

The fourth ENRD LEADER Thematic Lab explored the role of LEADER and LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) in maintaining and widening stakeholder engagement in their local areas to develop short- and long-term responses to address local challenges now and for the future.

LEADER stakeholders shared various ways of working and agreed on the need for 'co-ownership' when designing the future of local development in their areas. Experiences of LAG responses to the current COVID-19 crisis were shared and a mini-survey was completed on how the situation has impacted LEADER implementation in various EU Member States.

Setting the scene


Peter Toth (ENRD CP) provided [context](#) for the day's discussion and highlighted the need to involve all types of stakeholders in LEADER work, using targeted approaches – from information provision to building close partnerships. According to participants' responses to an ice-breaker exercise, the benefits of stakeholder engagement include social cohesion and better local development strategies. As illustrated in the [ENRD LAG Survey \(2017\)](#), stakeholder engagement-related activities such as capacity building, animation and training are a priority for LAGs, but they are also challenging.

Karolina Jasinska-Mühleck (DG AGRI) shared the key considerations on stakeholder engagement from the [European Commission's \(EC\) perspective](#). Stakeholder engagement is integral to the LEADER approach and the local partnership is the principal tool to achieve it. Local partnerships should remain open and inclusive throughout the implementation period. Involving 'traditional' local partners as well as other agents of change and knowledge sources helps maintain LEADER's ability to respond flexibly to emerging challenges.

In the discussion with participants, Ms Jasinska-Mühleck clarified that LAGs have a key role in preparing the ground locally for the societal changes to be brought about by EU-wide actions ([European Green Deal](#), [Farm-to-Fork](#), [Biodiversity strategy](#) and digital transition). LEADER and LAGs can also have a strong role in shaping and contributing to the future EU agenda. Member States (MS) are encouraged by the EC to design simple, flexible and responsive LEADER systems with more prominence for animation using specific resources, and a possibility to introduce relevant MS-level indicators. Clear rules and open discussion should enable stakeholders to participate in LAGs' governance while avoiding conflicts of interest. Possible conflicts of interest between local stakeholders about local development objectives should be discussed within the partnership to accommodate diverging interests in the local development strategy in a balanced way.

Widening stakeholder engagement

LAG Salland, Netherlands

 To 'let go' of old beliefs and design a truly new Local Development Strategy (LDS), LAG Salland adopted [Theory-U](#). This method requires listening to and actively involving local stakeholders, modelling the future, and consulting the locals repeatedly, constantly honing ideas. The LAG organised 'Salland Cafés' and managed to involve 400 local people in the LDS design with help from a small team including the LAG manager and people from local municipalities or NGOs. The method has been applied throughout the LDS implementation period, with annual meetings organised according to principles of openness, equal access and a positive, informative environment. Projects are invited for evaluation by local stakeholders and constant feedback is encouraged.

Date: 4 June 2020

Location: online / webinar

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point

Participants: Representatives of LEADER LAGs, EU-wide and national LEADER networks, RDP Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks, a digital innovation hub and EU institutions (DG AGRI).

Outcomes: Practical examples of, and exchanges about, how stakeholder engagement adds value to LEADER implementation in both normal circumstances and in such a crisis situation.

Web page: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-leader-thematic-lab-maintaining-and-widening-stakeholder-engagement_en



REDR, Spain

The network has recently issued a position paper on the 'future of LEADER 2021-2027'. REDR has been involved in networking activities with stakeholder engagement [at its core](#). The paper was developed through a participative process, involving all Spanish LAGs and other rural stakeholders in a multi-stage process. Preserving LEADER's creativity and innovation requires maintaining and increasing local participation, 'putting animation first', continuing to work across various disciplines and maintaining inclusive partnerships that are open for all rural stakeholders. Constant communication and 'measuring' participation through feedback processes are key.



National Rural Network, Sweden

The many methods used by the Swedish NRN for [widening and deepening LAG engagement](#) include involving LAGs in thematic group work (e.g. on LEADER/CLLD, Smart Villages, and a mapping of regional innovation infrastructure) through live and virtual meetings. An annual LEADER conference allows the exchange of experiences between LAGs, the national LEADER Association (LUS), the Managing Authority and Paying Agency. A key principle is to involve all kinds of stakeholder organisations as well as LAGs and create co-ownership. The NRN keeps stakeholders interested in working with LEADER/CLLD in the next period by facilitating joint decisions about initiatives, ensuring that no one owns the agenda and that all stakeholder groups are enabled to participate.



4PDIH, Slovenia

4PDIH is a partnership between public bodies, education, the private sector and the communities. For 4PDIH, [working with LAGs](#) and rural areas is key to help a large number of bottom-up initiatives to build their digital skills and digital platforms.

