



ENRD webinar

1st meeting of the Thematic Group Making the seven LEADER principles work in practice for all LAGs under the CAP Strategic Plans

Highlights report

The first meeting of the Thematic Group (TG) was organised to facilitate discussion and exchanges between the TG members for a common understanding of the seven LEADER principles. The group discussed 'blocking' and 'conducive' factors as well as relevant Member State experiences related to the practical implementation of these seven LEADER principles.

These are: (1) appropriate territorial level (subregional), (2) bottom-up, (3) balanced/inclusive partnership of public and private local socio-economic interests, (4) (community-led local development) strategies, (5) networking, (6) innovative features in the local context, and (7) cooperation with other territorial actors.

This first meeting focused more specifically on the following three LEADER principles: subregional areas, bottom-up approach (led by Local Action Groups), and innovative elements in the local context.

Event Information

Date: 10 March 2022

Location: Virtual meeting

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point

Participants: 46 participants from 21 EU Member States, including MAs, NRNs, Paying Agencies, Local Action Groups (LAGs), the European Commission, regional/local authorities and other stakeholders and civil society organisations.

Outcomes: identification of key elements for defining three LEADER principles, relevant blocking factors and possible solutions proposed by Member State representatives.

Web page: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/1st-meeting-enrd-thematic-group-making-seven-leader-principles-work-practice-all_en

Implementation of all CLLD/LEADER principles by all LAGs



In her [introductory presentation](#), **Iwona Lisztwan** (DG AGRI) explained why questions about the LEADER principles were still being asked. She stated that the added value of LEADER comes from the full application of the LEADER method, as indicated in the EU Guidelines for LEADER evaluation (2017).

The demonstration of LEADER's added value is crucial and will be developed in the period 2023-2027 in monitoring, evaluation and as a follow-up to this Group.

The seven principles of LEADER/CLLD method are enshrined in the EU legislation, but the past ENRD survey shows that their application by LAGs in different Member States is mixed.

Even if the LEADER method has remained fundamentally unchanged for 30 years, it is important to keep re-defining its principles in context of changing the overall rural development policy and challenges (green transition, social innovation, digitalisation, refugees etc). Moreover, the principles need to be fresh and alive to the experienced practitioners and clear to the newcomers to CAP 2023-27. Constant questioning is also the basis for policy improvements as visible in the LEADER community itself calling for "LEADER reloaded".

The emphasis on the full application of LEADER method is also present in the CAP Plans. The Thematic Group will thus reflect what each principle means, what exactly happens when it is well applied and – conversely – not applied, what can be done to ensure that all LAGs do apply it.



Introduction to the Thematic Group




Peter Toth (ENRD Contact Point) provided a short [introduction](#) to the TG, which aims to achieve a better understanding of the seven LEADER principles for all stakeholders in the delivery chain and to develop recommendations for their full implementation by all LAGs. [TG members' inputs prior to the meeting](#) show that the main blocking factors preventing the full implementation of the seven principles relate to: administrative burden; limited understanding of the principles and their application, both at the local level and in the delivery chain; and general mistrust in delegating real development functions and tasks to the local level. Bottom-up approach and innovation are the principles thought to be most in need of better implementation (development interventions) available under the CSPs.

Understanding the LEADER principles – an ice-breaker





In a short ice-breaking session, participants discussed what works well in implementing the seven LEADER principles. The key ideas were summarised in [word clouds](#). For 'subregional areas', the concept of cultural identity, partnership and their definition at the local level were identified as priorities. For 'bottom-up approach', participation, animation, and communication were emphasised, while for 'innovative elements in the local context', a supportive ecosystem and local definitions were considered key.


Supporting LEADER in Austria

 **Christa Rockenbauer-Peirl** (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism, Austria) [explained](#) that support for implementing the LEADER principles in Austria was evaluation-based drawing on the [ENRD LAG survey](#) and a case study on social innovation and its linkages to the LEADER approach. Based on the findings, the cooperation between LEADER and ESF+ will be strengthened and the Local Agenda 21 processes will be integrated within LEADER based on two new interventions (non-agricultural Rural Innovation Systems, and reactivation of villages centres). Training for LAGs and other regional management professionals is also being designed with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. The training, scheduled for launch in 2023 will focus on skills and capacities to foster innovation and the bottom-up approach.

LEADER/CLLD is part of the solution

 According to **Stefan Niedermoser** (LEADER Forum, Austria), "[LEADER/CLLD is part of the solution](#)" if the quality of the approach is increased, and this requires LAGs to take ownership of its implementation.  To improve understanding of the principles by both LEADER professionals and stakeholders not directly working with LEADER, the Austrian LEADER Forum developed a new framework to describe three complementary roles for LAGs: funding advisory centre, network unit in the region, social innovation business. The presentation also emphasised the various 'functions' that LAGs can deliver to their area (democratic, social, European, crisis and transformation management) and the need to consider LEADER as a participatory regional development method that combines innovations with regional know-how.

Let's 'bottom-up' the process

 **Iva Přichystalová** (Paying Agency, Czechia) [explained](#) that the Paying Agency's (PA) main motivation to improve the application process in LEADER was to avoid duplicating controls and checks and to allow LAGs to focus more on animation instead of red tape. In the new process, the potential beneficiary engages with the LAG on a project idea and prepares a draft application based on discussions with the LAG. A full application package is needed only for the selected projects, which are then registered at the PA. This process strengthens local ownership of the LEADER tool, reduces red tape and fosters innovation.



