



## Name:

Leader (Links between actions for the development of the rural economy)

## Programme type:

Community initiative

## Target areas:

Leader+ is structured around three actions:

- ▶ Action 1 — Support for integrated territorial development strategies of a pilot nature based on a bottom-up approach.
- ▶ Action 2 — Support for cooperation between rural territories.
- ▶ Action 3 — Networking.

## Priority strategic themes:

The priority themes, for Leader+, laid down by the Commission are:

- ▶ making the best use of natural and cultural resources, including enhancing the value of sites;
- ▶ improving the quality of life in rural areas;
- ▶ adding value to local products, in particular by facilitating access to markets for small production units via collective actions and;
- ▶ the use of new know-how and new technologies to make products and services in rural areas more competitive.

## Recipients and eligible projects:

Financial assistance under Leader+ is granted to partnerships, local action groups (LAGs), drawn from the public, private and non-profit sectors to implement local development programmes in their territories. Leader+ is designed to help rural actors consider the long-term potential of their local region. It encourages the implementation of integrated, high-quality and original strategies for sustainable development as well as national and transnational cooperation. In order to concentrate Community resources on the most promising local strategies and to give them maximum leverage, funding is granted according to a selective approach to a limited number of rural territories only. The selection procedure is open and rigorous.

Under each local development programme, individual projects which fit within the local strategy can be funded. All projects eligible for funding under the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) are eligible under Leader+.

At the decision-making level of the LAGs, the economic and social partners and associations must make up at least 50 % of the local partnership.

## Duration of the programming period:

2000–06.

## Community grant:

The total budget for programmes is EUR 5 046.5 million, of which EUR 2 106.3 million (EUR 2 143.5 million after mid-term indexation) is funded by the EAGGF Guidance Section and the remainder by public and private contribution.

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European Commission

# Leader+ Magazine



## SPECIAL FOCUS The legacy of Leader+

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# Leader+ Magazine

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This European Commission magazine seeks to promote access to information about the Leader+ community initiative. Our goal is to provide accurate and up-to-date information. If errors are brought to our attention, we will try to correct them. However, the Commission accepts no responsibility for the information contained in this magazine, especially regarding financial data on the projects described, and in particular on the eligibility of expenditure. Readers should therefore take all necessary precautions before using this data, which they do entirely at their own risk.

# Leader+ Magazine

There is a great deal of additional information on Leader+ as well as a range of useful interactive tools which can be found on the Leader+ website:

<http://ec.europa.eu/leaderplus>

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# In a word ...

By Mrs Josefine Loriz-Hoffmann, Head of Unit F.3, Consistency of Rural Development, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission



Those of you who are regular readers of the *Leader+* Magazine will notice that instead of the usual round-up of *Leader+* projects, this is a special edition, which aims to consolidate some well-known and perhaps some less well-known facts about the Leader method. It is all too easy for those of us who work with Leader on a daily basis to perhaps lose sight of what Leader is about and what makes Leader special. In fact, as with most things that we consider special, time has a habit of making us a little complacent. However this is certainly not the time to become complacent. We are already in the new programming period where the Leader axis, under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), has an important part to play in Europe's rural development programmes.

If we look back to the start of the Leader initiative we are surrounded by a wealth of information, experience and, more importantly, tangible results. Tangible results are the 'proof of the pudding' and are something of which we should be justifiably proud. What is so heartening for those who have been engaged in Leader, either from the very beginning under Leader I, or from more recent times, is to know that these tangible results did not just appear by chance. We are very fortunate that Leader was blessed from the start with the right mix of ingredients, and like any successful recipe, it is with thanks to those who have worked with these ingredients, that this recipe has proved itself to be a successful one over time. Under *Leader+* we have been able to use tried and tested ingredients in new ways, and apply them to some new areas and situations. In doing so we have been more or less safe in the knowledge that what had served us well before could be repeated and reapplied elsewhere. This is very much the philosophy behind the mainstreaming of the Leader method: applying

proven methods to new situations and giving tried and tested tools to new custodians.

However, to be able to mainstream successfully, we also need a solid reference to the past. The *Leader+* Observatory has well understood the need to constantly look to those of you already working in Europe's rural areas for ideas and inspiration. Much of the information and tools that are now available to Europe's rural actors at Community level are thanks to the efforts of Leader's pioneers. As I said before, building on earlier results has been a key factor in the success of *Leader+*, but I am also aware that Leader is not the only ingredient in rural development. This is why all of Europe's rural actors, irrespective of whether they are Leader or not — NGOs, associations, networks, and citizens, including those in third countries — have always been welcomed to exchange their knowledge and experiences.

In fact it was during the Leader Observatory seminar held in Corsica in April 2007, that such an exchange took place. On this occasion we wanted to show Europe's rural community that Leader had provided them with a valuable legacy of local knowledge and experience, and that within this legacy lay the key to building the future of our rural areas. In the sections that follow, the different elements of this legacy are clearly presented: building the territory; building the partnerships; network building and cooperation; and human competence and capacity building. By understanding these four elements, Europe's rural areas can take note of lessons learned and capitalise on the experiences of the different generations of the Leader initiative. In this way we can do our best to ensure that the tangible results I spoke of earlier may also be the experience of those working under the new Leader axis.

Today, Europe's rural areas face quite a different world compared to the days of the early Leader pioneers, and there are many challenges to be faced whether coming from competitive global markets, climate change, or shifts in society's values. However, the inspiration to meet these challenges is readily found in the Leader experience. All of us working in rural development and in Leader in particular, have a duty to use and develop this knowledge and experience, as well as maintaining our enthusiasm for it. In this way Europe's rural diversity will be ensured.



# An overview of the Leader+ Observatory seminar: The legacy of Leader+ at local level: building the future of rural areas, Corsica, April 2007

## Introduction

This three-day Leader+ Observatory event provided a timely opportunity, as indicated by the seminar's title, to examine the legacy of Leader+, and to show how its methods can be used to build the future of Europe's rural areas. The island of Corsica, and more precisely the 'Institut Méditerranéen de Formation' (IMF) at the town of Borgo, hosted participants from 25 EU Member States, of whom some 150 were representatives of Local Action Groups (LAGs).

During the course of the seminar's two and a half days, the Leader+ legacy was examined, not only in terms of its achievements in relation to its main objectives and expected results, but also in terms of for 'whom and how Leader+ had been successful'. The plenary sessions set the scene for the ensuing discussions and debates, by providing the audience with a clear and precise understanding of the legacy of Leader+. This was done by giving a historical perspective and a vision of how the Leader+ spirit could continue within future rural development policy. The subsequent mini-plenaries had been constructed to show particular successes, and the methods and tools used. These were also illustrated according to the selected themes by best practice case studies. Each of these sessions was accompanied by a thesis paper which provided the contextual framework for analysis and discussion.

In order to give participants a feeling for the Leader+ legacy at the local level, several field trips to locally financed Leader+ projects were arranged. These visits gave attendees further valuable insight into how at LAG level, Leader+ can contribute to local economic viability through the implementation of a local strategic plan, and similarly how it can contribute



to developing regional competitiveness. On the third day, the seminar's key messages, based on the discussions arising from the various mini-plenaries, were reported back to all the participants. These were then discussed by a selected panel of experts, and followed by some concluding words.





### **Appreciating the legacy of Leader+**

In his opening of the plenary session, Mr José Manuel Sousa Uva, director for rural development programmes, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission, gave an appreciation of four different legacies of Leader+, and suggested some questions which could be tackled during the course of the seminar. The first legacy concerns Europe's territories which, by implementing the Leader+ method, have in many cases gained the capacity to initiate and implement their own local development strategies. Partnership was described as the second legacy, which under Leader+ establishes a network of local public and private actors who are best able to meet the needs of rural areas. Cooperation was given as the third legacy, and was presented as being a necessity for rural areas if they are to network and have contact, and ultimately develop partnerships with other European areas. The fourth legacy related to the way in which the Leader+ method can develop and implement a local strategy for the territory. In



all four cases, it was mentioned that it is the role of the LAG to bring together the different rural actors and ensure that the different legacies (as outlined above) come together and form a tool for rural development.

Mr Jean-Benoît Albertini, director of the interdepartmental delegation for spatial planning and regional competitiveness (DIACT), France, added his appreciation of the Leader+ legacy in terms of the contribution of French LAGs. In particular he noted their role in the decision-making process (characterised by the partnership approach), and their contribution to networking and knowledge transfer which remain important challenges for the period 2007-13. The importance of Leader in France's 140 territories was provided by Mr Christophe Viret, representing the national centre for the development of agricultural holdings (CNASEA). Here it was stressed how through the financing of thousands of projects, local private and public investment had been stimulated, and also how Leader in France had resulted in a solid network structure. He then emphasised the need to consider conclusions and lessons learned about Leader methods and practices, and to think about how these could be applied in order to strengthen the Leader spirit, not only in the new programming period but also for other policy areas.

A more local appreciation was then given by Mr Ange Santini, president of the executive council of Corsican regional authority, CTC, and Jean Pierre Leccia, chairman of the hosting LAG, Cap Corse, Nebbiù è Custerà. Both speakers emphasised the importance of Leader+ to the region: how it had brought different communities together, and how through working on the projects already implemented, there was already a strong legacy for continuation.

### **Setting the scene for further discussion**

Several presentations were then given in order to provide a context for the various conference mini-plenaries. In her presentation, independent expert Mrs Elena Saraceno made five key observations regarding the history of the Leader initiative, and its legacy in relation to: its evolution and ability to motivate; the method for implementing rural policy; the approach that is not only a set of measures (considered to be the main legacy); the capacity of rural actors at local level; and the innovative approach across different sectors and aspects of rural life. The way that Leader enables rural actors to define their territories, as well as the way that LAGs establish partnerships and then define and implement rural development strategies were considered to be the key legacy themes by Jean-Pierre Dichter, former director in the ministry of agriculture, Luxembourg. The legacy of Leader+ for networking and building cooperation was the subject of the presentation given by Haris Martinos, representing



the Leader+ Contact Point. Here, recognition was given to the central importance of network building. The different forms of networking, and cooperation with which it is closely linked, are two Leader+ fundamentals which lie at the very heart of the Leader+ method. Together they provide a strong legacy on which to build the future of Europe's rural areas.

In order to provide delegates with an opportunity to fully understand and appreciate the many different aspects of the Leader+ legacy, the seminar was divided into mini-plenary sessions. Each session was chaired by a moderator who, on the basis of specialised experience, presented a thesis paper on the particular workshop topic, which was also supported by Leader+ case studies.

The mini-plenaries were grouped around three Leader+ legacy themes: building the territory; building the partnerships; and network building, cooperation, and these are dealt with in the 'special focus' section which follows.

### Field visits: a visible legacy

Three separate field visits provided an opportunity for delegates to have an appreciation of different projects funded under Leader+, and which indeed were tangible legacies of Leader+ at the local level in the area of the hosting LAG, Cap Corse, Nebbiù è Custerà. From the village of Rutali, a three-kilometre hike allowed participants to discover sheepfolds which had been renovated with Leader+ funding according to traditional methods of construction. Next stop was the

village of Oletta, which included a visit to the chapel where an interesting project on sacral art in the Cap Corse region was presented. This project is being implemented by the LAG in cooperation with the regional archaeological association. Many chapels have been rebuilt and an inventory has been made. There was then a visit to a second chapel in the village which has fallen out of use, but which is going to be transformed into a museum for sacral art.

In the municipality of Nonza, which formerly had traded Cedron, a special citrus fruit, there are plans to finance a project which would recreate the terraces where the ancient Cedron orchards once stood. Linked to this project is an eco-museum which recounts the history and culture associated with the cultivation of the Cedron tree, and also displays delicacies which are made from the Cedron fruit. Further along the coast at Canari, two more projects were presented. The monastery of Canari has been restored and is now home to a museum which will employ state-of-the-art media technology to display traditional Corsican folk costumes. In addition, part of the monastery has been converted to provide tourist accommodation.

The third visit started with the gardens of 'Cap Vert', a unique collection of Corsican fruit and vegetables, including special varieties of onions (which don't provoke tears), and aubergines. It also included the olive garden trail (the 'Oliveraie') which is still to be completed with explanatory signposts, and a tasting of various products made from the fruit and vegetables cultivated as part of the project. Moving on to the wine museum project, which features an exhibition of old tools used for wine making, here Leader+

has supported a newly built visitor centre and a refurbished stable. Here it was possible to taste wine and to identify local herbs placed in special containers. This herb guessing exercise is in fact a game developed by the project and sold in the museum. Participants then discussed sustainability issues related to the project.

## The Leader+ legacy as a challenge for the future

The workshop findings were reported back during the course of the plenary session on the final day. Some additional concluding words emphasised that: the Leader+ legacy is one which is derived from the passion that Leader+ actors have in carrying out their projects; that Leader+ provides room for all networks to work together by taking account of the needs coming from the ground; and that to build the future you have to create it! On this basis the legacy of Leader+ is a sound platform on which to build the future, as was shown by the many successful case studies that had been presented during the course of the seminar. These case studies showed how the strategy had not only to be conceived, organised and implemented, but also how it had to involve local partnerships in order to implement projects. Moreover, the legacy is in part shown by projects that are viable and which can provide rural areas with sustainable development.

At the level of the LAG, the Leader+ legacy demonstrates that there are many different models and methods which are evolving; for example, it is likely that in the future there will be more emphasis on local governance. At EU level it is recognised that the LAG's environment is changing and that the European Agricultural Rural Development Fund (EARDF) is not a unique source of funding, since 14 % of EU structural funds are also allocated to rural areas. The Leader method is recognised not just as a tool for experimentation and innovation, but one which has an important local dimension, and one which can be adapted to other areas of policy such as: fishing, social and regional. Therefore in order to ensure the coordination and synergy with other policies, and guarantee the economic sustainability of LAGs, it is important that local public-private partnerships are also recognised as appropriate local development agencies within these other policy areas. Thus the legacy of Leader can also be considered as a challenge for the future of Europe's rural areas.

Additional seminar information, including the programme, presentations, detailed reports from the mini-plenaries, and photographs, can be found at the following link: [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/events/24042007\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/events/24042007_en.htm)



# Special focus

The Legacy of Leader+: four specific legacies explained

## Building the territory

By Michel Dubost <sup>(1)</sup>, executive director,  
International Centre for Alpine Environments (ICALPE),  
Corsica, France



### Introduction

In terms of its physical, social, and economic character, a 'territory' can be considered as a homogeneous area, limited in size, but having sufficient capacity and consistency to build and implement viable development strategies. As such, it is a grouping of local communities sharing a common identity based on a sense of belonging to the same natural and cultural environment.

In this respect, there is no need to 'build the territory': it already exists as the result of the natural and human development, although there is a need to build better conditions for its sustainable development.

What Leader leaves behind for the territory as a main legacy, is an improved capacity of local people to work together towards common goals. This is a major, invaluable heritage which local communities can use to build their own future development. It is also a fact that in shaping the territory, Leader+ is not acting alone. In addition to Leader+, all areas have any number of programmes, initiatives or actions, which are more or less interconnected, and all contribute to shaping the development of

the area. This is especially true for Leader+, where Local Action Groups (LAGs) are invited to select a main theme and then to develop integrated strategies around it.

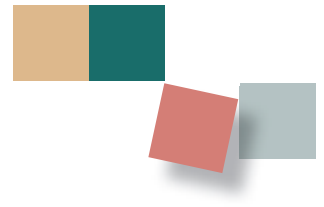
Thus, building the territory with Leader+ could also be considered to be 'building the capacities of local people to contribute to a more sustainable future for their territory'.

These capacities mainly concern developing and implementing the strategy in order to ensure economic viability and develop competitiveness. For this there is a need to better identify the specific legacy of Leader+, with all the strengths and weaknesses of the experience, and the main lessons for the future.

The main objective of this paper is to try and identify how Leader+ has indeed been an efficient tool in contributing to a more sustainable future for the territories involved. In fact, it is the pilot nature of Leader+ which will provide rural areas with new tools for building their own future in a more sustainable way. Thus the heritage will be based on the approach, methodologies, and good practices that could be transferred to all other rural areas in Europe, and elsewhere.

<sup>(1)</sup> Michel Dubost is an agronomist with a scientific and technical background in research and development applied to local development, ecological land management and pastoral issues in mountainous areas. He has experience in international cooperation including the coordination of community cooperation projects in interregional cooperation, research and studies, focusing on local sustainable development, less-favoured areas and the environment.





## Developing the strategy

Developing a strategy for the territory is a very important and decisive step in any Leader+ experience. It is the main building phase of the partnership, and it determines all future actions, and more especially, how they will be integrated and be able to provide the area with a consolidated development plan.

