

Designing LEADER – NRN support

LEADER case study Participative LEADER design facing COVID-19

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In Finland, the preparation of the new LEADER programming period started as early as 2016. The aim was to provide sufficient time for involving all rural stakeholders in deciding how their rural areas should look like in the future. A number of think-tanks were created including *Leader2030*, *CLLD2030* and *Countryside2030* to focus on how the world is foreseen to change and how rural development should react on that. A comprehensive participatory approach was planned by the National Rural Network (NRN) in close collaboration with the Managing Authority (MA) to ensure full engagement.

Officially preparation for next funding period started in the beginning of 2019. The MA organised 27 thematic workshops, including one focused on the LEADER method. The workshops gathered hundreds of participants from LAGs and other rural organisations to elaborate on future ideas and visions. Based on the findings of the earlier engagement processes and thematic workshops, the MA started officially the drafting of its national rural strategy.

One of the important steps of the MA in 2019 was to commission an in-depth, external evaluation study of LEADER. To ensure that the findings of the evaluation fully informed the planning process, the NRN organised a two-day workshop bringing together representatives of the 55 Finish Local Action Groups (LAGs), the NRN, the MA and the evaluators for intensive debate.

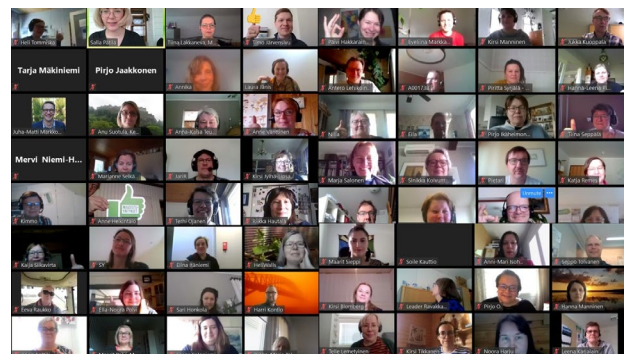
By spring 2020, it was time for the 15 Provinces and their LAGs to be informed about the emerging national draft and to start designing their own strategies.

The plan was to organise a country-wide Smart Rural Areas Roadshow that would present the national strategy at provincial and LAG level. The idea was that the NRN would help the Provinces and LAGs to implement the Roadshow event in their own area. In February 2020, the NRN and the MA launched this process with a national seminar.

To ensure that the Roadshow events would be implemented in a fully participatory manner, the NRN organised five one-day regional facilitation training sessions for the Provinces and LAGs (30-50 participants each). The aim was to inspire, build capacity and provide the participants with the practical tools and templates for managing participatory events successfully and with confidence.

Three of the five facilitation training events and one smart rural provincial Roadshow were implemented.

As the COVID-19 outbreak stopped any further activity on the ground, the NRN reacted on the spot with the delivery of an online webinar (via Zoom) to continue informing about the national strategy. Due to the crisis, the interest was substantial and instead of the expected 200 participants the webinar attracted over 800, which made this the biggest event ever staged by the



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NRN. Live chatboards accompanied the event on a scale never experienced before.

To support the 15 Provincial authorities further, the NRN organised a two-day online training session on how to implement virtual participatory meetings and events with web-based tools. The Provincial authorities are expected to share what they learnt with their LAGs and prepare their own virtual Roadshow events. The NRN provided relevant templates and offered ongoing assistance.

The key to the success was the close collaboration and good understanding of roles between NRN and MA from the outset and the dedication of staff to learn, be flexible, and prepare fully. This included trial runs of the new online tools before going 'live'. The immediate engagement of experts was also of crucial importance. This enabled staff to learn the technicalities of online, interactive tools, and to receive practical tips (lighting, posture of presenters, organisation of contents, etc.).

Further information:

- <https://www.maaseutu.fi/en/topical-greetings-from-countryside-and-around-the-world/leader2030-finnish-lags-want-to-keep-moving-forward>
- https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/tg2_rural-businesses_leader2030_markkola.pdf

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