Overview from Belgium, Flanders



Wouter Peeters (Managing Authority, Flanders, Belgium) [explained](#) that the evaluation of the current LEADER programme in Flanders highlighted the need to re-balance top-down and bottom-up approaches and increase innovation in LEADER. They also found that small beneficiaries, small municipalities, and grassroots movements seem to be lost to LEADER due to the administrative ‘heaviness’ of the programme. A review of the whole LEADER scheme and procedures will result in a new, simplified process for project approvals, specific expert support to beneficiaries in the preparation stage of project applications, and a toolkit to improve local innovation. Deciding if a project fits the local strategy remains the LAG’s role. The expectation is that this approach will result in more balanced, independent, and benefits/added value oriented local strategies.

Participatory laboratory “Simplify LEADER” in Italy



Filippo Chiozzotto (National Rural Network, Italy) [presented](#) the participatory laboratory ‘Simplify LEADER’, which tackled recurring discrepancies between Local Development Strategy objectives and actual achievements in Italian regions. One of the causes of this was that Managing Authorities aligned LEADER implementation mechanisms more with that of the standard RDP measures, thus reducing the scope for locally specific interventions by LAGs. The participatory laboratory allowed the NRN and LAGs to develop a ‘community regeneration project’, a LEADER operation where implementation mechanisms were standardised, but where content reflected local needs. A key finding was that more engagement from locals helps LAGs function as real local development agencies rather than as technical/administrative units. Findings from the participatory laboratories informed the drafting process of the LEADER intervention of the Italian CAP Strategic Plan as well.

Summary of findings



TG members discussed three LEADER principles, full summaries of the discussions are available on the [MIRO Boards](#). TG members discussed what it means to fully implement each principle, what are the blocking factors, any specific questions and solutions. Key points included:

Subregional areas: Key considerations include functionality, the recognition of regional specificities, local involvement in defining the territory, and the need to match capacities to the size of the LAG. The discussion also highlighted elements such as critical mass – in terms of LAG size, area – and a minimum population size needed for local development to happen effectively. Projects taking place across the LAG territory, not limited to one municipality, are interesting in terms of strategy implementation. Important considerations were made in relation to the role of municipalities in terms of their membership – and how changes in their membership is defined and how it affects the LAG area. Participants of the discussion also emphasised the importance of creating LAG areas that are coherent and not fragmented.

Bottom-up approach (led by Local Action Groups): Openness, accessibility (for locals) and the need for the local strategy to be recognisable by local people were mentioned as important for the full implementation of this principle. The role of local volunteers and continuous efforts (and specific mechanisms) by the LAG to maintain openness and diversity were also discussed. Participants emphasised the need for real stakeholder analysis and sufficient local resources to make this principle work. It is important that LAG memberships do not become static and act as a blocking factor. Valuing participation and including newcomers, informing them, working in new ways using new participation tools and techniques help bring new people in to focus on the local strategy – including links with the MA and PA.

The proper representation of local stakeholder groups and ensuring the local decision-making bodies do not remain ‘static’ over long periods were emphasised. Lack of a shared understanding of this principle was identified as a strong blocking factor, and in this respect, awareness-raising for newcomers to LEADER mentioned as important. Working together in different formats, bringing new people in, and making existing stakeholders feel valued, focusing on the local strategy, and establishing MA-PA-LAG links were identified as essential. Digital meetings were also mentioned as one of the ways of making LAGs more inclusive - to reach out to more people who cannot usually participate physically.



Innovation, according to the participants, should rather be considered a cross-cutting principle affecting everything LEADER does – and this should be defined by the LAGs. Some components of a definition were put forward, including: creativity, change based on knowledge that brings added value locally, and different people coming together to define local solutions. Possible blocking factors include different interpretations, at local and national level (across the LEADER delivery chain) or in different Member States. The fact that the cost of innovation cannot be fully planned can hinder innovative projects in the current system. Innovation as the ability to adapt and respond to crises (COVID, LAG responses in the context of the refugee crisis in 2015, Ukraine war, etc.) was also discussed. Participants proposed that the definition of innovation in LEADER should be broad enough to enable LAGs to adapt and respond to crises. The delivery chain should enjoy more flexibility, avoiding rigid interpretations which can present blockages. The use of simplified cost options was mentioned as a possible solution. Some MS examples of LAGs developing selection criteria specific to innovation were also mentioned and it was emphasised that these criteria should be based on the local context.

Conclusions



In the closing session, **Peter Toth** (ENRD CP) described the proposed [next steps for the Thematic Group](#), including setting up an online workspace for TG member. Participants emphasised the need to ‘bring back LEADER to the people’ and agreed that drawing up a common framework to promote better understanding of the LEADER principles and how they are applied locally and on a day-to-day basis would be a useful component of this. The need for a better monitoring framework was also mentioned. On this, **Iwona Lisztwan** (DG AGRI) mentioned that, in the ongoing consultation process on CAP Strategic Plans, MS are being asked how the LEADER principles are addressed.

In his closing message, **David Lamb** (ENRD CP) referred to the participants’ plea to ‘go back to the roots’ and interpreted this as a real ability of LAGs to reflect on specific local realities. He also highlighted the importance of animation in making stakeholders feel valued, bringing in new people or volunteers, and in bringing all the LEADER principles into play – since the full application of the seven principles is the main source of added value for LEADER. He mentioned the role of LEADER in responding to previous crises, such as the refugee crisis, as highlighted in an [ENRD publication](#) and stressed that this is critical in the current situation too. David closed the meeting with a [quote](#) from the recent European LEADER Seminar in Brittany (France): “The main success of LEADER lies in the method and the people... today the challenge is to apply the fundamentals of LEADER throughout Europe”, and wished TG members good cooperation to achieve this.