*Developing strategic plans for the rural territories lies at the very heart of the Leader approach and is the most integral and challenging element of its mainstreaming under the 2007-2013 European Agricultural and Rural Development Fund. The preparation... of the strategy is where the links between actions, actors and resources are established and drawn together in an area-based, integrated and multi-sectoral fashion to identify and address the needs and opportunities of the rural territory through a bottom-up process.*

(John Grieve, moderator)

The strategy-building phase is of critical importance to ensure further successful implementation. Taking time to think first, when making the strategy, will make it easier to identify, share and further respect priorities: also, adopting clear selection criteria in relation to priorities during this strategy-making phase will help in its subsequent implementation.

The strategy-building phase is not only important for designing a good development plan, in terms of actions, links and priorities, but also for ensuring the participation of local people in its future implementation. 'The strategy... must reflect the involvement of local people, which is a key-factor for its successful implementation, as it creates ownership, helps building capacities among the local population and finally is also an important issue for administration' (Jean-Pierre Vercurysse, rapporteur).

The quality and consistency of the planning strategy within the development process has always been important. With the mainstreaming of Leader this is especially so, and serves as a methodological reference for rural development policies in general.

## Agreeing upon a common vision

Before going into detailed description of the strategy, and its translation in terms of measures and actions, a first and decisive step for local partners is to agree upon a common vision for the future of their territory. This is very important, since for the strategy to have a chance of being successfully implemented it must reflect the expectations of local people, their needs, and their ability to work together.

Another very important role of agreeing upon a common vision is for local people to create a sense of ownership, and identification of the strategy. This develops among local people as a shared sense of belonging to an area, including its past history and responsibility for the future. Thus, it consolidates social cohesion, which is a main condition to fulfil for local communities, and is a prerequisite for them to move towards more sustainable development. Agreeing upon a common vision helps to build basic capacities for development in the local population. It is also a critical issue for administrations, who consider social cohesion of local communities as a guarantee of public investment.

However, this common vision is not always easy for local partners to develop, and may even test the longer-term solidarity of the partnership. Indeed tensions often occur in developing the strategy, and especially during the common building phase. Such tensions may illustrate many different views about the role Leader may play for the territory, or about the state and needs of the territory itself. It may equally be in contrast to the views of the voluntary sector, local authorities, business sector, the local and public authorities, and civil society, etc. As a result, the adopted common vision is more often the result of compromise than consensus. However this does help local people to work together, as being able to make compromises and solve tensions is a crucial strength for local communities, and a major asset for self-centred, endogenous development.

## Local strategy as a motor for local development

Once the common vision has been agreed upon, detailed measures and actions must be adopted. At this stage there are some critical issues that must be considered for a successful implementation of the strategy.

Firstly, there is a need to adopt and make clear the selection criteria to be adopted for future projects. This will help a lot in implementing the strategy in several ways. The LAG will find it easier to communicate with local stakeholders and to keep the overall consistency of the action plan. Also, local



stakeholders will be more efficient in making proposals, and better targeted projects. Similarly, the LAG and local stakeholders will be helped to develop links among projects, and concentrate on common objectives.

Another very critical issue when detailing the local strategy, and in making it a driver of local development, is the link with the non-Leader environment. This means those regional programmes which are in operation, and other rural development schemes at local, municipal or inter-communal, regional and national level. Indeed this is a complex issue and a matter of debate (see later 'Ensuring synergies with non-Leader strategies').

While there is no easy solution for this, it is clear that some balance must be found on a case-by-case basis, between the LAG's 'autonomy' and existing policies. Policies may be developed by various institutions that operate in the area and develop their own strategy. This includes public ones such as local administrations and public bodies, but also private bodies such as professional groupings, or powerful NGOs. In particular, the relationship with funding institutions might sometimes be quite difficult as their voice in the decision-making process, which is important, might not exactly meet the strategic priorities of the LAG. For the Leader+ strategy to become successful there is a need to avoid conflicts with the non-Leader environment and, on the contrary, find some support from outside in order to develop complementary initiatives. These should be according to the basic principles of the integrated approach, which apply to all strategies and actions developed for the whole area.

Thus, the Leader+ strategy must be the result of a pragmatic and realistic negotiation process between the LAG's partnership and other institutions, and more often between local expectations and other planning priorities, at a higher level. Then, there is a need for another 'compromise'. In fact, for the Leader+ strategy to act as a good engine for area-based development, which well meets the area's needs, it must be a meeting point of 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' efforts developed by the LAG and other local and regional institutions.

Broadly speaking, local development efforts need to be in-line with regional policies in order to have the necessary support. Regional policies need to rely on territories which are capable of developing their own capacities, and at their own level, in order to translate political priorities into concrete achievements. In other words, 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processes are not contradictory but complementary. The main issue is

to find the right meeting point. It is in this sense that Leader+ can act as a laboratory in identifying these 'meeting points' in each specific national and regional context.

Generally there is no 'one' answer, given that in Europe, the national and local contexts are so diverse in terms of: decentralisation and local autonomy; organisation and competencies of public authorities; population density; and the area covered by administrative units, etc. This is closely connected with another main issue, which is the selection of the appropriate territory when preparing a Leader strategy.

#### *Selecting the appropriate territory*

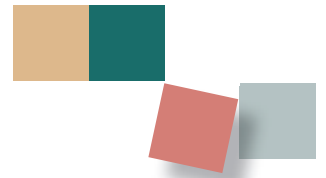
*A key element to consider when selecting the territory is homogeneity, and consistency. 'Naturally coherent or organic rural areas tend to be stronger: they have communities of interest, social and economic networks, a shared heritage, distinctive products, economic interdependence and geographic coherence. The sense of place and ownership which these confer is often highly motivating.*

(John Grieve, moderator)

Defining the boundaries of homogeneous areas is not always very easy. However the most critical aspect to consider when selecting the territory is the appropriate dimension, in relation to both the area size and population.

Local people need to define their territory small enough to keep a sense of belonging to it, which is so important for the success of any area-based development strategy, since people must be able to identify themselves with the area. They must also be able to meet frequently and know each other in order to network and develop active partnerships. However it should not be too small, as there also needs to be sufficient people to implement and sustain projects. The territory should be big enough in size to reach a critical mass for developing projects which can impact on the area's future, including its environmental, social and economic conditions.

Human resources are the key factor in local development, but in many rural areas they are becoming very scarce. In the most depopulated areas, Leader+ may provide invaluable help and represent the only possibility to exploit these resources. However, it is also in these areas, that defining an appropriate area might become quite challenging. If too small it might not be economically viable, but if too big it might lose consistency, and in both cases have a limited impact. This is a very critical issue, and again there is no one solution. While population density is a key criterion, it must be considered



along with: a territory's topography; existing transportation and communication infrastructure; actual distances and time spent travelling for people to meet; local historical and cultural traditions; and how communities are organised.

This means that in remote and low-population density areas such as exist in: the Nordic countries; mountain areas; and island archipelagos, a compromise solution may have to be found.

One possible solution is to bring together small areas through networking. This maintains a strong area-based character and identity, while at the same time offers sufficient actual economic capacity to achieve a critical mass. Strategies may be agreed at the local area and network levels, with the additional advantage of being able to cooperate outside of the local region, which is so critical for these isolated areas, and in particular, fulfils the need to exchange and to communicate.

## Advantages and disadvantages of being part of a small LAG

Population in the Southern Karelia Leader group's area is one of the smallest in Finland. The area consists of four municipalities in the Imatra region: Parikkala; Rautjärvi; Ruokolahti; and the rural areas of the town of Imatra. The total population is approximately 21 000. Most of the area is a sparsely populated rural region, and the average population density is only eight inhabitants per square kilometre.

There are advantages to being part of a small LAG. When compared to the size of the area of operations, the number of members of the LAG and holders of positions of trust in the organisation is high. There are a total of 45 members of the board and the sector groups in various parts of the operations area. They have excellent knowledge on how Leader funding can be used; they convey the message in the environments where they operate; and also bring messages from the field regarding development ideas to the Leader office. Another advantage of a small area is the good local knowledge. Everybody knows each other and they are roughly aware of the potential project applicants and the issues that require development. The relationship with the regional administration is easygoing: people are appreciated and feel like equals. The LAG has an important task in developing the region and its role is recognised. Its actions are autonomic.

However, there are also disadvantages in being part of a small LAG: the group of active actors is relatively small, and individuals may easily be faced with too much work, which may lead to fatigue; poor personal relationships may also hinder development of a sector; and the network of experts is not very extensive. In the case of Southern Karelia, they had to compromise their original principle of circulating as many funds as possible within their region, because they were obliged to acquire expertise outside their region. This was because: there was no available research supporting rural development in their region; there were no educational establishments to support the development work, and not always enough participants for small-scale training.

To conclude, the best feature of a small operations area is the fact that we completely lack a hierarchical structure. We can reap the benefits of a large group by being a part of the extensive LAG network!

**Riitta Bagge, Etelä-Karjalan Kärki-Leader LAG, Finland**

<http://yhdistykset.etela-karjala.fi>



## Implementing the strategy

In order for the strategy to be implemented successfully, there is a need to find a good balance among several competing objectives, such as: respecting the different priorities; encouraging local people to get involved; or developing synergies with non-Leader strategies.

### *Respecting the strategic priorities*

When selecting activities there is always a risk that the initial intentions may partly or totally fail to reach the declared objectives: especially those strategic priorities adopted by the LAG. This can be due to a misunderstanding, where, for example, those LAG members with some professional experience and understanding of associated terminology are not understood by the local stakeholders, or even because of differences between people.

In short, it is important to be aware of communication and staffing issues, and not only of the objective criteria or results of paper-based evaluation. Selection of the right topics, the right vocabulary, and the right people is important for having 'a dynamic strategy', and in ensuring that the strategic priorities will be met. Then when sufficient efforts have been made to communicate with those involved, and the right projects identified, it should be possible to realise the strategy. However there is a need not to be too selective and to retain some flexibility in the project selection.

Firstly, the door should be left open to some projects which apparently do not fit squarely with the strategy, but may nevertheless provide some original contribution. Such projects can give the innovative element which in the end leads to more valuable and interesting results than other projects that were supposed to better meet the priorities, but at the end failed to do so.

*The purpose of the strategies is to show applicants the desired development directions for the next seven years. However making priorities does not mean that when a good idea comes that does not fit the strategies it should be automatically dismissed. The effective implementation of the LAG strategy is always a balance between those defined well-established strategies, and crazy, surprising ideas that just happen. The latter usually have higher risks but sometimes the results can prove very innovative. The whole concept of innovation is that all good ideas cannot be covered beforehand in the LAG strategic document. (Petri Rinne, moderator.)*

It is also suggested to keep a good balance between developing small-scale actions at a very local level and wider initiatives with a longer-term vision.

Finally, although priorities must be respected, as the main objectives agreed among local people, the way to reach them might be subject to revision during the implementation phase of the strategy. 'The strategy should be allowed to evolve, to be modified according to the intermediate evaluation or a change in the contextual conditions' (Jean-Pierre Vercruyse, rapporteur).

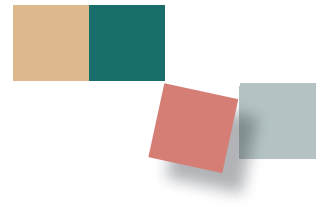
Keeping some flexibility may also help in improving the strategy with new ideas.

In any case, a key tool for respecting strategic priorities is to develop evaluation as a basic method. However, this must be done with easy-to-measure indicators which take into account the local needs of those involved. Indeed, there is a risk that evaluation is carried out at LAG level but not at the project level, where it might be viewed as just a useless bureaucratic burden. This is because local people are not used to this kind of systematic work, and the standard criteria proposed to them may appear obscure and somewhat detached from the local reality, etc. This risk is even more important when evaluation is made at a higher level, which involves those administrations who are funding the LAG strategy and therefore wanting to obtain standard, comparable information at regional or national level. In this case much depends on the relationships established by the LAG with these institutions. The LAG must also serve as a mediator concerning the projects' selection and evaluation, while at the same time keeping an appropriate distance and confidence with both the higher-level institutions and local project holders.

### *Encouraging local people's involvement*

Involving local people is a main pillar of Leader, and the LAGs should not forget that their main responsibility is to animate the territory and not just to administrate it.

However, animating the territory and encouraging the involvement of local people is still a continuing challenge for all LAGs! One important issue is communication. The regular dissemination of information about any aspect of the life of the LAG and its selected projects is very important for local people to identify themselves with Leader and to participate. Making the most of the local media is also very important, as it may provide local people with a means to



identify the area themselves and allow them to feel part of it. This also includes the strategy and actions developed by the LAG and other local stakeholders. Another solution is to develop working groups to facilitate the participation of local people. These discussion groups might be organised according to economic sectors and topics, or geographical distribution, or a mixture of both. A main advantage of such working groups is to develop contacts with local people, and decrease distances between them and the LAG. Decentralised working groups in large, low-density areas may reduce the physical distance, although thematic

working groups which may reduce virtual distances facilitate a more concrete perception of the strategy by the local people concerned. In any case, the most difficult challenge is to maintain dynamic working groups and to provide ongoing animation in order to obtain a good local level of participation.

Leader has provided numerous invaluable examples of animation techniques for rural development, which have been adapted to the local context, especially to the needs and capacities of local people.

## Making the most of different animation techniques

The 'Reintegration of agriculture into the social life' (RA) project has been initiated by the Cuestas LAG, in the Wallonian region of Belgium, with a view to: involving local people and farmers in thinking about the future of agriculture; developing new relationships between the farmers and the territory as a whole; and exploring new possibilities for the future of agriculture, individually and collectively.

To discuss the significance and future of agriculture, in addition to a vast inquiry of the territory's 150 farmers, a participatory approach has been developed with inhabitants and local stakeholders, including farmers. To help get people involved, photographs taken by 15 people were used to illustrate a series of key issues for the territory. The most interesting photographs were selected in discussion groups and illustrated in a brochure to show the local people's attachment to their area. Open debates, meetings and conferences took many different forms, and took the opportunity to cross-check the project's activities with other national, regional or local initiatives. This was particularly so for projects supported by the LAG. For instance, in connection with another annual Leader project dealing with cultural initiatives, called 'Memory of the eye', a series of conferences have been organised on the theme of, 'Which professions for farmers, men and women, in the Gaume region, today and tomorrow?'

Another activity called 'Open farms to the territory' was aimed at raising citizens' awareness of the role and importance of farms on the territory, and creating new social links among farmers and local people. A series of cultural events took place in several farms to provide opportunities for local inhabitants to discover: the reality of farm life, including photographic exhibitions; concerts, tales and stories; theatre; and other public events. These initiatives were also developed in conjunction with other national events or cultural projects supported by Leader. The national 'Open farms' days in June each year have been used for conferences, debates on agriculture following a piece of theatre, and the dissemination of the Leader projects on agriculture, especially the 'RA' project. The 'Memory of the eye' initiative was also used to make a decentralised photographic exhibition about 'People of the land' inside three farms, together with a welcoming party, conferences, storytelling, guided visits and other events.

**Catherine André, Cuestas GAL, Belgium**



Apart from animation and communication difficulties that LAGs may encounter in getting involved with local people, there is also a concern about existing, or even growing, distances between the LAGs themselves and local people in terms of a project's management capacities. Making and implementing development strategies and projects requires some professional know-how, which LAGs may acquire over time, but this is not necessarily the case for their local stakeholders. Also it seems that a wide gap remains in many areas between the LAGs, their staff and other members, on the one hand, and local projects' holders on the other hand. This confirms what has already been pointed out, that local people have difficulties to do self-evaluation and use indicators, since the basic principles and methods of quality management have not always been made widely known.

This is both a critical and central issue for Leader in general. There is no doubt that Leader has developed a European know-how for local development. However there is equally no doubt that quality management methods, such as those born in the industrial world have not really penetrated the

rural reality, which is often made of very small-scale businesses. Consequently it is a challenge for Leader to make the bridge between its own 'local development know-how' with that of the quality management methodology, which could be used with the necessary adaptation for the benefit of the rural world. The dissemination of 'quality management know-how' into the rural world, to meet the small-scale business context, and for use by local people as a routine project management, is probably a major task ahead for Leader!

Although it has so far not been considered as a central issue by many LAGs, some Leader areas have provided good examples and methodological references to develop quality management in relation to territorial development.

In brief, the LAGs and their partnerships must help local people to become skilled and confident in their self-management and self-development capacities. This is not only necessary for local people and groups to develop successful projects at their own level, but also for them and the LAG to get closer in order to more easily develop beneficial relationships with the non-Leader environment.

## The area label

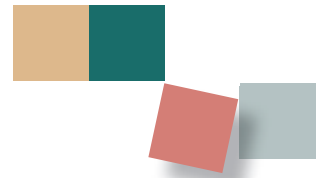
In the Campania region of Italy, the Alto Casertano LAG itself has initiated and carried out the 'Area label' project, with a view to creating a territorial quality network made up of enterprises, organisations and local authorities working on the same territory, all with the same goal of improving the area.

In this respect, the establishment of an '*area label*' involves all interested local stakeholders in a collective territorial system, aimed at adding value, and represents an active creation of a local development model. Moreover, it is in a process of ongoing development in line with the territory's social and commercial needs. The label is a means to develop the whole territory. This is achieved by the identification and promotion of local operators delivering products and services to high quality standards, and oriented towards the utilisation of traditional and environmentally-friendly techniques.

