



European Network for
Rural Development

Key lessons about cooperation under LEADER

Overview of results from the 2007-2013 period

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This document draws on work carried out in the 2007-13 period¹ to identify the main conditions for successful cooperation and the steps that have been taken in the new regulations and the official guidance of the European Commission to make cooperation easier. It provides a starting point for discussions at the ENRD conference “Strengthening Local Development through Cooperation” (Milan, 25 September 2015) about how to put these and other proposals into practice.

The main benefits of cooperation

Cooperation between LAGs, either inter-territorial (within the same Member State) or transnational (between LAGs from different MS), can be a valuable tool to enhance the achievements of the local strategy.

In particular, cooperation can help to:

- Increase the *knowledge and awareness* of rural stakeholders about new opportunities and ways of doing things. It can encourage innovation and “thinking out of the box”, helping local people to learn new skills and competences.
- Achieve *economies of scale, and “critical mass”* by working together on common challenges or common assets and resources (e.g. food, immigration, a shared natural resource, cultural heritage etc.)

The second of these advantages is usually easier to achieve through inter-territorial cooperation or when partners are closer together – either physically, linguistically or culturally. However, both advantages can and should lead to concrete results in terms of improved local projects and local strategies, as well as less tangible benefits such as strengthening social capital and long term contacts both within and between areas.

The state of play

Due to these benefits, the number of LAGs involved in transnational cooperation increased dramatically in the early stages between LEADER 1 and LEADER 2 – but then declined slightly during LEADER+. In the 2007-13 period the total number of LAGs more than doubled to over 2 400 partnerships – but the proportion of those involved in TNC fell.

Significant differences can be observed between Member States and regions as regards the intensity with which LAGs cooperate. This can partly be explained by language and cultural barriers. But to a large extent it can be attributed to a series of **problems in cooperation rules and procedures and differences between Member States and regions.**

¹ Final report on “The State-of-play of the Implementation of Rural Development Programme Measure 421 in the EU-27”, published in May 2014 by the ENRD Contact Point; Final report of Focus Group 3 on the “Implementation of the cooperation measure in LEADER” (May 2010). Report on “Cooperation between rural areas: LEADER and extra- LEADER projects of Italian LAGs” prepared by the Italian Rural Network in 2014.

Many of these problems were identified by an earlier ENRD focus group which also proposed solutions. Many of these have, in turn been incorporated into the new EC regulations and guidance for transnational cooperation for the current programming period. In brief, if LAGs are to achieve the benefits of cooperation, a lot of attention must be paid to putting in place **adequate delivery systems** in the form of implementation rules that are **supportive, flexible and transparent**.

Supportive delivery systems:

- Should ideally enable the LAGs to select and approve cooperation projects themselves, instead of having to apply to the Managing Authority (MA) or Intermediate Body (IB);
- Should ensure funding for preparatory activities, i.e. the possibility for LAGs to obtain support for the costs of the initial exploratory meetings with partners, studies and other pre-project activities, irrespective of whether the cooperation project will eventually materialise or not;
- Should put in place tools which facilitate exchange and cooperation between LAGs, such as peer-to-peer meetings, cooperation events, guidance material, databases and partner search tools (this role is typically played by the National Rural Networks, NRNs);
- Should encourage cooperation with Third Countries by facilitating LAGs' access to additional funding sources (e.g. EuropeAid or bilateral cooperation programmes).

Flexible delivery systems:

- When LAGs do in fact need to apply for cooperation projects to the MA or IB, they should be allowed to submit applications at any time (i.e. on-going calls or very regular calls). This can help to avoid mis-match between the timing of calls between different MS or regions, and to help reduce delays in project approval which can occur if the MA/IB has to assess a large number of projects at the same time.
- The period of assessment and approval of cooperation projects by the MA or IB should be kept to the minimum to enable all partners to be ready to start their project at the same time.
- Eligibility rules should not be defined in too much detail. Often eligible cost types can be over-specified in national/regional legislation. One solution is to develop only a list of ineligible costs and consider all other types of costs eligible.
- Detailed rules concerning the number, size, duration etc. of cooperation projects should be avoided (e.g. rules determining the minimum or maximum number of cooperation projects per LAG).

