakeholders.**
6. LAGs are the development organisations of their areas. They have direct links with rural enterprises, municipalities and the civil society for building a stronger capacity in the area involving local and regional resources and the skills of people. It is necessary to create **conditions allowing LAGs to concentrate on their role of animating the area and helping the best ideas to emerge and be implemented.** There is a need to raise the awareness of authorities about the value of animation activities, including transnational cooperation projects in order to motivate and support LAGs to implement animation activities. **An appropriate share of budgets has to be assured for running and animation costs.**
7. We believe that **LEADER/CLLD should be recognised as a powerful development approach in its own right**, implemented through integrated local development strategies which call upon all relevant parts of European and national funding. In order to achieve the full potential of the LEADER approach in addition to European Rural Development Policy there is a need for a wider platform and LEADER has to be an integral part of all relevant EU and national policies.
8. For the reasons stated above, we believe that **more power and responsibility should be given to Local Action Groups and their representative networks to design a clear framework for the implementation of LEADER/CLLD. Significantly improved communication and real partnership have to be established** between representative networks of LAGs, Managing Authorities and the European Commission. The current definitions in the Common Provisions Regulation fail to safeguard the integrity of the integrated approach, which is at the heart of LEADER/CLLD. Member States should not be given the power to dilute the comprehensive multi-sectoral approach through making their own interpretation of regulations and the LEADER approach. It has to be assured that the selection of activities and projects (including transnational cooperation projects) to implement local development strategies is undertaken independently by LAGs without

intervention by Managing Authorities. **Good practices where LAGs design their own measures have to be promoted more widely.** Only in this way can the LEADER approach reach its full potential and the implementation of LDS be in full accordance with local needs.

9. To achieve efficiency in the future implementation of multi-funded CLLD, of which LEADER is a part, we call for the following conditions to be met before the start of the 2021-2027 programming period.
 - a. A timely definition of simple rules, guidelines, evaluation and IT systems aiming at maximum harmonisation between the ESI Funds. We need a **balanced legal framework that ensures the correct application of the LEADER method and its principles in Member States on the one hand, and a significant decrease in the bureaucratic burden that lies on LAGs on the other hand.** Not just simplification, but **deregulation** is the keyword for designing implementation framework in Member States. The new political and economic context should be used to reduce bureaucratic burdens and launch a simple framework, which is focused on opportunities and trust, not on restrictions and mistrust. Instead of focussing on preventing mistakes we should think about the needs of communities more and **how regulations can support LAGs and local beneficiaries when implementing their local development strategies.**
 - b. Rules, guidelines, evaluation and IT systems must be elaborated with the genuine inclusion of all stakeholders. IT systems for e-applications and for monitoring and evaluation have to be built on **flexible and open platforms in order to avoid standardisation and to enable LAGs to retain the uniqueness of their local development strategies.**
 - c. The only way to ensure an efficient implementation of multi-funded CLLD is **for the management to be undertaken by a single coordinating body** at a Member State or regional level. At the EU level, a CLLD committee should be set up as a subgroup of the EGESIF (Expert Group on European Structural Investment Funds) to monitor and guide the implementation in Member States.
 - d. The implementation of LEADER/CLLD is bound to fail if it is dominated by the threat of sanctions at the local level. Since an important aim of LEADER is the emergence of innovative solutions, we need to be aware of the risks often associated with experimental projects. In order to promote innovative solutions adapted rules should be considered to fund experimental activities and projects.
 - e. **The collegial spirit has to be strengthened.** All stakeholders involved in the process, LAGs and authorities need to be well-trained and made aware of the specificities of the LEADER/CLLD implementation. This can be achieved when authorities and LAGs understand each other's realities through well-coordinated communication.
 - f. Representative networks of LAGs must be accepted **as full partners** by Managing Authorities in ensuring a smooth implementation. They must be involved from the outset in the design of administrative procedures and IT tools in the Member States and the process coordinated by the European Commission.
 - g. Harmonisation of rules for transnational (TNC) and inter-territorial cooperation projects is crucial and therefore should be established at the EU level. A major obstacle is that rules, procedures, timeframes, common costs differ across the Member States and regions, often resulting in the initiation and implementation of TNC and inter-territorial cooperation projects becoming more time and resource consuming. **Selection and approval of TNC and inter-territorial projects has to be done by LAGs.** There is a need to create a common understanding by all LEADER actors regarding the benefits and added value of TNC projects. Sharing good practices using new methods and more practical approaches has to be enabled and integrated in the above processes.

We urge the European Commission, other European institutions and Member States to engage all their efforts in a renewal of the framework for LEADER/CLLD when reforming the framework for the ESI Funds for the programming period 2021-2027.

The Declaration was composed using participatory methods during two days of conference workshops. Participants were from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom.

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