These operators are public and private enterprises who share the same objectives of the LAG, such as improving the quality of life by reaching high quality standards, and commit themselves to an ongoing process of improvement. The enterprises may include public administrations, restaurants, social services, handicraft laboratories, food stores, etc. The label allows the area to consolidate and develop those activities and the conditions that improve the territory's ongoing competitiveness, in terms of sustainable development and its traditions.

The whole area label system has been built-up step by step. This has been the case in: developing the legal framework; adopting the quality charter; providing information and assistance to enterprises willing to adhere to the charter and in becoming a member of the area label system; checking the eligibility of applications made by enterprises; preparing and managing the development of the labelling system as a whole, in particular in its continuing control and verification process, and in its financial management and communication strategy.





The main themes of the Alto Casertano Services Quality Charter to which the enterprises have to adhere to in order to obtain the 'area label' are: adding value to local resources; conservation of the environment, security and safety guarantee; improvement in the quality of life; sustainable use of local resources; and the quality of products and services. The adhesion to the label implies a series of checks made by the LAG itself, according to a series of indicators. These include the use of local products, low impact technologies, energy saving, training of employees, communication and promotion, etc.).

**Pietro Andrea Cappella, Alto Casertano LAG, Italy**

[www.altocasertano.it](http://www.altocasertano.it)

### *Ensuring synergies with non-Leader strategies*

The LAGs must be aware of their environment, and develop positive synergies with it.

*Complementarities with non-Leader strategies can be very important. Firstly for the Leader area, as it belongs to a larger region, then for the partnership, as partners are also involved in other procedures, and finally for the Leader strategy itself, as it is anyhow connected to a larger strategy at regional level. A balance has to be found between the autonomy of the LAG and its integration in a higher-level strategy. In any case a 'negotiation' must take place between the local expectations and other levels of priorities, and a 'pragmatic negotiating' approach will make the implementation much easier. The internal appropriation strategy by the LAG must be matched by the external appropriation by the administrations and the elected representatives. This is sometimes not easy as a culture of strategic planning is still missing in many places, especially amongst elected people. (Jean-Pierre Verduyck, rapporteur.)*

Of course this depends very much on the local context, the local policy and governance environment. The situation varies according to the degree of autonomy and competence given to regional and local authorities, and to the role played by state administrations or special public bodies in local development.

According to the countries or regions concerned, there might be quite distinct views expressed about the role and importance of Leader in the development of a given territory. Leader may be perceived, indeed, either as the main driving force of change and development, or just as a complementary tool which is specialist among other tools in developing the area. It thus can serve as an incubator of innovative actions, or as a methodological reference for a participatory and area-based approach.

Synergies with non-Leader strategies seem quite easy to develop in some contexts, but elsewhere are either much more difficult, complex, or even conflicting. In many cases, it still seems difficult for LAGs to be fully in line with administrations on all matters, and in particular to share some basic ideas relating to integration or complementarity.

A main task for the LAG and its partnership is to define the best position it may adopt in a specific context. When the area is already well organised, with either an existing and active private-public partnership or with highly empowered local authorities having a high degree of competence for local development, then Leader may be given a special mission. In this case the LAG may serve as a complementary tool or a specialised incubator to develop pilot actions. Elsewhere, the LAG may provide the territory with all the services necessary to bridge existing gaps in the capacity for local development, and act as a local development agency. Where there is a low level of local governance, then there might be difficulties for the LAG to adopt an appropriate and well recognised position. Much depends on the quality of relationships developed with local and regional institutions.



## The Finnish approach to the 'global grant' (1)

Finland is sometimes referred to as having a 'global grant' funding system for LAGs. A global grant is a somewhat controversial term and has different definitions depending on the person. Generally speaking, it relates to the independence in decision-making and to the LAG's own funding frame.

The strategies and funding frames of the Finnish LAGs are approved by the Ministry of Agriculture. Within these frames the LAGs are free to choose the desired projects based on the applications received. For example the Joutsenten Reitti LAG received some 170 applications in the period 2000–06, of which 133 were approved by the LAG's Board of Directors. The LAG then evaluates the feasibility of the project based on its own strategy. After approval all applications are submitted to the Regional Ministry Office, whose duty it is to evaluate the legality of the project. In this particular example, the Regional Ministry Office rejected two projects in 2000–06, claiming that their objectives did not match with the Leader Regional Rural Development Programme.

In some EU countries the role of the Ministry is stronger: the LAGs propose projects and Ministry officials either approve or reject. This can be seen as a completely different model to the global grant one. LAGs do not really have the power in their own hands but are always subject to top-level decisions. On the other hand the pure global grant model would require the LAGs to determine the eligibility, plus all payments and inspections currently done by the Regional Ministry Offices in Finland. So the pure global grant model would result in a 'governmental organisation' status for LAGs in Finland. This would give a much heavier responsibility and staff, which is not advantageous for the Finnish LAGs.

The biggest advantage of the Finnish global grant model, where LAGs and Regional Ministry Offices work closely together, is that the application procedure is clearly open to everyone, and is processed quickly: a fact helped also by the local media coverage given to the project. In this way, the Finnish LAGs have managed to mobilise a fairly large number of local people and organisations who are able to play their role in the local development. This is particularly important in what is the most sparsely populated country of the EU.

### **Petri Rinne, Finland**

<http://joutsenenreitti.fi>

(1) Under the guidelines of 24.1.2007 for the Leader axis: 'A decentralised model where the group is directly responsible for the initial certification of completion of the projects and payment is the global grant system.'

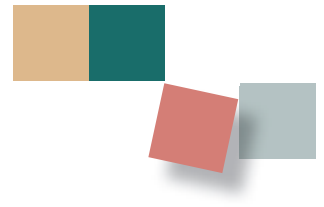
In all of this, the basic question to answer is: is Leader a gift or a mandate? In other words, is Leader a gift that a LAG and its area may use as they want to satisfy their own needs, or is it a mission given to them to develop an exemplary experience which may provide benefits to other rural areas, first in their own region, but also in Europe in general?

A good implementation of the strategy depends much on how the LAG and its area perceive the role attributed to them through Leader, and how it is in harmony with their environment. However, the most important thing remains the quality of the approach developed by the LAG. In particular, improving its capacity to bring innovation to the territory seems critical for a LAG being able to develop

positive links with its 'non-Leader' environment. The more exemplary and innovative it is in terms of proposals and results obtained, then the more attractive it will become for its environment, and relationships will be easier to develop with it. In this sense, it is very important for a LAG and its area to keep the door open to outside influences, and to take all opportunities offered in terms of networking and cooperation, in order to improve the capacity to innovate and make the Leader experience more attractive.

To conclude, the success of Leader depends very much on its ability to develop synergies with the non-Leader world in order to substantiate its original and innovative contribution to building the territory.





### *Conclusions about implementing the strategy*

What seems very important is to keep Leader not only as a methodology, but above all as a philosophy, based on specific values.

These values are expressed in the famous seven principles of Leader: area-based approach, bottom-up partnership, integrated approach, local management, innovation, networking and cooperation. For a Leader experience to be successful they all have to be respected and taken into account. These seven golden principles are indeed all interdependent and must be considered together as part of the Leader philosophy.

### **Economic viability**

*Leader is not only a successful EU initiative, but many case studies have proved that it is also economically viable at local level.*  
(Andrzej Halasiewicz, rapporteur)

In addition to the seven fundamentals, Leader has indeed given more and more attention to economic viability. Much public money has been invested, from national, regional and local funding sources in addition to the community support, and it is very important to consider the results in terms of economic viability and sustainability of actions implemented.

#### *A matter of misunderstanding*

There is often some misunderstanding about the concept of economic viability, at least on two aspects. Firstly, many LAGs' partners and staff stress the multidimensional character of local development. This must be understood in a holistic way and involve not only economic, but also social, cultural, and ecological aspects. However, based on this assumption, some of the LAGs' partners consider that economic viability is not a priority and should not be considered as a major objective. This is not logical, as Leader has no vocation to become a permanent granting system, and the mid or longer-term viability of projects has to be validated, and ensured. In addition, to become sustainable any local development process has to rely on economically viable activities and to become self-centred, which comes from within.

Promoting endogenous development for an area implies a commitment to ensure the co-financing capacity, and to take any necessary economic, social, ecological or cultural initiatives. Moreover, economic efficiency is one of the three

basic dimensions of sustainability, together with social equity and environmental integrity. For all these reasons, economic viability has to be considered by Leader partners as a basic objective.

Another misunderstanding relates to what is applicable. Does it concern the economic viability of new activities generated as a result of actions supported by Leader, or the economic viability of the follow-up of actions themselves? Both of these are important, and have to be considered. If the Leader project is considered as 'temporary', then it is the immediate indirect economic viability of the activity which is pertinent. Where a Leader project is supposed to be permanent, then it is the direct long-term economic viability (after financial support has ceased) which is at stake. There are, however, some indirect impacts on the development of the area, including economic ones.

#### *Ensuring that selected projects will be economically viable*

In spite of difficulties encountered in addressing and evaluating the economic viability of projects, or the activities supported or generated by Leader, there is in all countries much evidence that Leader has actually funded economically viable projects, either directly or indirectly.

*Professional management of the LAGs, including good development strategy, institutional capacity and tools for self-evaluation and management of projects, is very important. Crucial for success is a good selection and support system for projects at LAG level, as this ensures that good and economically viable projects are clearly identified and adequately supported. The LAGs should offer support not only at the initial stage of the projects' implementation, but also maintain contacts with projects during the later stages and offer assistance if necessary. They should offer good coaching and not necessarily just financial support.*

(Andrzej Halasiewicz, rapporteur)

The most important issue that a LAG has to address, however, is how to ensure that selected projects will be economically viable, directly or indirectly.

*Selecting an economically viable project will provide the best choice for the LAG's area, indeed in terms of costs and benefits. However, economic viability is quite complex to define, as it has to deal with economic efficiency and financial sustainability. It is strongly interrelated with other concepts, such as the project's sustainability, financial, social, and environmental impacts, which depend much on innovation and added value.*  
(Ivo Tartaglia, moderator)



Ensuring that selected projects will be economically viable is not an easy task for the LAGs. In this respect, answers have to be found more at the LAG level rather than at the individual projects' level, and that the assessment of viability depends on several criteria, and not just the financial ones.

Firstly, a broad-based organisational working with the LAG partnership is crucial to identify and support all projects, not just those considered to be economically viable. Project holders also need some support to move from their initial idea to their final proposal. The advice that it is given regarding a project's viability and ways to improve is just as crucial as the financial support provided by Leader.

*The wide network of contacts and skills available to the LAG should help projects having the potential for economic viability to develop their business plan.*  
(Andrzej Halasiewicz, rapporteur)

In this respect, the LAG acts as a multi-skills advisor, able to give different opinions and views from a variety of partners involved with Leader.

There are also many examples where the support provided by Leader in setting-up a project proved to be vital to its future development. This kind of support generally consists of providing the project with the necessary partnership element in order that it might realise its full potential. This means, for example, that the LAG will inform interested partners about the project, and start the necessary net-

working activities among local partners. A project having a territorial dimension, and thus more able to both support the development of the area and benefit from it, may also be the target of LAG support. In this case, the LAG will help the project promoters to review their project and give it a broader dimension, showing the possible links and synergies with existing, ongoing or future activities planned for the area. In any case, the broader the organisation of the LAG is in terms of partnership, the more efficient it is in offering projects with an efficient support network, including not just financial support, but general advice to ensure economic viability.

In other words, the LAG, and Leader in general, must act, and be perceived to be more of a 'think tank' than a 'money-tank'.

Another LAG function, which may help to ensure the economic viability of selected projects, is to act as an incubator of new activities, and facilitate the first steps until full economic viability can be ensured. In that case, the LAG may support pilot studies for future income generating activities and entities. This could be done in many ways. For example, the LAG may: support feasibility studies to consider the economic viability of new activities; support feasibility or market studies to facilitate the diversification or new development of existing activities; provide annually decreasing support until the new activity created can become economically self-dependent; support a pilot study as far as the development of the final business plan for the creation of new business; etc.

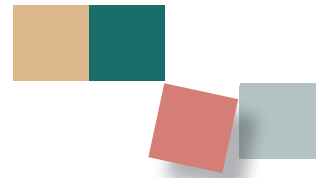
## The community portal

Comprising of the Orkney and Shetland Island groups, the Northern Isles is a very remote, peripheral area with a total population of only 45 000 inhabitants spread over 30 small islands. It is in the most northerly part of Scotland, and closer to Oslo than Edinburgh! Among the projects selected to support a local strategy aimed at breaking isolation and developing a viable economy through the use of new technologies and know-how, one of them well illustrates the route followed by the LAG to secure long-term financial sustainability.

The North Isles Leader+ Partnership requests that projects consider their exit strategy on completion of Leader funding. If a project has potential for economic viability, then the LAG will use its wide network of contacts and skills to assist the project to develop its business plan. In the example selected, additional funding was agreed for a further three years on an annually reducing basis, thus ensuring that the project had to become commercial in order to survive.

In 2003, a community-owned web portal named [www.orkneycommunities.co.uk](http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk) received start-up funding from the LAG. The initial funding was agreed on the basis that a detailed business plan, demonstrating long-term sustainability, would be developed in the second year, based on the practical outcomes achieved in the first 18 months of operation. In 2005,





as agreed, the project developed a business plan to identify future sources of income and ensure a staged withdrawal from public sector funding. The LAG assessed the business plan as having a good potential and encouraged the group to proceed.

The project now achieves sustainability through charging fees to member groups to meet the cost of hosting their websites, selling advertising space on the portal, and charging public agencies a fee for hosting statutory public consultations and surveys. The project has ideas for future development, and it is particularly interesting that the voluntary groups involved had to take a commercial view of income generation in order to enable the project to survive: they are now looking at using the skills developed within this project to provide a similar service to local small businesses.

**Alec Miller, North Isles Leader+ Partnership, United Kingdom**

[www.northernisles-leader.org.uk](http://www.northernisles-leader.org.uk)

Among the most important aspects to consider for a LAG acting as an incubator, or facilitator of new activities, are the skill-generating value of the pilot projects, and those new activities which can be supported in the early stages of the project. What is indeed critical, is whether an activity will bring new skills, new jobs that add value, and any new business models that can be replicated within the territory.

Here again, the financial role of Leader, however important it may be, must be considered carefully against other functions and supports provided in the area. Improving local skills should be a priority issue in order to ensure the economic viability of selected projects. Indeed, skills allow people to develop new activities and generate new incomes for the area. Although financial support is always helpful, it does not necessarily create new skills!

## Developing competitiveness

In addition to the economic viability of Leader funded activities, it is the economic viability of rural areas themselves which is at stake and this very much depends on their capacity to compete in the wider economy.

Developing competitiveness is thus another crucial issue in the evaluation of the legacy of Leader+. Has Leader+ helped territories to increase their competitiveness, and in which sense: to create added value?; to develop social competitiveness?; or to develop competitiveness in a global context? These are the main issues to address when evaluating the legacy of Leader+ in terms of increased competitiveness of those territories involved.

*Competitiveness is determined by the productivity with which a region (and its constituent elements) uses its human, capital, natural, environmental and cultural resources. Competitive regions require a 'strategic position'. Strategic positioning for a region can be defined as performing different activities from rival regions or performing similar activities in a different way. The region and enterprises within it must seek to deliver greater value (innovative products or processes) or create comparable value at a lower cost in order to achieve competitiveness. Greater value allows for higher prices. Greater efficiency allows for lower costs. The challenge for a region lies in the former.*  
(Ian Dempsey, moderator)

Thus creating and maintaining added value is a key issue for any rural area to develop its competitiveness.

*Creating and retaining maximum added value in the territory*

To achieve the maximum added value it is crucial to reach and maintain a strategic position in the market. To that end, developing distinctiveness is key.

*For the region a strategy should create a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities. The essence of strategy lies in the 'activities'. Regions should seek to perform different activities or the same activities differently. The key is to differentiate.*  
(Ian Dempsey)

Rural areas do not have so many resources to compete with urban or peri-urban areas, which benefit from a concentration of a skilled workforce, a stronger capacity to invest, better communication and transportation facilities, etc. Rural areas need to avoid direct competition with these areas, and try to bring to the market specific, distinct, and if possible unique products and services.



In other words, 'competitive strategy is about being different' (Ian Dempsey).

*To do this a region has to use its existing resources, find and develop synergies in its local economy. Research is a key element to get feedback from the market, evaluate products and services and develop innovation. A major challenge indeed is to be innovative and use the right to take risks in developing local products: a region that does not innovate is like a company that does not invest!*

(Martin Law, rapporteur)

There are many ways for an area to be different, and the Leader+ experience has made this possible.