- The definition of a “common action” should not be too restrictive, especially for transnational cooperation projects. There must be a concrete activity with clearly identified deliverables or outputs which benefit the territory but this can be capacity building and the transfer of experience.
- If cooperation projects are included in the LAG strategy, these should not be defined in excessive detail.
- Eligibility rules should allow for cooperation between partnerships financed by different funds in different types of areas (urban-rural-coastal) and/or different countries.
- Eligibility rules should allow the partners to finance certain common cost items (e.g. a joint publication or website). Restricting funding only to expenses incurred in the LAG territory can also be an important barrier.

Transparent delivery systems:

- All the relevant rules concerning cooperation projects should be known to LAGs as early as possible and they should be clear and easy to understand.
- Information about cooperation rules should be publicised where it can be easily accessed by potential cooperation partners from other MS/regions, ensuring translation where necessary.
- Where possible the rules and procedures between regions and between EU funds should be harmonised and publicised in a way that encourages cooperation.
- Guidance and advice should be provided to LAGs concerning rules and conditions for cooperation projects, as well as the contact details of the people responsible in the MA/IB who can reply to questions or clarify doubts.
- There should be periodic reviews of the cooperation delivery framework, carried out jointly by the MA/IB, NRN and interested LAGs, to identify barriers and propose improvements.

The table below demonstrates that many of these recommendations have been taken into account in the EU Regulations and guidance for the 2014-2020 period. Many Member States and regions are also using methods which make cooperation easier. This conference provides an opportunity to exchange experience on these initiatives and shift transnational cooperation into a higher gear.

Recommendation	Addressed at EU level through
Enabling LAGs to select and approve cooperation projects	LAGs may select all projects (Art. 34.3 of the CPR ²), and the EU Cooperation Guidance ³ strongly recommends that they do so, although MAs may in some cases derogate this right.
Funding for preparatory activities	Preparatory support for cooperation projects is mandatory in the RDPs (Art. 44.1(b) of the RDR ⁴ , Art. 35.1(c) of the CPR and the Cooperation Guidance p. 7).
Tools to facilitate exchange and cooperation	National Rural Networks should facilitate cooperation and provide support to cooperating LAGs (RDR Art. 54.3(iii)).
Encourage cooperation with Third Countries	Cooperation with rural areas in Third Countries is eligible for funding (Art. 44.1(a) of the RDR).
On-going calls	Member States must establish a system of ongoing application (RDR Art. 44.3); periodic calls should be launched at least 3-4 times a year (Cooperation Guidance, p. 10).
Reducing the period of assessment and approval of cooperation projects	Cooperation projects must be approved within 4 months from submission of application (Art. 44.3 of the RDR).
Possibility to finance common costs	Cooperation Guidance (p. 8) encourages eligibility of partners' share in common costs.
Flexible eligibility rules at MA level	Cooperation Guidance strongly recommends MAs not to be too restrictive in the description of the eligible costs (p. 7).
Flexible definition of "common activities"	The Cooperation Guidance explains that there must be a concrete activity with clearly identified deliverables, but these can include capacity building and transfer of experience (p. 7).
Avoidance of detailed rules on cooperation projects	Cooperation Guidance encourages a broad definition of the geographical scope, type of partners and beneficiaries (p. 5-6).
Early information on cooperation rules	Administrative procedures to select TNC projects must be published at the latest 2 years after RDP approval (RDR Art. 44.3).
Publishing cooperation rules in accessible ways, with translation	See above, administrative procedures must be publicly available.
Availability of guidance and help-line on cooperation	No specific guidance, but Annex III of the Implementing Regulation ⁵ requires MAs to publish contacts of people who can explain the criteria for selecting and evaluating the operations. Tools and guidance for cooperation are also being developed by the ENRD Contact Point.
Joint review of cooperation rules	No specific guidance, but NRNs should facilitate sharing and dissemination of analysis and evaluation findings (RDR, Art. 54.3).

² Common Provisions Regulation, 1303/2013

³ „Guidance for the implementation of the LEADER cooperation activities in Rural Development Programmes 2014-2020”.

⁴ Rural Development Regulation, 1305/2013

⁵ Commission Implementing Regulation no. 808/2014 laying down rules for the application of Rural Development Regulation 1305/2013