Working with the Ministry of Public Administration and local municipalities, 4PDIH has mapped local priorities to provide an evidence base for future policy design. The main purpose of cooperating with LEADER and various ministries is to make rural areas more attractive for young people. 4PDIH collaborates with LAGs on a variety of themes, including safety, health care, sustainable mobility, environmental awareness and Smart Village approaches.

Maintaining stakeholder engagement in crisis situations

According to an ENRD [mini-survey](#), the impact of COVID-19 on LEADER territories and LEADER implementation has been 'moderate' and mostly affected the implementation of approved projects, cooperation, and the submission of new project proposals to the LAGs. The thematic lab was an opportunity to discuss how LAGs and other rural development stakeholders are coping with recent challenges, supporting their local communities while maintaining the continuity of LEADER implementation.



Managing Authority, Slovenia

The MA quickly adapted its way of working to [ensure continued RDP policy delivery during the COVID-19 crisis](#), switching to phone and online communications, using digital signatures in the approval process of LDS amendments and introducing other administrative simplifications. The Paying Agency also simplified the administrative checks of projects and the NRN supported the development of an interactive map of local farmers and growers. LAGs worked as local information hubs and service providers and initiated activities supporting short food supply chains and digital learning.

The key elements to adapt to the new situation were: a focus on self-sufficiency and resolving local needs, a good IT system, and flexibility in terms of legislation, simplification and administration to enable required changes in projects.

National Rural Network, Portugal



To [support crisis response in rural communities](#), the NRN launched the campaign 'Feed who feeds you' in collaboration with Minha Terra, the Portuguese association of LAGs, to support local food producers.

LAGs launched related initiatives to support local farmers and commercial activities. The MA introduced amendments to the 'local markets' measure – administered by LAGs – to widen the types of eligible activities and expenditure, making access to support more widely available. Further flexibility introduced during the pandemic includes an extension of deadlines for the completion of projects, the possibility of project modifications and the elimination of penalties for non-performance of certain indicators.



ELARD

In March 2020, ELARD launched a [survey](#) on LAGs' early responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Some 364 responses were collected, the majority from eight EU MS during the early stages of the pandemic.

Respondents expected the timely completion of projects and the implementation of event-based projects to be challenging. They also anticipated the withdrawal and/or decrease of applications, as well as delays in approval and payment decisions. Early reactions by LAGs which aimed to support local communities included health-care and assistance to people in need, guidance on how to work online, support with schooling, and promotion of local food on LAGs' websites.



4PDIH and LAG Istria, Slovenia

Both partners considered the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to develop [local responses](#) and provide further support to digital transition in rural areas. 4PDIH created a 'one-stop shop' of remote working tools, developed a protocol for online work, and organised webinars to support communities in adapting to the situation. LAG Istria continued to develop its smart villages application prototypes, set up a food delivery platform and organised local food deliveries for a charity working with people with disability.

Local people re-discovered local food, improved digital competencies in their territory, and strengthened local cooperation in the course of developing local responses. The crisis also showed them that the digitalisation of traditional sectors is not only possible, but important in adapting to future challenges.

Conclusions and next steps



Participants [suggested](#) that widening stakeholder engagement adds value to LEADER work as it leads to **stronger local communities** and improves **local networking**. While stakeholder engagement requires continuous effort, it helps communities learn from each other and stimulates them to organise joint initiatives. Stakeholder engagement can improve the resilience of local rural communities, particularly in the area of innovation, resulting in better strategies addressing local needs, a 'stronger voice' for the local territory and better identification of needs.



The most important 'take home' messages for participants related to the **dynamism and responsiveness** of LAGs, the potential role of LAGs as **bridges** between the local communities and the EU agenda relating to future strategies (Farm-to-Fork, Green Deal), and the innovative way in which **Theory-U** was applied in engaging local stakeholders.



The ENRD could help participants communicate more about stakeholder engagement through virtual events like this one, social media posts and dissemination of videos about local initiatives. The ENRD CP suggested that the participants proactively initiate thematic labs at MS level to further disseminate knowledge.

In times of adversity, the flexibility of rural development stakeholders has contributed to successful crisis responses, stronger local communities, and sustainability. LAGs have shown their ability to respond quickly and adapt to the crisis by providing specific support to local communities. Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies and National Rural Networks demonstrated flexibility in terms of simplifications and various support initiatives aimed at maintaining the continuity of LEADER implementation. The initiatives discussed during the event point to a valuable lesson for the future: the need to **build resilience, responsiveness and flexibility** into the design of LEADER under the CAP Strategic Plans.