A first option, often selected by the LAGs, is to promote the market visibility of the area by developing clear labelling and communication strategies based on local identity. The objective is to be as distinct as possible, which means looking for the delivery of specific, original, unique products and services. The labelling function is twofold. It gives a distinct image of the products and services coming from the area, but also promotes the territory as a whole, and the capacity of local people to act together and to identify themselves with the area. These strategies are generally applicable to all existing production in a given area. They rely on what exists,

and tend to make the most of it through communication and labelling, which also implies efforts by local producers to organise themselves, and to adhere to minimum quality charters and to cooperate locally.

To be successful, producers cannot simply rely on communication campaigns, or just using labels as new ways to give an identity or visibility. The strategy must involve local producers in a new approach to better secure and improve the quality of products and services delivered to the market. These strategies imply a level of development and management procedures. In this sense, they are critical in consolidating the Leader experience and in building the territory. This is especially so in: developing basic quality management know-how among local stakeholders; improving local cooperation; promoting new economic chains or clusters and developing new skills in terms of communication and marketing. This is a very important, intrinsic contribution for increasing the competitiveness of the area, beyond the main visible effect of these labelling and communication strategies, which are more concerned with an improved territorial image. There are many examples to build and implement such strategies provided by Leader+, from the simplest to the very sophisticated ones, and all are adapted to the wide diversity of local conditions existing in Europe.

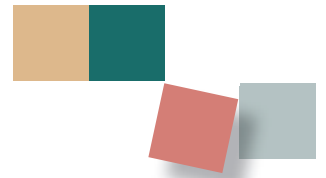
## The Fuchsia brand

The principal initiative in achieving competitive advantage for local goods and services in the West Cork LAG area, in Ireland, is the development and promotion of the Fuchsia Brand.

The main objectives of the action, and results expected from an improved visibility of the area, are: to harness the distinctive image of the region as an aid to local competitive advantage; promote the region's unique environmental, cultural and heritage resources; develop a branded identity for local goods and services, emphasising distinctive regional origins and product quality; and utilise regional imagery and identity in attracting new enterprise development to the region. Other related objectives and results, as key conditions for a successful development of the brand, are to develop high quality goods and services, using local natural resources, integrate the development and marketing of complementary economic sectors, and achieve greater degrees of collective action by the public and private sector in local development.

The core development strategy has been to use the animation and capacity building of the Leader programme as brand capital. The support system created is delivering exceptional benefits to the brand participants and to the region in general. These include: consumer recognition; new enterprise development; improved production processes; access to markets; increased output and capacity; development of new products, services and markets; substantial group synergies and networking; increased turnover, profitability and employment; and the development of a coherent identity and enhanced regional profile.





In 2005 the total direct economic value of output related to the Fuchsia Brand initiative amounted to EUR 106.97 million. With regard to impacts on economic sectors, of the total EUR 58 million (54 %) is associated with the food and beverages sector, EUR 35 million (33 %) in the accommodation and catering sector and the remainder is in tourism services. In terms of input-output analysis, of the total EUR 69.14 million remained in the region generating an overall contribution of EUR 88.79 million to the West Cork economy, supporting 1 131 full-time-equivalent jobs.

Thus the Fuchsia Brand members, typically small-scale food and tourism enterprises, have made a major contribution to the local economy of a peripheral rural region. Fundamental to this success is the harnessing of regional strengths in local natural, cultural and environmental resources, an integrated development strategy and a clear strategic focus.

**Kevin Santry, LAG West Cork, Ireland**

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Another option, less frequently adopted by the LAG however, is to identify leading projects, or products and services, which have a strong identity, and to promote them as soon as possible. Such products act as a 'driver' for the whole area, and are often based on existing products and services which have an emblematic value. Promoting them will enhance the territory's image and its distinctiveness, and this will be of benefit to all products and services from the area. It is also possible to think about and create new products which have a market image and identity for the whole area. Identity, though, is not necessarily equivalent to tradition. On the one hand, many products are genuinely traditional ones, but do not necessarily express any particular local identity, as they are present in many rural areas. On the other hand, history is not only the past, but also today and tomorrow, and a totally new product may be able to express some actual aspects of the local identity. In this latter case it is not just about improving the capacities of local people to work together and develop quality management and marketing. In the promotion of products based on traditional identity, the creation of new products will introduce innovation and stimulate the development of new skills in the area. This will also lead to an increase in competitiveness due to the development processes taking place in the area; the improved market image of the area, however important, is just the visible face.

## The Alpine beef story

The regional initiative 'Almenland' in the eastern mountainous parts of Styria, in Austria, was founded in 1995 under Leader II. The core cooperation promoted by Leader between farmers, gastronomy and other providers of tourism facilities has been continuously developed and intensified. Under Leader+ the LAG's strategy began to focus increasingly on the production of quality meat as the central theme of the region. The aim is to develop the Almenland area into one of the prime 'beef competence regions' in Europe, and to use this sectoral development as a driving force for the local economy, within an overall integrated regional approach. The flagship product is 'ALMO', which is an acronym for the ox raised on the alpine pastures, as a combination of 'Alm', which means alpine, and Oxen.

The major economic step started when the local cattle producers entered into a cooperation agreement with a company specialising in meat products, with markets being developed all over Europe. 'ALMO' is now a registered trademark and the product is being certified as subject to permanent control along the entire production chain, and according to a strict application of the traceability principle. Famous independent NGOs such as Slow Food International, Greenpeace, or 'Vier Pfoten' provide a variety of support to the initiative. The certification process as a whole has generated a high level of confidence among consumers in the overall quality of the region.

Above all, in a longer-term perspective the initiative has had a tremendous economic impact on the region. Since 1995 a total of 55 projects have been implemented. This represents an investment amounting to EUR 19.5 million. The actions have contributed to the generation of 80 full-time jobs and 180 part-time jobs. The existence of about 900 economic entities (from farmers to tourism operators) has been safeguarded through regional income generation. The success of the strategy is shown by an increase of 10 % in tourist stays during last year, despite a rather unfavourable overall development in Austrian tourism.

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[www.almenland.at](http://www.almenland.at)



Finally another option available to the LAG to promote competitiveness, and complementary to the previous one, is to include economic viability and competitiveness into the projects' selection and evaluation indicators.

#### *Developing social competitiveness in the territory*

Human resources are an important primary resource of any local development process. In rural areas they are particularly valuable for many reasons. Firstly, population decay and out-migration means they are often very scarce. Secondly, due to low density and geographical dispersion, or the small number of producers fully committed to manage small-scale business (where manpower is by definition a limiting factor), such resources are difficult to mobilise. Thirdly, the key stakeholders who can act as opinion leaders, or provide very useful expertise, are usually already fully committed to a variety of associations and professional groupings, local authorities, and their own businesses and families.

*Therefore, how a territory exploits its limited human resources is extremely critical for its development!*

(Martin Law, rapporteur)

In many rural areas, the private initiative, in terms of commitment and investment, is not enough to develop social competitiveness: public support is crucial. One way to optimise public support is to build professional coordinating structures. This role needs to be, and indeed is, carried out

by the LAG. In many cases there is a need for the LAG to find complementary local assistance, and use Leader, or other local opportunities, to build such coordinating structures, as they have to develop very specialised tasks. Firstly, they have to develop information and training of local people, which basically takes place through public meetings and thematic workshops. They also have to ensure that local knowledge is not lost, and then package and disseminate it through well targeted training and information activities. Many such structures will have to develop appropriate tools to allow local people to become organised and to cooperate. For example, this could be the adoption of commonly agreed quality charters for local products, or the development of a new agreement between producers to market new products or services, etc. Such a structure may also need to better organise or develop new local chains of production. This would be so in the case of promoting local products, and helping producers to adopt contractual agreements – and ensure that they are respected. Another key function, which is quite challenging, is for these coordinating structures to network the different private, public and voluntary sectors in a professional and sustainable way. Lastly, these structures can assist the local development process by providing the area with the necessary specialised support. For example by acting as intermediaries for the research and academic community, technical institutions etc., they can channel this expertise into the local development strategy. A good example of such professionally coordinating structures created to promote social competitiveness in rural areas is the so-called 'rural district' system in Italy.

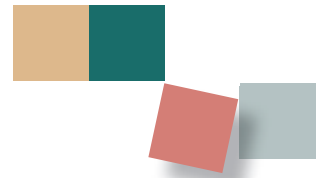
## The rural district

According to Italian law, a '*rural district*' embodies a local productive system composed of agricultural and non-agricultural enterprises acting together towards the implementation of a district policy. This policy is based upon: diversification; social and economic integration; conservation of natural equilibriums and the ability to promote a total territorial quality; providing a high standard of living for residents, and thereby becoming attractive for other enterprises and people.

The core content and objective of a rural district is to develop a quality management approach for the whole rural area, which can reinforce its identity and capacity for endogenous innovation. Few rural districts have been created so far in Italy.

In 2002, in the Marche region of Italy, the Colli Esini San Vicino LAG decided to use all the Leader+ resources to transform its territory into a rural district, in line with its strategy of improving the quality of the territory and its main theme selected, 'Adding value to local products'. In order to reach these objectives and create a rural district adapted to its specific context, the Colli Esini LAG focused on developing the following instruments: the creation and promotion of a territorial label; an environmental quality policy; an industrial policy geared towards innovation; internationalisation; and a widespread qualification of human resources. All these actions were accompanied by campaigns to raise awareness and favour networking between the local actors.





In 2004, all of the different local stakeholders, including not only professional groupings (hotels, B&B, tourism operators, farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, etc.), but also the county, communes, and chambers of commerce, nominated a representative to the board of governors of the future rural district, and to the 'Concertation Table'. The latter is an operational body charged with setting-up the regulation of the territorial label, and to discuss the implementation of the strategy decided by the board.

Compared to the initial objective of having 80 enterprises as members of the rural district, by the end of 2005 there were 90 members, including associations, and public and private bodies, with requests for membership increasing continuously afterwards. The 'rural district' is now in legal existence and is fully operational with all the necessary functioning bodies and instruments in place (internal regulations, board of governors, technical committee, label, quality standards, and dissemination material).

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#### *Developing competitiveness in a global context*

*'Competitiveness is determined by how a territory uses its local strengths and resources.'* (Martin Law, rapporteur.) Thus developing social competitiveness, taking care of human resources and local skills to better network and organise the local system, developing labelling and marketing strategies, and leading projects, will all contribute to increased competitiveness.

In spite of all this, there is also a need to go beyond the area-based approach as it has been implemented so far, and to take a look outside the territory. Territories wanting to increase their own competitiveness need also to be aware that solutions (including market oriented ones), are not necessarily local. To be successful in the global market, territories have to work together, which also means looking for external support, including sources of funding.

In this respect, all LAGs have a valuable opportunity through Leader+ networking and cooperation, to take a look outside their own boundaries, and learn from the experiences of others.

Compared to the need for many rural areas to increase competitiveness, many LAGs have still to take advantage of such opportunities. There are many examples under Leader+ where cooperation has proved to be particularly efficient in bringing innovation and boosting local development. Moreover, it must be said that the Leader method provides a very efficient frame for cooperation among rural areas: even for areas involved in such an experience for the first time. One major obstacle to cooperation is communication

among partners. This is due not only to a language barrier, but also to conceptual and cultural differences which arise between people coming from very different backgrounds. It is therefore possible to speak the same language but not necessarily be understood, as the same word can have a different meaning, and the concepts and experiences are so diverse. To some extent this has been overcome under Leader. One of the major advantages of Leader is that at the European level a set of common principles, methods and approaches has been adopted, which considerably facilitates communication among partners in cooperation projects. People may indeed speak different languages, but they have a common one, which is the Leader language. With this they can understand each other very well, much better than in other areas where the Leader language is not known, as the respective partners have very similar experiences and a common conceptual and methodological framework in which to express them. This means that Leader territories can learn from each other more easily.

In other words, the Leader+ networking and cooperation system is a powerful tool since it helps rural areas develop their competitiveness in a global context. To develop and make the most of the networking and cooperation potential, much more than has been the case so far, is certainly another major challenge for the Leader method!



## Conclusions

To conclude, building the territory is nothing more than writing a new chapter of its history and preparing the next, by developing and implementing a sustainable strategy for future generations.

This overview of the legacy of Leader+ with regard to building the territory has provided evidence of some important lessons for the future at European level. It can indeed be considered that Leader has three major challenges for improving its capacity to contribute to rural development, and serve as a pioneering tool for all European rural areas.

The first challenge is to make LAGs more aware of the capacity of local people for self-management. There is widespread evidence of a continuing, and perhaps a growing gap between the LAGs' capacities to manage local development, and local people's capacities to manage projects. A main goal for Leader is to disseminate a quality management culture, such as exists in the business world, into the European rural world. There is a great need for local people to integrate the basic elements of quality management, concepts, techniques and methods, including the use of indicators for monitoring and assessment. This will help them to manage more easily their own projects and the LAGs to better implement their strategy, and improve the consistency and efficiency of funded projects in respect of strategic priorities. This is urgent and important for European areas: not just Leader ones. There are many good examples of Leader+ projects having developed such techniques at territorial level, and these could serve as a reference for Leader as a whole. Another critical issue in Leader being able to improve self-management capacities of local people is the development of models of support, or coordinating structures. These could disseminate basic ongoing services to local stakeholders in terms of: information; training; networking of producers; cross-sectoral networking; mobilisation of external resources; networking and cooperation. Priority should be given to developing these basic supports which will improve the economic viability of actions and the competitiveness of territories as a whole.

The second challenge is to improve the positioning of the LAGs towards the non-Leader environment. The main objective here is to help the LAG find a level which best preserves on the one hand, the value of the bottom-up approach and strategic planning management by the LAG itself. On the other hand, there is the need to ensure the best use of Leader territories as pilot areas for the implementation of regional policies, and in the regional context, the dissemination of best practices to other rural areas.

The third challenge is to increase the level of networking and cooperation under Leader. Using the simple image of the Leader networking system as being a collection of 'tubes' allowing information, ideas, experiences and people, to circulate, then the solution is to have 'wider tubes'. There is a clear need for Leader to modify the present balance between the so-called 'territorial experiences' and the other 'inter-territorial and cooperation experiences'. This is required to improve significantly the potential contribution of Leader+, and thereby increase the competitiveness of Europe's rural areas. There is also a need to use the networking and cooperation capacities of Leader+ towards the rest of the world. Leader is indeed a model for European rural development, but would very much benefit from being able to exchange this experience with other rural development models in the rest of the world. All people involved in rural development all over the world are very eager to learn about the Leader model, and understand how it actually works at the local level. All Leader areas in Europe would benefit by developing an exchange of experience and knowledge transfer from these third countries. Such an exchange would allow for a better appraisal of the territory in the global context. Leader could then become the main channel for cooperation among rural areas not only within Europe, but also with the rest of the world.

## Acknowledgements

We are indebted to John Grieve, Andreas Neuhauser, Ivo Tartaglia, Ian Dempsey, and also Jean-Pierre Vercrey, Andrzej Halasiewicz and Martin Law, moderators or rapporteurs of mini-plenary sessions at the Leader+ Seminar 'The legacy of Leader+ at local level: building the future of rural areas', held on 24-26 April 2007, Capi Corsu, Nebbiu è Custeria area, Corsica, France. Most of the ideas expressed in this paper derive from their decisive contribution to introduce key issues and make evident the main lessons learned from these mini-plenary sessions dedicated to address questions raised on the theme of 'Building the territory'.



# Building the partnerships

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## Introduction

To 'partnership', or to actively associate with others is a basic human instinct. However, we can see that even this basic principle of sharing something is viewed quite differently depending on where you are in the world:

- ▶ A Chilean proverb says: 'He who divides and shares, always takes the best part'. From this we can perhaps infer that sharing implies learning the most.
- ▶ 'Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow'. This Swedish proverb demonstrates a straightforward view of mankind's qualities.
- ▶ A Spanish proverb, 'He who divides gets the worst share', takes a more cynical view!

It is clear that the idea of 'partnership' depends very much upon the angle from which it is viewed. The ethical aspects which it embodies, such as mutual trust or reliability, are also matched by the management perspective. This links partnership to the sharing of a task and know-how, and of exploiting complementary capabilities. Finally there is the business perspective, i.e. to find partners for a joint venture. The key to all this, is to understand that not only does the perspective change but also the partnership itself is subject to continuous transformation. Thus, if a partnership, such



as the Local Action Group (LAG) in Leader, is devoted to development, then a continuous transformation is a necessity and a prerequisite for success.

Below, the major topics related to partnership building in the framework of Leader+ are discussed and presented. For all the basic principles of the Leader method, the partnership aspect is fundamental. The LAG can be considered as a prototype of regional partnership for rural development. It is the example of a public-private partnership which is not business-plan driven but community-based and is very much oriented towards the development of a given territory. At the same time though it is a multi-annual partnership which has flexibility in terms of strategy definition and implementation. The major expectation regarding the LAG's performance is that a well-founded and diverse project portfolio leads to visible and tangible achievements. Again the issue of partnership is crucial: projects in Leader+ are built on partnerships. The composition of the partnership reflects the content and shapes the results of the project.

<sup>(1)</sup> From 1998 until 2007 working for 'OIR Managementdienste GmbH', Vienna. Focus on international projects such as evaluations as well as guidance and training for Structural Funds, particularly in Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia. Also consultancy and support in the collection of good practices for Leader+ as well as the elaboration of the compendium on tools for transnational cooperation in the frame of Leader+, Interreg IIIA and programming of Interact.



Thus the formation of the project partnership is a key element of strategy: a group of local residents might look for institutional backing for their initiative; a group of small entrepreneurs decides to cooperate in order to gain access to new markets; or the LAG management might decide to join forces with a university for a particular project. Thus there are many different options possible for the diverse projects found under Leader+.

For all longer-term partnerships it is important to adjust to changing environments. In respect of rural areas there can be changes in the macro-perspective. This is particularly so in the case of the diminishing role of the agricultural sector in terms of: employment; urban sprawl in proximity to agglomeration areas; climate change strongly felt in mountainous or Mediterranean regions; and the wellness and health trend in tourism. However there are also changes from a micro-perspective. These include: particular patterns of outward or inward immigration; lessons learned from a natural disaster; and specific potential due to new research results etc. The perception of similar trends and changes as well as the responses in terms of projects might differ between the areas, though one key challenge is the same for all actors in rural development: the importance of developing tools and techniques to ensure sustained learning capacities. Open-mindedness towards new ideas, the involvement of new partners, and to reflect on previous actions are all crucial in this respect.

Finally it is important to see that Leader+ is embedded in the context of governance at all levels, a fact which is also reflected in all elements of the Leader method. National policy frameworks have significant implications for the development of structures and thus also for the setting-up of partnerships, be it at LAG or project level. To give a few examples, the recent French concept of 'pays' as the guiding legislative and territorial framework for rural development is partly based on the lessons learned from Leader I and II. Finland has taken a pivotal role in mainstreaming the Leader approach in rural development policies. LAGs cover the whole territory of Finland and are partly financed from Leader+ and partly from national sources. In Austria, Leader could build on the experiences of endogenous regional development as well as the specific support actions for mountainous regions. Both of these were launched in the late 1970s and led to the emergence of regional managements as stakeholders of rural development. In all three countries mentioned, there is a strong positive momentum for the Leader initiative, although the related development processes and administrative cultures are quite different.

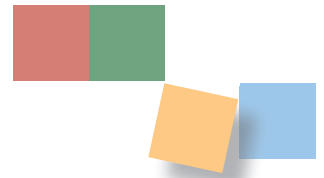
## The LAG as a development tool

The following considerations of the LAG as a development tool are strongly inspired by a recent publication by Robert Lukesch <sup>(1)</sup>. The perspective indicates that the following considerations are taken from a 'bird's eye' view. First of all, a quick look at the notion of local partnerships in the legislative guidance documents. The EC regulation which will govern the mainstreaming process of the Leader approach stipulates the following key features of LAGs.

- ▶ LAGs as part of a bottom-up approach must propose a multi-sectoral, integrated local development strategy, which also foresees networking activities with other LAGs.
- ▶ The group must represent partners from the various locally-based socioeconomic sectors in the territory concerned.
- ▶ Economic and social partners, as well as other representatives of the civil society, must make up at least 50 % of the partnership which takes the decision on the projects to be financed under the strategy.

These are the core elements of the Leader approach referring to the constitution and the partnership aspect of LAGs. The requirements are obvious and clear-cut. The striking point is that this model is applied to many policy frameworks and a broad variety of rural territories. The European Union now consists of 27 countries, in each of which there are numerous types of rural territories. The fascinating diversity is made up of: coastal areas; valleys in mountainous regions in the Alpine arc; groups of settlements in the vast continental plains; sparsely populated areas in the far north; and prosperous areas in proximity to areas of agglomeration etc. In many of these territories LAGs have been active since the early 1990s, while in others they have recently become members of the EU. In some countries, decisions governing the actions of LAGs are taken in a distant ministry of agriculture, while in others, regional representatives work in close contact with the LAG stakeholders. Differences in the LAG environment shows (on the assumption that all living organisms adjust to their environment), that throughout Europe LAGs depend on different structures and have different roles.

<sup>(1)</sup> Robert Lukesch, 'The LAG-Handbook — A guide through the stunning world of local action groups', commissioned by the Leader+ Observatory Contact Point, Brussels, 2007.



### *The LAG as a responsive development grouping*

The LAG should respond to the needs of local people and match their styles of working and decision-making. Further on, the LAG should have a complementary function in terms of governance. It should add value to the governance of rural development. When setting up the LAG, a thorough check of the environment is needed. This means a comprehensive analysis in the context of local and regional development is needed in order to identify:

- ▶ the role of the LAG in respect of other players in the area, such as existing farmers' associations, tourism operators, youth, etc.
- ▶ previous achievements in rural development, diversification, and the remaining gaps which should be addressed since these gaps reflect explicit needs of local stakeholders;
- ▶ the potential and limits depending on the governance context;
- ▶ the potential and limits in terms of own capacities, skills, technological or natural constraints for certain types of action, and the resulting needs for initial capacity building.

An honest stocktaking of these factors will help to define which type of action is most needed to achieve visible and desirable results and impacts.

The LAG (as a model for interaction in rural areas) could be considered as a living organism which goes through several stages of development. The character and scope of activity will differ significantly through the different stages from inception to maturity.

- ▶ At the start, the animation will help to get people started, by getting them to take a close look at the territory itself, and helping the LAG to take a leading role.
- ▶ Subsequently, structuring activities will help establish initial ideas and lead to partnerships and concrete projects such as the development of new organisations, regional branding, and investment in technology.
- ▶ This will be followed by a process of consolidation, which will take advantage of the results of projects through cross-sectoral or interdisciplinary networks, and to make self-organised structures sustainable with a stronger emphasis on economic sustainability.

A typical example of animation is the recent project of the Luxembourgish LAG Letzebuerger Musel ([www.musel.leader.lu](http://www.musel.leader.lu)) in the creation of a regional identity known as 'Miselerland'. The LAG began in June 2003. The project which started in late 2006 is the result of a long internal discussion process. In the beginning, the situation was characterised by a number of fragmented players in the tourism and regional food production sectors, as well as a strong dominance of wine and viticulture. The major result of the project has been the setting-up of organisational backbones for future projects, and a series of marketing and promotion actions. So-called market alliances now gather regional producers under the new logo, and a declaration or cooperation charter provides a documented testament for all those interested parties who have decided to work together.

A typical example of a structuring activity is the project known as Bergholz Marketing Ltd, which is run by the LAG Austrian Vorarlberg ([www.leader.vlbg.at](http://www.leader.vlbg.at)). This project brings together a joiner, a saw mill and a forest enterprise, who founded a company on the basis of an order to construct a wooden house. The partners developed the necessary joint marketing strategy and quality certificate, and subsequently a number of product innovations were realised. The company is organised as a 'one-stop-shop' for the potential customer.

An excellent example of a consolidating activity is the 'Road of masters' (Meisterstrasse Salzkammergut). This is a trans-regional, cross-industry network which gathers craftsmen dedicated to the production of high-quality products coupled with innovative ideas. From a nucleus of nine craftsmen in the region of Salzkammergut, the project has constantly expanded its scope of activity. Currently about 100 partners are engaged in a network spanning over five Leader+ regions in Austria. The partner network now includes partners in craft, tourism and cultural institutions. Its major work focus is the exchange of experiences, marketing, as well as the development and implementation of targeted qualification measures.

Despite the fact that in the course of the LAG's life cycle the share of these types of activities might differ, it is nevertheless evident that in all stages of programme development, there are three types of action that are needed in order to ensure the continuous supply of new ideas.





At regular intervals, but in particular at the beginning of the LAG's work, an honest stocktaking is needed in order to avoid pitfalls such as over ambition or lack of acceptance. The practical experience from the LAG Northern Kymenlaakso (Finland) demonstrates three major points.

- ▶ It is important to dedicate sufficient time to the internal clarification of the role of the LAG in all its practical aspects, otherwise there is a serious risk of never-ending struggles and compromises leading to inefficiency.
- ▶ It is important to see that the voluntary work of LAG board members has limits, by the fact that most of these persons have jobs, families and hobbies etc. Apart from an internal atmosphere of trust and a sound division of labour within the LAG management, it will also be necessary to offer financial compensation in order to ensure their continuing involvement.
- ▶ The role of the LAG management as service provider with a broad portfolio has to be reflected in its budget.

The composition of the LAG and its decision-making structures will not only reflect the degree and character of the governance context but, to a certain extent, also shape the portfolio and scope of action. The LAG board represents the participatory aspect of Leader, which in most countries consists of the representatives of local residents and entrepreneurs, associations and municipalities. Its members work on a voluntary basis. The operative arm of the LAG is the LAG management which, technically speaking, is the service provider supervised by the LAG board. Since LAG managers are the only ones who can devote all of their time and professional capacity to the LAG, their actual influence is in most cases significant. A public-private body which is as large as a LAG needs a small steering unit which, in turn, will strongly influence the course of action.

#### *The governance context as decisive element*

National policy frameworks shape the room for manoeuvre in the LAG's work. In most countries rural development policy, similar to regional development, is a cross-cutting issue which in administrative terms is subordinate to agricultural policy. Only a few countries have established rural development as a policy area in its own right.

Finland practises, since Leader II, a policy of Leader mainstreaming. LAGs, funded from Leader+ and other national sources, cover the whole rural territory, and are actively involved in drafting regional rural development programmes. They play a key role in a number of other regional programmes. In this way, such a LAG could be seen as an implementing agency for integrated rural development policy. The many different tasks required for policy harmonisation and delivery also require considerable management skills and resources.

In many other countries the situation of LAGs is rather different to the Finnish example. The LAGs work as service providers in their area and seek to channel resources from several funding sources to consolidate and expand their scope of action. To motivate target groups across sectors, as well as to address the differing needs of various target groups, requires a constant effort in animation and participatory activities. The LAG's work requires autonomy and flexibility, which is often hindered by formal requirements from the authorities. In the case where rural development is a sub-function of agricultural policy, then it is often the subject of fragmented competencies, and consequently may suffer from staff shortages and unclear areas of responsibility. Here LAGs could develop their function as integrated platforms and service providers for rural areas. Expertise in the use of several funding sources will therefore be an important skill. In such cases the LAGs will try to establish their position as local development agencies.

In other countries, standard issues of rural development policies are the subject of an already dense network of players. In Austria for example, agricultural mainstream programmes are strongly anchored at the level of the Länder (provinces) and operate in close cooperation with the national level. Here there are a number of strong sector organisations (such as regional chambers of agriculture and commerce as well as business and tourism agencies) with a long-standing tradition and significant political weight. Next to LAGs, regional managements are also in charge of local/regional development policies. Leader is designed as a complementary programme focusing on soft investments, such as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the preparation of large-scale projects for mainstream programmes. In such cases LAGs could be considered as local partnerships developing niche products or as a complementary pathfinder.



It is evident that the governance context shapes the role of the LAG. These three examples highlight the different positions of LAGs and their scope of action.

### **The Finnish LAG Pohjois-Kymen Kasvu as an example of an implementing agency for integrated rural development policy**

The LAG is co-financed from national rural development funds (ALMA). The LAG is actively involved in the compilation of the Regional Rural Programme for Southeast Finland, and a task division between the responsible departments of the Employment and Economic Development Centre, and the LAG is being negotiated. The LAG also plays a key role in the Kouvola Region Agenda 21 Programme and in a number of other regional programmes under the authority of the Regional Council of Kymenlaakso, and under the umbrella of the national Rural Policy Committee.

### **The Portuguese LAG in Loco as an example of a local development agency**

The LAG in Loco ([www.in-loco.pt](http://www.in-loco.pt)) was formed in 1988 in order to develop and expand the community development work that had begun in 1984 under the auspices of a university. The LAG participated in all Leader programmes since the beginning of the 90s, when Leader was the only rural development programme and the LAG the only body in charge of local rural development policy. The LAG follows an approach of 'action research' which allows for a

comprehensive picture of the real needs of the population, and to provide responses reaching far beyond the scope of Leader measures. The basis has been a network of local development agents, and strong emphasis is placed on information, animation, training and capacity building in order to foster continuous integration of the territory.

### **The Austrian LAG Sauwald as an example of a complementary pathfinder**

The Upper Austrian LAG Sauwald ([www.sauwald.at](http://www.sauwald.at)) was formed in 1999. After several years of working to develop the basic structures and identify the core themes, the LAG's professional staff turned their attention to project implementation. After this initial period the rather slow process gained a strong momentum and took a rather unexpected turn. An idea for a rather unconventional tourism project, brought up by a facilitator in the course of the LAG's strategy definition process was, three years later, taken up by a group of local actors and then implemented. The so-called TreeTopWalk was born and became an instant success. This flagship project, which has become a successful tourism project, has also led to a change in the LAG's strategy. The LAG board started to take on the function of a regional tourism board, and now the establishment of a proper tourism board has started. Prior to the implementation of the project, tourism played a minor role in the LAG's strategy. Now the overwhelming success of the TreeTopWalk has demonstrated the potential regional value-added of tourism.

These considerations of the LAG as a universal tool of development have illustrated that under the common 'trademark' of the LAG, a wealth of different public-private partnerships at local level have emerged. The context of governance plays a major role in the scope of action and even in the composition and the setting-up of the LAGs. Under various types of governance, LAGs have delivered excellent results and have shaped promising paths of development even under rather difficult conditions. The main point is that the LAG has the positive qualities of a living organism, i.e. to act responsively in the given environment.

There now follows a closer look at the internal mechanisms of the local partnerships.

## **Establishing and managing a successful LAG**

### *Developing the partnership*

The first step towards a successful LAG is to develop a strong, integrated multi-sectoral partnership, which should reflect the territory, the local residents and the area's products. The main objective is the diversification of rural areas. Usually strong sector organisations already exist which are rooted in regional or even national policy frameworks. These organisations are joined by the LAG who then guides them towards developing the territory, with a close view on any possible synergies or conflicts.



All initial partners setting out on this road should bear in mind that the development process, i.e. the setting-up of the partnership and the formulation of the strategy, should meet high standards in terms of transparency and broad participation from various groups. In all cases the human resources, namely the inhabitants of the LAG's territory, are the key assets for future development. To find the adequate means to participate in the planning process represents the first management challenge for the LAG's start-up phase. Such a process requires to some extent, professional leadership in order to safeguard momentum, and to avoid frustration due to a lack of preparation, and in particular to document achievements and agreements reached. The major point is that the definition of topics and priorities should be clear-cut and transparent to all stakeholders. However, it should be clear that professional support should be used in designing and implementing the process and not for writing the strategy itself. The key success factor is the formation of a core group which is interested in project work already at the planning stage.

The strategy should be a common guideline which leaves room for new ideas and one which represents an agreement between the LAG partnerships. For obvious reasons it will differ between new LAGs, who will place greater emphasis on animation and the formation of new project partnerships, and the more mature LAGs who will seek to build on previous achievements, or sharpen their economic profile with a view to regional competitiveness. In many cases this initial written agreement will be overtaken by new ideas and promising new directions: thus a new strategy emerges. If the partnership building process itself has led to strong sub-networks, and/or founding of some organisational structure, this will not be considered as a major problem by the LAG stakeholders, but rather as an ongoing adjustment.

#### *Establishing the LAG management*

The LAG management should be considered as a tangible unit which provides high-quality services. For small LAGs it is a particular challenge since the establishment and maintenance of sound levels of service requires a minimum level of staff. Moreover it has to be seen that it is a 'travelling management business' which covers all parts of the LAG territory. Thus for one person alone it is very hard to cover all functions: office management; organisation of events; involvement in projects; advisory services; and reporting.

In Finland it is a general strategy that there is a minimum of two persons, even for smaller LAGs. In order to finance a staff of two, small LAGs, such as the LAG of Southern Karelia,

implement projects alongside others in order to have more than 15 % of the total budget available for financing the permanent staff. This consists of an executive director and a project secretary. The executive director is in charge of monitoring; financial transactions; links to interest groupings; handling project reports; payment applications and related statements. The project secretary works in the field and is engaged mainly in LAG animation, training and project development: working as a pair is also needed for continuous mutual discussion and mental well-being (!). This safeguards sound office management and ensures that the office is open to clients.

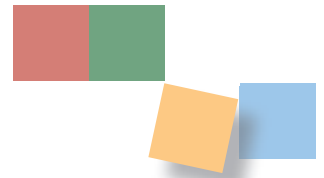
#### *Ongoing communication and tool development*

In general the communication strategy has to reflect the diversity of clients and the local environment. The communication strategy should be not only based around standard tools such as websites and leaflets, but also on topical seminars or information meetings for project partners. Even video films (see below) could be used to attract new clients since they can convey emotions and give interesting insights into achievements.

Press and media work might account for considerable staff capacities, e.g. in the case that broad animation/marketing projects are carried out by the LAG. Such animation projects might be needed when forming broad development partnerships. Indeed, the process of shaping the regional identity and projects which deal with regional marketing or branding requires a continuous media presence at local, regional and national levels. This can be very demanding and time-consuming. The regular evaluation of communication activities as well as of the project portfolio is crucial in order to determine the participation of the different municipalities and sectors. Such regular reflection is a major element in planning tailored animation and information activities.

At the same time it is important for the LAG management to keep the programme attractive for clients. The administrative burdens for project owners should be kept to a minimum which in turn requires a sound office management. According to the expertise of several countries, a particular emphasis should be put on information tools and advice for applicants. The application of a 'two-step procedure' has also proven to be a valuable support for applicants: i.e. having a series of support activities from project start-up to project implementation. Such useful tools include:

(!) 'Acting in small LAG-Benefits and disadvantages', presentation of Riita Bagge in the course of a mini-plenary session at the Corsican seminar, 'The Legacy of Leader+ at local level: Building the future of rural areas'.



- ▶ a comprehensive project planning framework which gives detailed instructions for setting-up the project plan;
- ▶ meetings with the applicant as well as ongoing feedback about the way the project is evolving;
- ▶ switching to the application stage only after the project plan has got the green light from the LAG manager;
- ▶ upon receipt of the official decision, the LAG manager goes through the entire document and: clarifies any open points; instructs on practical implementation issues; and offers help in formulating detailed work plans.

In most cases these services are offered on an as-needed-basis for the applicants. In all reported case studies the initial investment has paid off, since those project applicants who received sufficient information do in fact launch better targeted and more efficient projects, which in turn saves a lot of time for the LAG staff in the implementation stage.

#### *Keep the system open for new ideas and perspectives*

For the LAG to operate as a living organism it is important to encourage new ideas and to safeguard learning capacities. This requires a clever balancing of continuity against the integration of new ideas and thoughts. On the one hand, the continuity of personnel is needed in order to benefit from previous experience, and to develop an institutional memory which is necessary for any ongoing strategic adjustments. On the other hand, the influx of new ideas and perspectives is crucial to cope with any societal and physical changes taking place in rural areas.

One of the options for encouraging new ideas is to ensure staff rotation on the LAG board: the supervisory and decision-making body of the LAG. This has several beneficial effects. Firstly, the impact of dominant personalities on the board is lessened, and secondly, since some board members work on a voluntary basis, the 'rotation' helps to persuade people to offer their services.

The LAG should also try to represent the interests of as many groups as possible. It is evident that certain groups within the population cannot be attracted so easily to rural development. One group which deserves attention is youth, since rural areas, and remote ones in particular, are prone to out-migration of their youth. There are two major ways to raise the interest of young people:

- ▶ firstly, specific youth projects are an option, and examples in Leader+ include: comprehensive educational initiatives with a view to strengthening their ties to their home region; direct involvement in nature protection activities; participatory planning approaches;

- ▶ secondly, the interests of young people could be addressed by having youth represented in the LAG, including participation in decision-making, which is in fact the case for some Finnish LAGs.

One of the dangers for mature and well-performing LAGs, which might lead to innovation being neglected, arises due to the prevalence of daily routines. Institutionalisation can consequently set-in and cause 'fatigue', especially amongst the LAG's voluntary members. This is an important consideration when actively foreseeing what management provisions need to be made in order to keep the LAG open and responsive to new ideas.

#### **The LAG board as active stakeholders — the case of the LAG Oulujärvi (Finland)**

As in all Finnish LAGs the composition of the board of LAG Oulujärvi ([www.oulujarvileader.com](http://www.oulujarvileader.com)) was done in accordance with the so-called tripartite principle: one third of the members are representatives of the public administration; one third represents associations; and one third is composed of private residents. The board consists of 12 people. The LAG rules foresee rotation in the board membership, and the term of office has been defined as two calendar years. One person can serve for a maximum of three consecutive terms. Half of the members change each year, which means that many different persons have the opportunity to participate in decision-making. The LAG's youth is also represented on the board, and the internal 'code of conduct' strongly emphasises that decisions are taken equally among partners.

An important strategic element is the continuous involvement of the deputy members of the board. All board members receive the same information, and they are all invited to training and excursions as well as to participate in board and workgroup meetings. Consequently the feeling of shared ownership is strengthened.



### *Expand the scope of action with cooperation and networking*

The networking of local partnerships and the involvement in cooperation projects at interregional and transnational level are explicit requirements according to the official regulations. Most NNUs share the view that mature LAGs are in a better position to meet these challenges. The initiative for networking among LAG managers, and the incentives to meet for joint training or specific seminars, comes mainly from the NNU. The next steps in this procedure are often incentive meetings which are jointly organised by the NNUs of neighbouring countries. Usually it is a major help if the neighbouring LAGs speak the same language, or if command of the language is widespread among the population.

In short, in the context of transnational cooperation 'top-down' incentives play a substantial role. In many cases the LAG manager has a spearheading function and starts to investigate possible common fields of interest. To give just two examples: the Luxembourgish LAG Letzeburger Musel has recently been in contact with the neighbouring German LAG Mosel Franken, since inter alia, regional development processes are increasingly linked, with for example, many Luxembourgish residents moving to Germany to benefit from lower housing costs. Initial contacts have been made and cooperation will be intensified in the near future, with the explicit desire not to restrict it to tourism. The neighbouring LAGs Ausserfern in Austria and Auerbergland and Ostallgäu in Germany are one step further. The newly founded LAGs had existed only a few months when the managing directors met for a first exchange of ideas. A lot of common objectives and options for cooperation were identified. The common cultural heritage and its potential for tourism had been identified as a strong incentive for cooperation. The LAGs agreed on a qualification project in tourism and transnational education for cultural guiding and management of regional museums. This was subsequently developed and implemented.

### *The institutional environment of the LAG*

In institutional terms the environment of the LAG is shaped by the fact that it should provide services for project owners and at the same time it is linked to authorities at regional or national levels, which share the responsibility for the financial management of the Leader funds. As has been stated already, in the best cases, close cooperation with the authorities is sought in order to safeguard direct communication. This is of course not possible in the context of national or regional policy frameworks in many countries. Large central administrations tend to have very elaborate systems of task division and it is often difficult for external persons to find the right person to provide answers to some of the more comprehensive questions. In

any case, diplomacy is a key rule for the LAG management in order to establish a manageable position in the institutional environment. Clients will benefit from sound and transparent work relations. It is better to work on the basis of clear-cut rules even if accompanied with stricter conditions than to depend on ad hoc decisions or rather vague guidelines.

When looking at the relationship with applicants, experienced LAG managers stress not to do anything on behalf of the applicants, but to work with them, since it is a cooperative process and both parties should learn by 'doing'. LAG managers are often deeply involved in the setting-up of projects in terms of lobbying and networking, and in the design of the project. Sound preparation of a project is worthwhile as projects then need much less time later on. The intention of Leader is in fact to enable rural actors.

### **Not recommended!**

Finally, it is sometimes useful to set up a list of things you should never try when managing a LAG. This list is based on the ample experience of Liisa Häme, who is working for the Finnish NNU.

At the start:

- ▶ don't let a professional consultant create a strategy — nobody will be committed to the strategy or understand what it says
- ▶ don't save money for better projects — you need working examples to show that it is really possible to get something going.

In your internal system of checks and balances:

- ▶ don't hire big bosses — LAG work is all about cooperation, teaching and counselling;
- ▶ don't cling to competent, easy-going board members — turnover in the board staff will bring new ideas and it will effectively prevent power from ending up with one person or interest group.

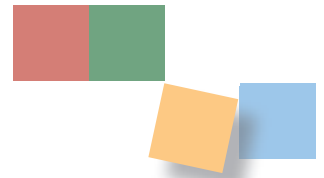
With a view to your environs:

- ▶ don't do anything on behalf of applicants, work with them — the idea is to learn by 'doing';
- ▶ don't quarrel with the authorities if you can avoid it — your clients will benefit more from functional relationships, even if accompanied with stricter conditions.

In the years to come:

- ▶ don't stop — never think that you are dealing with a ready-made system.





## Establishing and managing successful projects

### *Diversity of partnerships for diverse projects*

The project partnerships are the second fundamental aspect of partnership in Leader+. These partnerships will vary in their composition depending on the type of projects, and it is possible to distinguish three ideal types of projects, generated by: the LAG; entrepreneurs or community projects stemming from NGOs; or local public services. The following examples might help to illustrate the diverse nature of partnerships in Leader+ projects.

A diverse range of project partnerships have been established in order to respond to the challenges of rural diversification which itself is a main objective of Leader. Below are three examples of such project partnerships. These include: partners which have a complementary interest; a number of small shareholders who could pool their resources; and disparate partners who have the potential to see a common interest. All these types are possible within Leader projects.

### **Protection of ground water reserves in Jura — LAG Kelheim (Germany)**

<http://lag-keh-nb.le-on.org>

This is an example of how a project can bring together partners with complementary interests in order to derive mutual benefit. Parts of the LAG territory include an area of Karst which is particularly sensitive in terms of ground water protection. The project has established a successful partnership between the farmers and the regional water supplier, which has led to a win-win situation for the partners. Farmers have made changes in the way that they farm without any losses in terms of harvested crop, and in return receive financial incentives from the water supplier. In turn the regional water supplier benefits from a significant cost reduction in water purification. The role of the LAG was to ensure interregional cooperation with two neighbouring LAGs in order to achieve the critical mass for the planned activities. Later, the LAG helped to bring the partners together, and to facilitate the development process and the negotiations. This was in addition to ensuring a broad awareness-raising of the project at regional level.

### **Small forest owners — LAG Altusried-Oberallgäu (Germany)**

<http://lag-altusried-schs.le-on.org/Internet/lag/>

This shows how a project can develop a critical mass of partners with similar interests which results in more efficient organisation and a better market position. A cooperative of small forest associations has been founded which helps to optimise the use of wood from small private forests in accordance with the principles of sustainable forestry. The cooperative organises the logistics and the sorting of the wood, and negotiates the prices with wood processing industries. This has led to new markets being accessed and better timber prices for the forest owners. The role of the LAG has been focused on supporting the application process.

### **Cooperation for prevention — LAG Fehnggebiet (Germany)**

<http://fehnggebiet.landkreis-leer.de/>

'To raise a child takes a whole village' is an African saying that characterises this community, which addresses an important target group. It aims to support the LAG's youth developing a locally based self-esteem, including faith in the future and a positive awareness of their local identity. The various educational institutions of Osterhauderfehn wanted to understand the results of scientific research which show that '20 % of the youth are at risk'. For a joint analysis of the situation, and subsequent action, they created an institutional network to improve pedagogical support and to allow a secure social bonding of young people with their home area. Today the support structure counts up to 50 working groups active in various fields. The project helped to develop an understanding of how to tackle the problems of those youths considered at risk. An ensuing 'future search conference' produced dramatic results. Consequently, the LAG initiated a project partnership in which normally non-participatory stakeholders came together in the steering group (e.g. police and school teachers).



A topic which is often the subject of lively discussions among Leader stakeholders is the support of external consultants. There are two lines of argument in respect of the role of consultants. Firstly, the consultant cannot take the place of the applicant, and if support is needed in project development it is still the applicant who gets in touch with the LAG. Secondly, within a project, external expertise should be used whenever there is a knowledge gap. For example: projects in the field of renewable energy should benefit from the research that has been done in other regions; marketing initiatives could be improved by taking into account international standards; and the quest for new markets, as part of a joint venture, requires specific knowledge about the rules governing the market etc.

#### *Dedicated support over the entire project life cycle*

Part of the LAG management's role is the dedicated support given over the entire project life cycle. For obvious reasons the type of support needed will change over the different phases. However, the transparency of the process should be a standard feature. It is recommended to create a flow diagram and ensure that there is a clear quality control procedure in place for handling the movement of projects, including actively informing promoters of the status of their project.

In the preparation phase major points are to:

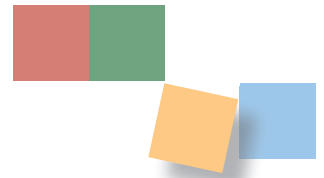
- ▶ pave the way for the initiative, i.e. to contribute to awareness-raising among key actors;
- ▶ establish the foundation in terms of partnership and content, and set-up the networks (the networks which span from the inner circle of project stakeholders over the broader circle of supporting partners, to other interested parties);
- ▶ provide tools and efficient work routines, in particular when moving from the planning to the application stage.

The second major step, which is clearly a challenge for management, is ensuring that *the* decision-making process should be timely, fast and transparent. One element in this decision-making is the internal capacity of the LAG to come to timely decisions. The second element is the administrative routines needed to get the support/agreements from the regional or national authorities. In the case of both these steps, an open and transparent communication with the applicant is a major factor for customer-friendly behaviour. Obviously a close relationship between LAG and the authorities is crucial in this respect.

The assessment of project applications within the LAG is the first step. Ensuring formal compliance (as well as the check for eligibility) is in most cases the subject of well-established routines. The more difficult aspects relate to the assessment of the innovative content, economic viability and sustainability of the project. An honest assessment of the internal capacities of the LAG is needed in order to decide if all aspects can be covered by 'in-house' experts, or if external expertise (including expertise from other LAGs which have already implemented similar projects) is needed for a thorough project evaluation. In many LAGs the board also includes sector groups. Chairpersons are often members of the board, whereas other members work as external experts, who review project applications and issue statements concerning the decision-making process. The often multi-sectoral character of many projects will call for an intense discussion between all deciding members in order to reach an agreed decision about the evaluation.

In any case the documentation surrounding this process, and its results, are cornerstones of sound and transparent LAG management. In addition, a more technical layout of the selection process should not separate the selection process from the guiding principle that all projects should respond to the area's needs. Tools such as evaluation grids, rules of procedure, and the format of selection meetings, should always be checked and subject to revision if the discussion process in the evaluation loses momentum and is allowed to degenerate and become a technical routine.

Once the LAG has taken the decision in favour of the project, the remaining administrative steps should be completed quickly in order to avoid frustration. The advantages of direct relations with authorities and established administrative routines are obvious benefits in this respect.



## Short and direct communication flows as well as shared responsibility in decision-making — the LAG Flevoland (Netherlands)

The Dutch Province of Flevoland is a good example of direct communication in the decision-making process. The LAG project manager is situated in the same office as the managing authority which allows for frequent and direct discussion. The LAG's advice to the managing authority is binding. The authority reviews the proposal on financial and legal aspects and prepares the funding decision. The decree with the decision on the approval is combined with an agreement. The agreement states important dates, expectations and deliverables related to the financial support. The agreement is signed by both parties, i.e. the authority and the project owner. The method of assigning shared responsibilities enhances cooperation and reduces problems.

[www.flevoland.nl](http://www.flevoland.nl)

The subsequent implementation phase poses totally different management challenges. In the case of projects run by the LAG itself, the obvious challenge is for an efficient use of the LAG's capacities. This will help to avoid bottlenecks and maintain the quality in areas of work such as regular communication, animation or training tasks. In the case of projects implemented by other promoters, all kinds of support might be needed from the LAG depending on the nature of the project. A standard need is for the LAG management to support the project by different media/information initiatives. At the same time, the regular monitoring of progress has to be done without posing disproportionate administrative burdens on the project promoter, and also ensuring an open communication in order to be able to provide reliable information to the LAG stakeholders, as well as to the authorities whenever needed. A key point is changes to the initial project, and in particular experimental projects which might require changes. It is a major help for both sides if the LAG management has a mandate to negotiate and fix such changes within predefined limits. If even minor changes require a fully-fledged decision-making process, the project implementation will be impeded and frustration for all parties involved is guaranteed. From the LAG

perspective it is important to foster the balance between flexibility and persistence. Strategic objectives should be kept, but operational steps in the working practice might need to be changed to provide the necessary safeguards.

### *Evaluation with a view to 'life after funding'*

The LAG is in charge of a portfolio of projects which should reflect a coherent approach in meeting the strategy's objectives. This is the simple 'bird's eye view', but life on the ground is quite different. Often bundles of interlinked projects are being implemented, or projects built on each other, and comparatively large-scale infrastructure development stands next to small animation activities. The LAG's staff may be heavily burdened by their day-to-day administration and/or by the implementation of the LAG's strategy: either way their time and resources are scarce. However, the only real failure in the management of the project portfolio is not to learn from what is happening on the ground. The micro-elements of the strategy, the projects, should be assessed with a view to 'life after funding'. However, this should not be confused with considerations about economic sustainability which is a key requirement for certain types



of projects. Here it is about the strategic decision taken by the LAG, either to continue a certain development path or to consciously drop it. Such processes of reflection are one of the foundations in the successful management of the project portfolio, which will be discussed later under the heading of 'Monitoring and evaluation'.

#### *Innovation — the magic word*

Projects in Leader+ should be innovative. The smallest common denominator is that such projects should be unique in a comparable environment. The nature of innovation is manifold. It could be a product, but quite equally a process. Often in Leader the major innovative element is the multi-sectoral nature of the initiative which brings together standard elements in a new way. In practice, the assessment of the innovative character of a project is not always easy. It is evident that the LAG and its management is not just a funding office, which might otherwise restrict its role in the assessment of the project's innovative content, since the LAG is deeply involved in the definition of the strategy. The strategy should contain the first seeds for innovation. However, the process whereby the strategy is developed might reveal that a 'standard animation project' is needed in order to prepare the ground for future innovative spin-offs in terms of real innovative projects. This means that an understanding of project clusters is needed to be able to grasp innovative aspects.

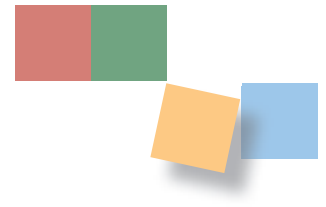
When it comes to single projects, in particular those involving entrepreneurs, it is clear that in striving to be innovative there is an implicit degree of risk with no guarantee of success. However, there are several tools for an *ex ante* risk assessment such as comprehensive feasibility studies including: cost-benefit analysis; standard techniques such as the calculation of internal rate of return or the net present value; and the inclusion of experts in developing business plans, or study visits to LAGs which have implemented comparable projects. Although there is no guarantee for each and every case, it should not be forgotten that it is the very nature of this type of support programme to encourage projects which are not standard. A major step towards risk minimisation comes from the support in setting up the partnership. Here the LAG should assist in an open assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the initial group of project partners. If a knowledge gap is identified in the project development phase the LAG should strongly support the inclusion of the possibility of using external expertise.

#### *Finally: what is a successful project?*

The success of a project might look different from the perspective of the key players in Leader+. For the managing authority, the compliance with national and EU rules, as well as the take-up of funds, might be key factors in stating the success of a project. For the LAG, the success of their strategic project might be the fact that it stimulates new emerging sectors, and follows a distinct development cycle from awareness, to training and business support, and the establishment of sustainable structures. For the project promoter, it is often considered as the timely achievement of expected results in line with the initial resource plan.

In more technical terms, the success of a project can be monitored with a view to the achievement of milestones and the expected outputs and results. This becomes more difficult when assessing the strategic impact of a project, and the complete picture will only be apparent when evaluating the strategic impact of the project portfolio against the strategy. However as we have seen before, key projects might open up additional scope for manoeuvre and lead to an adjustment of the initial strategy. To share the internal view on the impact of projects requires a well-founded combination of qualitative and quantitative information. Quantitative indicators such as new and safeguarded jobs, temporary jobs within projects, investments made, increases in turnover, numbers of tourists etc. are one part of it. Such indicators are needed to report the success of the programme to the public authorities since the value added of public expenditure has to be demonstrated. For a discussion about strategy within the LAG, a lot of additional qualitative and quantitative information is required to be able to come to any conclusions about the success of projects. It is important to see that the criteria for success will differ according to types of projects:

- ▶ for projects generated by the LAG, one of the key criteria might be to trigger other initiatives which lead to further projects;
- ▶ for projects developed by companies, it might be the decisive support in the start-up phase which enables an economically sustainable innovative business in a niche market, thus creating jobs and generating regional added-value;
- ▶ for community projects, it might be the significant and visible improvement of the quality of life for a certain group of persons (which can hardly be expressed in quantitative indicators, but in terms of institutional capacity building and their generative nature in leading to other creative processes in the community).



A project's diverse nature and the resulting differences in the types of strategic impact have all to be reflected in the provisions for monitoring and evaluation. The foundation for the successful management of a project portfolio is to foresee time and resources for joint reflection. The only failure is not to learn from what has been done.

### Monitoring and evaluation at LAG level

'Hell shared with a sage is better than paradise with a fool'.  
(Yiddish Proverb.)

In previous sections the learning capacities of LAGs have been stressed. For the LAG the learning process implies the sharing of perceptions and perspectives. Alongside willingness, time and resources, a set of tools can also support the learning process.

#### *Monitoring and evaluation — terminology and key intention*

Monitoring and evaluation should help to fix the LAG's learning capacities and related partnerships. It comprises a set of tools and techniques which are to some extent both standardised and based on the motivation of individual LAGs. A clear distinction should be made between the terms of 'monitoring' and 'evaluation'. Generally speaking:

- ▶ monitoring is essentially the checking of results against expectations and thus an important pre-requisite for evaluation, whereas;
- ▶ evaluation involves analysing information from monitoring and other sources to find out and explain the effects of the interventions.

#### *Evaluation at programme level*

It is important to see that with a view to monitoring and evaluation at programme level the European Commission has developed and established a comprehensive framework which details the expected standards for the outcomes, such as for *ex ante* evaluation, mid-term and *ex post* evaluation reports. These evaluations are done at programme level and will, of course, take the aggregate achievements of the LAGs into account. Their main purpose is the legitimisation of public expenditure used for certain policies. However, it is also important to see that these evaluations at programme level, if not restricted to mere compliance exercises, provide a wealth of policy-related information which is also useful when reflecting the work at LAG level. The *ex ante* evaluation should include a framework for the

measurements of the programme's impact, and discuss or even develop the set of indicators, and assess the intended implementation routine. The mid-term evaluation will provide cross-cutting insights to the performance of LAGs, and often includes case studies or encourages meetings of LAG stakeholders from all over the country. The discussion and contacts gained in such an evaluation process can be supportive of decisions about strategy taken at the LAG level. Finally *ex post* evaluations will retrieve a wealth of information due to the full use of case studies, and the synthesis over several strands of policy. International experiences and pointing out case studies or the benefits of different policy frameworks is certainly an added value, and helps to broaden the perspectives of national stakeholders of Leader. In short, the process and results of such compulsory evaluations at programme level should not be neglected by the LAGs. There is a clear added value in having an aggregate view of local or regional initiatives in terms of assessing the strategy, benchmarking and sharing knowledge about the individual initiatives.



*Self-evaluation at LAG level — different needs at different stages*

In contrast to the evaluation at programme level, the expectations and guidelines related to self-evaluation at LAG level are more based on the ambitions and motivation of LAGs. Generally speaking, self-evaluation should be understood as a tool for quality management. LAG stakeholders reflect past performance and experiences, with a view to improvements for the future. The LAG as a living organism will evolve through several phases and in each of the phases self-evaluation is a crucial step.

- ▶ In the inception phase it will be useful to define the scope of action and the LAG's identity. Such useful methods might include: SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats); focus groups; mind mapping and critical incident technique; and project fairs etc.

- ▶ A more mature LAG could apply self-evaluation for quality management and control in order to reflect performance, procedures and work routines. Relevant methods are likely to include quality circles, standardised data collection, and the so-called 'balanced scorecard'.
- ▶ Finally, the ongoing and regular process of self-evaluation, based on a sample of different methods, might contribute to institutional learning and the codification of knowledge which helps organisations that are expanding, as well as in times of staff rotation.

A broad set of methods and techniques exist for self-evaluation. The following outline of methods has been developed by Bernd Schuh <sup>(1)</sup>. It may serve as a starting point to develop tailored solutions for self-evaluation.

<sup>(1)</sup> Bernd Schuh, 'Monitoring and evaluation at LAG level', incentive speech for the mini-plenary session in the Corsican seminar, 'The Legacy of Leader+ at local level: Building the future of rural areas'.

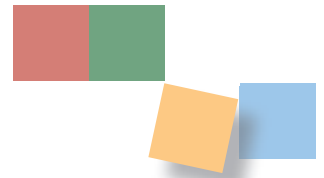
LAG development stage	Self-evaluation goal	Selected methods
Forming	Self-definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ SWOT analysis</li> <li>▶ Focus groups (external facilitation recommended)</li> <li>▶ Critical incident technique (ibid.)</li> <li>▶ Mind mapping</li> </ul>
Storming	Identity finding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Films</li> <li>▶ Identity markets/fairs (external facilitation)</li> </ul>
Norming	Quality control and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Quality circles</li> <li>▶ Standardisation of data collection</li> <li>▶ Local balanced scorecard</li> </ul>
Performing	Institutionalised learning and codification of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Database (externally set up, internally managed)</li> <li>▶ Quality circles</li> </ul>

*Self-evaluation needs guidance, exchange and tools*

The 'Synthesis of mid-term evaluations' has shed some light on the state of play as regards self-evaluation in Leader+, notably that the coverage and quality of the activities revealed serious gaps. Activities tended to lack coordination and cooperation between the LAGs and national networks played, with some exceptions, only a minor role in terms of active support. Self-evaluation was often restricted to one-off activities without subsequent corrective action. The study has recommended a mix of external evaluation and assisted self-evaluation at LAG level with strong support from regional and national networks.

There is a strong need for tool development: some compendia or exemplary information on self-evaluation have been prepared by national network units (NNU), as is the case in Finland and Austria. The Finnish NNU has published two comprehensive documents on self-evaluation which are available in English. The Austrian NNU has started an initiative to establish LAG self-evaluation within an overall framework of Leader quality management.

However, the provision of a simple set of tools which will foster an ongoing and regular process of self-evaluation is still a challenge in most of the countries. As has already been shown, a rather coherent system of tools is needed which



satisfies the different information needs throughout the life cycle of a LAG. The benefits of actions taken at regional or national level are evident. The comparability of evaluation techniques, and the ensuing results, is an important element for benchmarking which should not be misinterpreted as a mere comparison of performance, but rather seen as an encouragement for mutual learning among the LAGs.

External expertise could be a decisive help in self-evaluation. The effective and efficient application of evaluation

techniques needs to be demonstrated and trained. Also the targeted use of evaluation results needs discussion, agreement and commitment. An external person could be a major support in this process. Some NNU have set up a pool of experts with proven experience in evaluation techniques. The NNU gets feedback on the quality of the evaluator's work done for the LAGs, and thus can base its recommendation on previous experiences. Thus the initial hesitance towards a stranger having insights into the LAG's business might be overcome.

### Simple but effective: video films as a self-evaluation tool used by the LAG Grande-Terre (Guadeloupe, France)

The LAG decided to use video films as a simple tool, for example to film the projects and interviews with project stakeholders (an enriching experience for the LAG members). Videos help to convey emotion and thus raise the level of interest! Similarly, videos have been used to analyse the meetings of the LAG. This was useful when it transpired that some amendments to the format of the meeting could be arranged easily, and that this was beneficial for the atmosphere and proceedings of the meetings. The use of videos led to better participation and involvement between the public and private actors, notably lengthy presentations were replaced by discussion.

[www.maires-guadeloupe.org](http://www.maires-guadeloupe.org)

### SWOT analysis and Balanced Scorecard as tools: the example of the LAG Auerbergland (Germany)

The LAG Auerbergland has introduced SWOT analysis as well as the balanced scorecard (BSC) as tools for self-evaluation. In both cases, it is important to make use of a broad group of stakeholders in order to capture a wide range of opinion.

SWOT analysis captures a broad sample of qualitative aspects which can also be used to distil adequate performance indicators. It is a major help in defining and adjusting the LAG strategy over various phases of the LAG's lifecycle as well as for the formulation of short-term action plans. In the German case it also includes elements of benchmarking with other regions.

The BSC translates the visions and strategy into a tailored set of performance indicators at project level. The LAG uses it for the evaluation of projects, but also for the monitoring of projects throughout the project lifecycle. The standardised systems allow for aggregation which is again an important input for making adjustments to the strategy. The so-called local balanced scorecard <sup>(1)</sup> (see p.38) is an extension of the BSC with four integrated perspectives: firstly, the external perspective of territorial outcomes and impacts; secondly, the long-term process of development and learning; thirdly, the internal implementation processes; and finally, the short-term perspective of resources. Again for each of the four perspectives a few indicators can be identified.

Due to the fact that the basic grid for the SWOT as well as the BSC remains unchanged, both instruments allow for the comparison and transparent documentation of project evaluation and regular strategy assessment.

<sup>(1)</sup> Developed by Leo Baumfeld together with a working group of the Austrian Leader+ network



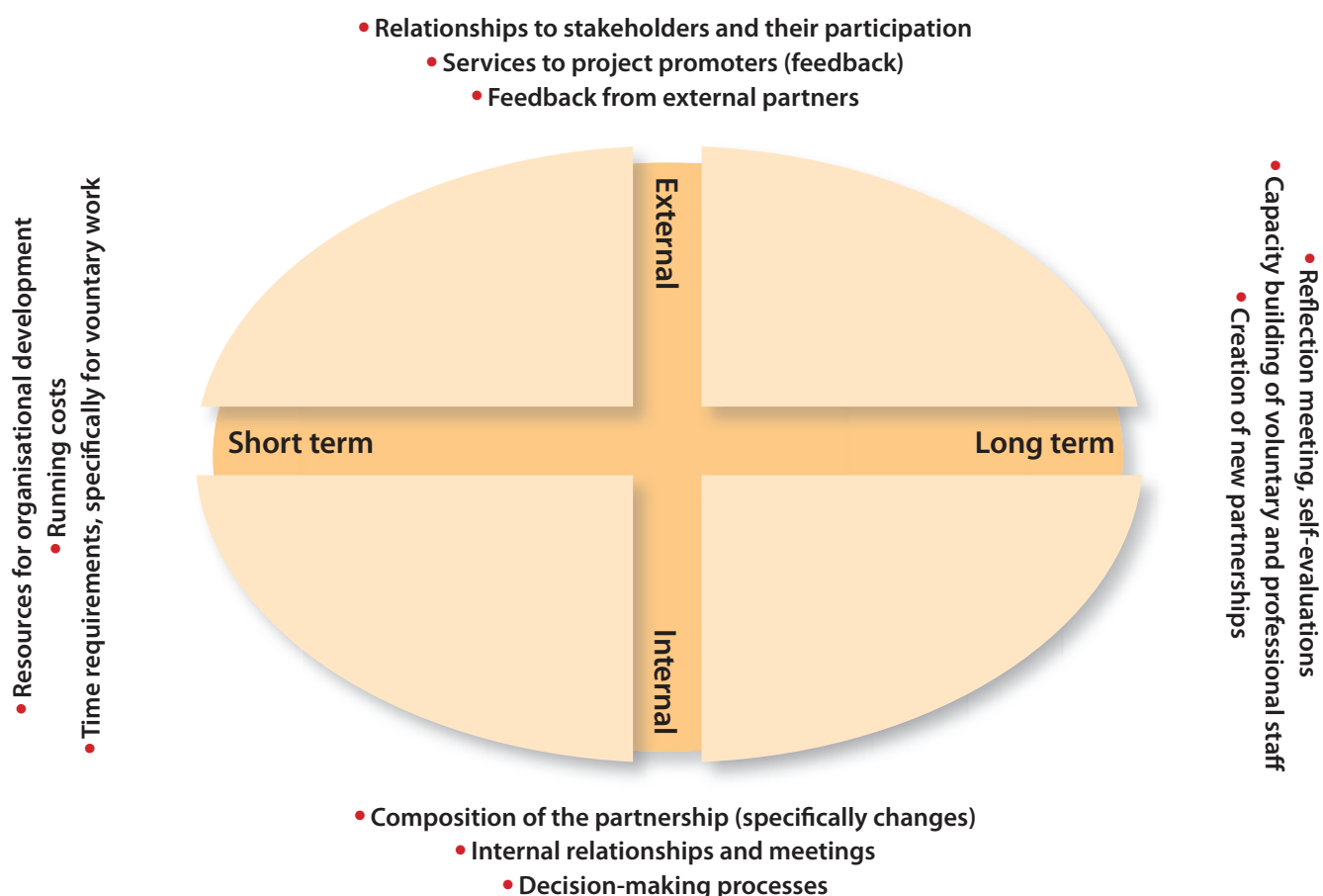
The provisions for self-evaluation should be defined and agreed at a very early stage. A major point is that the techniques used as well as the formats of the meetings need to be chosen carefully. It should be possible to demonstrate that self-evaluation is an enriching experience and not a nuisance. Generally speaking, self-evaluation should be an open, reflective, participatory communication process. It is not intended to produce well-formulated, balanced policy reports, but rather it should help to reflect the hands-on experience and perspectives of the LAG and to open new development options. Thus throughout all evaluation steps from questionnaires to focus groups, the language and the settings of the meetings is crucial for having the sustained interest of participants.

As has already been shown, there is a broad range of methods and techniques for the collection and systematisation of data. A mere application of quantitative methods will soon reduce the level of interest in a group of interested persons. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is

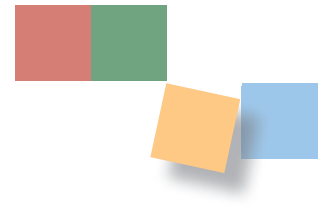
needed to address a broader group of LAG stakeholders. Structured brainstorming techniques such as SWOT analysis might be used at the outset of the strategy definition. This will help to define the main directions of action as well as to understand the complexity of the LAGs' environment. At programme level, the Leader programme also included a SWOT analysis which is revisited in the course of the mid-term evaluation. This might allow for a fruitful comparison of the perspectives at local and national level. SWOT could also be a standard element of project development. This type of analysis is a foundation for various steps. As a subsequent step requirements and objectives of data collection are better understood and accepted from all parties involved.

An internal structured reflection along the project management cycle for types of projects, paired with focus groups including LAG management and project owners, might help to detect gaps in the capacity of the LAG. Such gaps could be mitigated in quality circles including external support.

### Local balanced scorecard (LBSC): An example







### *Links between all stages of evaluation*

Compared to other programmes, Leader+ has a unique potential due to the fact that self-evaluation is encouraged and partly done at LAG level. The smallest units of programme delivery are encouraged to implement provisions for learning. Thus, compared to other programmes, a wealth of techniques for the collection and use of qualitative and quantitative information has been developed under Leader.

However the whole issue of evaluation at LAG level still needs further development. There is still ample room for improvement and the NNUs might have an important role in adding momentum to the process. It would be desirable to establish more opportunities to review the evaluations at programme and LAG levels. Qualitative policy-related findings at the LAG level would improve the quality of evaluation at programme level: a minimum of comparable performance information would help to establish a more detailed picture of the achievements of the programme. In turn the LAGs could benefit from a well-founded reflection on national policy, since it might give them new inputs for their internal discussions and methods to measure performance.

### **Conclusions**

The periods from Leader I to Leader+ have led to a wealth of knowledge on partnership building in rural areas. There are hardly any other initiatives at European level where the interaction between the strategy developers and the project owners is as close as in Leader. There are also hardly any programmes which leave such a flexibility to the stakeholders in terms of composing strategic partnerships. There is only the basic rule: that the economic and social partners, as well as civic society, should make up at least 50 % of the decision-making power within the local public-private partnerships, or in short the LAGs.

The socio-cultural diversity of rural areas in now 27 Member States should be considered as one of the EU's treasures. This necessitates prudent and tailored development strategies in order to safeguard an ongoing process of diversification, with a close view to the needs of the inhabitants of rural areas. Leader seeks to encourage direct interaction, to strengthen the capacities in adding value to endogenous resources, and to foster the integration of the agricultural sector into multi-sectoral projects. From an administrative perspective, one could say that in 15 Member States local partnerships have been established on a longer-term basis,

and have been proven to deliver important contributions to rural policies. In 10 Member States the LAGs as development tools are in the inception phase. In two Member States, where there is a huge rural development agenda, LAGs are a rather new species. A wealth of information on processes and techniques for partnership building and consolidation could be transferred within the EU, and these transactions will certainly lead to mutual benefit.

Partnerships in the framework of Leader share common roots and are part of a 'trademark' at European level. However it is a trademark designed for a general principle of partnership and not for a final product. The partnerships at LAG level, as well as at project level, are the subject of constant transformation. LAGs go through a lifecycle ranging from the intense animation and network formation, to developing sustainable structures along projects, and finally to the consolidation of earlier results and economic sustainability, which are all part of a sharpened profile and deepened competencies. One major point which needs to be respected, and which should become part of policy implementation at the European level (for the 27 National Networking Units to the universe of LAGs), is the capacity to learn from success or from failure. The capacity to detect, reflect and adjust the underlying strategy of the partnership is the key ability which will safeguard the positive momentum in the new funding period.

Finally a look at the project partnerships as 'spin-offs' from the local partnerships. Project partnerships might go from rather broad actions to smaller specialised 'spin-offs' which focus on viability and business. Partnerships might head for the transfer from temporary to established institutions, or might be recombined in a new formation — all options are possible. These diverse and dynamic partnerships create a multitude of interesting results. Taking advantage of these outputs at European level, namely the cross-fertilisation along certain topics and the formation of new transnational partnership, is the desirable result of the ongoing process of exchange and mutual learning at the European level.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank all colleagues who have provided excellent thesis papers and case studies as an input for the seminar 'The legacy of Leader+ at local level: Building the future of rural areas' which was held in Corsica, April 2007. These valuable contributions form a source book of Leader and have been the basis for this review on partnership building.

# Network building and cooperation

By John Grieve <sup>(1)</sup>, of The Rural Development Company, Scotland



## Introduction

This article reflects and discusses the outcomes from two of the themes which were addressed by participants during the 'Legacy of Leader+' seminar in Cap Corse. The themes which are addressed here are:

- ▶ the added value and benefit of networking;
- ▶ the added value and benefit of cooperation.

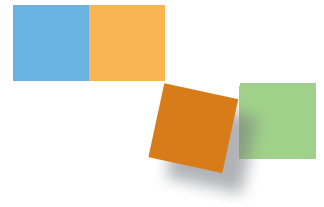
Participants were asked to consider: what Leader+ had achieved with regard to these two themes?; what strengths and weaknesses were evident from the way in which this activity had been implemented?; and what lessons for future improvements could be identified from consideration of the experiences presented?

The approach adopted in conducting these mini-plenary sessions reflected elements of networking and cooperation in action, through learning from the experience of others in active consideration and discussion.

That there is a clear and direct link between networking and cooperation is very evident and this was frequently referred to in discussing each of the topics. This is a two-way process with the one activity feeding the other: cooperation is a form of networking; and networking provides a basis for developing cooperation. This interaction between the two activities clearly could represent the basis of an article in its own right, however this is not the purpose here. In this case each topic will largely be considered on its own merits as it was discussed.

The focus of this article is 'how applying the Leader method has contributed to network building and cooperation in the context of rural development at the territorial level'. Some of the presentations reflected more on operational issues and experience within Leader rather than the intended wider rural perspective. This was rather more evident in relation to networking where there are elements of politicisation which are more evident in some Member States than in others. Whilst acknowledging these factors this article will concentrate on drawing out the given focus rather than explore these tensions.

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## Networking

### *Introduction*

It seemed entirely appropriate that of all the mini-plenary sessions those which focused on networking involved the largest number of case studies and the broadest representation from rural territories. In addition to the Irish and Swedish moderators the two mini-plenary sessions on 'The added value and benefit of networking' involved case studies from a total of seven Member States, involving partners from Finland, Portugal, Denmark, Ireland, Latvia, Poland and Belgium.

Each of the moderators set out a broad contextual overview on networking in their introductory thesis papers, which reflected the breadth of the topic and the considerable variation in approach and experience. The case study presenters then reflected on some of the specific aspects of their own local experience. The following sections seek to draw out the critical points from this very substantial breadth and depth of experience, and from this, to identify the future lessons.

### *Setting the context*

The two thesis papers scoped out the topic and provided a contextual basis for a wide reaching consideration of the nature of the rural networks, and the networking activity which has been implemented as a result of Leader. Much of the focus of these papers was on the variety and complexity of the networking situation with which Leader is associated and the diverse range of experience. In highlighting this, the moderators very effectively demonstrated some of the considerable complexity which is associated with this activity; this included:

- ▶ the diversity amongst the different forms of networks;
- ▶ the influences of the different Member States;
- ▶ the different origins and objectives;
- ▶ examples of elements of common experience.

The complex context of rural networking was therefore demonstrated and indeed shown to be complex and differentiated by many factors. There is a multiplicity of networks and of network forms and types reflecting the very considerable diversity of circumstances, and the equally diverse and varied range of different solutions. In setting this out, both moderators went to considerable trouble to provide some form of structured overview within which the case study examples could be considered and lessons drawn.

Whilst the two moderators' presentations both addressed these issues of diversity and complexity together with a range of common points, they also clearly demonstrated the clearest differentiating points in networking activity in Leader. There are two main functions identified for Leader networking activity: one in providing support to participating LAGs, and the other in lobbying activity. Similarly, there are two main types of network identified, the formal and the informal, and operating within this frame of variables are the official national network units (NNUs). The balance between these factors in the different Member States or Leader programmes varies considerably, and the case study presentations and associated discussion demonstrated this and drew on it. The variation here was very evident and working towards achieving a common understanding of this activity necessitated consideration of what constitutes a network: what are the objectives, the roles and types, the results which have been achieved, and the strengths, weaknesses and lessons which have emerged from the Leader networking experience. The first conclusion or lesson we arrive at is therefore that there is a clear need to establish more of a common understanding of the words 'network' and 'networking'.

### *What constitutes a network?*

It was established that in order to be able to consider what a network is there is first a need to establish a degree of common understanding of the words 'network' or 'networking' themselves. Firstly, it is important to differentiate between the actual networking activity itself, i.e. the voluntary gathering of members, notably LAGs, and the facility which supports this, the networking support units, through which the technical support is provided. Later in this article we will consider briefly this latter role.

In its simplest form it is suggested that networking is that activity which brings people (and their organisations) together around a common interest to undertake activities which are mutually beneficial to them. The analogy of 'a flock of geese in flight' is sometimes usefully used to highlight the added value of networking, where by working together for mutual benefit these groups of birds can travel further and faster than any of them could if alone.

Networks have varying degrees of formality and commitment. Generally they tend to be non-bureaucratic and depend on the members' mutual trust and common understanding. Ultimately all networks depend on active participation and commitment from their members, and it is this involvement which legitimises the organisation and the activity which it undertakes, and which provides its strength.



The network draws its strength from the sum of its parts and the whole may be greater than the sum. We therefore have a situation where although networks are rather informal they do demand participation. You cannot in reality be a network member if you do not actively network or if you effectively exclude yourself and cease to participate, then you effectively cease to be a member.

What does this say about network members, and what characteristics define them? In the experience of the LAGs involved in these sessions, real networks comprise of, and are built by, the people who are active in their involvement. These are members who:

- ▶ have something in common;
- ▶ are volunteers;
- ▶ recognise the benefit in sharing experience and learning from one another;
- ▶ work together on a non-hierarchical or directive basis;
- ▶ can establish mechanisms and structures to work towards common goals;
- ▶ accept the responsibilities of membership as well as the benefits;
- ▶ actively participate.

One of the contributors referred to the importance of having the 'networking frame of mind'. This phrase was explained as a means of describing those who contribute to and benefit from networking activity by thinking in a way which seeks to strengthen the network. What is this frame of mind? How can it be defined? Can anyone have it? In reality, it just means recognising that we are all involved as part of a wider rural development community and approaching your activity from an open-minded perspective which reflects this, and that we are all part of a wider initiative. Put simply, this suggests asking yourself the following set of pivotal questions.

- ▶ Who is in a similar situation to me who I can work with?
- ▶ Who else should be told about what I have just learned about?
- ▶ Who can do it?
- ▶ Who should be told about the results?
- ▶ Who can help?

Obviously the next question which flows from this is why should we do it, why should we network, what are the objectives?

### *Networking objectives and roles*

An overview of the moderators' papers and the other papers presented during the mini-plenaries reveals a tendency to look at how networking contributes to Leader not vice versa. This is somewhat at odds with the intended context of these mini-plenary sessions and of this article. The intended focus of these is clear: how the Leader+ method has contributed to network building and thus adding value and providing benefits. That is to say, there is a wider consideration of the networking activity which has arisen directly as a result of Leader+. In considering networking objectives we therefore need to include two types: the explicit Leader network objectives, and those objectives which can be achieved through networking.

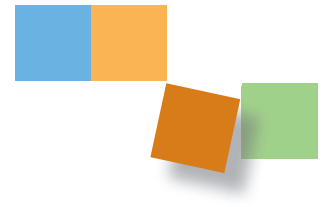
### *What are the network objectives?*

Leader network objectives tend to be those most closely associated with network units and these are generally prescribed and relatively narrow, and relate to providing support for or facilitating the processes of networking.

Networking in fact may be seen to lie at the very heart of the Leader methodology and the core of the programme. It provides the basis for partnership and linkages within the LAG territory, linking the local to the regional, the national and thus ultimately draws the programme together at the European level. The building of links through networking clearly reflects the core Leader concept, and contributes further to the processes of innovation, sharing and transferring experience.

In looking at these objectives it is important to recognise that we cannot think of any one network in isolation: networks do not exist in isolation. If we are networking effectively, then we are all actors in multiple networks, and this interconnectedness and interaction is the very essence of real networking and the source of much of the added value which participation brings. Through this interaction, the Leader method may become more widely understood and implemented, which is a key contributor to the process of mainstreaming.

The objectives to be achieved through networking are therefore wide and reflect those characteristics which define a network. This is mainly to bring people (and their organisations) together around a common interest, and to undertake activities which are mutually beneficial to them. The following examples were brought forward through the case studies:



- ▶ uniting people around themes, actions or issues;
- ▶ lobbying for or influencing change;
- ▶ forming of cooperative or collaborative groups;
- ▶ building and building-on inter-personal relationships;
- ▶ developing individual and collective abilities and capabilities;
- ▶ Developing individual and collective confidence;
- ▶ sharing resources including specialist competencies;
- ▶ facilitating the flow of information; and ultimately;
- ▶ achieving things which individuals or individual LAGs could not.

These objectives can therefore be summarised in three main areas:

- ▶ the grouping of people;
- ▶ establishing mechanisms for the exchange of information;
- ▶ a means for learning from each other.

Networking thus becomes an effective tool for extending the influence of Leader throughout rural Europe, and contributes to the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of Leader throughout the EU and at an EU level.

#### *What are the networking roles carried out?*

The range of case studies and associated discussion demonstrated the variation in the way in that these objectives are pursued between the various networks. It was also clear that the different objectives and roles cannot be considered wholly in isolation and that there is considerable interaction and complementarity between them. From the examples which were considered it is possible to highlight significant common ground around the main roles which networks undertake, although they may do these things differently. The various NNUs support and help to coordinate these roles to a greater or lesser extent. The following common network roles are suggested by the experience of those involved here:

- ▶ provide support for partner search, establishing common ground, joint working and cooperation;
- ▶ actively engage the wider range of rural stakeholders;
- ▶ collect, collate and disseminate information;
- ▶ promote exchange of best practice and of results;
- ▶ engage with LAGs through a variety of means to facilitate the exchange of information, experience and knowledge;
- ▶ provide advice, training and technical assistance based on this experience;

- ▶ boost ideas, promote new thinking, innovation and quality;
- ▶ provide the component parts with greater strength through being part of a greater whole;
- ▶ mediate between people and organisations with different approaches;
- ▶ encourage and facilitate transfers between networks;
- ▶ a number of countries suggest that there is an important contribution to building social capital here, this is borne out by evaluation evidence;
- ▶ inform and promote rural development policy and action;
- ▶ support programme implementation and evaluation (in the main through NNUs).

The following two case studies drawn from the mini-plenary presentations provide two different examples of how different forms of networking activity can broaden involvement in different ways.

This Latvian case study looks at how support for cooperation through the network has helped to support the formation of local groups and involvement in these.

#### **Case study: Latvia building LAGs through cooperation Latvian Rural Forum**

The Latvian Rural Forum is a new network formed in December 2004, it acts as an informal LAG network. It has a membership which comprises 14 of the 28 Latvian LAGs as full members, with the other 14 participating as observers. The forum's objectives are:

- ▶ to promote sustainable development of Latvia's rural areas;
- ▶ to strengthen development of civil society in rural areas by promoting development and cooperation with local initiative groups;
- ▶ to advocate the interests of rural inhabitants in national and international institutions;
- ▶ to build partnerships with governmental organisations, NGOs, business and other organisations.

Cooperation is a key element of the Latvian approach and success in this area has been a key consideration in the selection of Latvian local action groups now and in the past. In cooperating, LAGs are pursuing objectives of:





- ▶ forming of social capital;
- ▶ developing the focus in specific fields or sectors;
- ▶ securing finance and expertise;
- ▶ working together to strengthen the LAG area's identity and improve access to assets.

This has produced results in terms of increased involvement and improved participation, results that have been aided by an enhanced socioeconomic environment — new social and economic activity, new skills, the commitment of new cooperation partners, as well as improvements to the environment and cultural heritage.

This has been built from a base of very limited experience with a small number of LAGs; however, the breadth of experience remains limited. The need for time and support to develop such activity is recognised and pursued through the Latvian Rural Forum. The experience shows that those LAGs who have used the Latvian Rural Forum as a tool have a wider range of cooperation partners and are more strongly engaged with government departments and other public, private and social organisations. The intention is to continue to grow this within Latvia and to extend cooperation further throughout Europe through the network.

The case study from Ireland looks at how the Leader network has helped to facilitate, encourage and deepen the involvement of a wider range of rural development stakeholders by working together as a network.

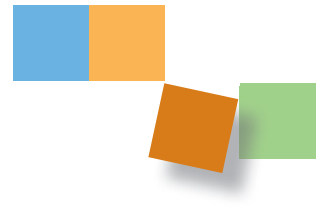
### Case study: Ireland engaging the wider range of stakeholders

The Irish Leader network focuses on uniting people and building partnerships, it concentrates on joining up people whose lives are affected by rural policy. The network involves both Leader LAGs and other local groups organised around the Leader method. Groups typically involve farmers, environmental organisations, women, young people, private firms, state agencies and elected local authority members. Through the structure of LAGs, thousands of rural people have an active role in the development of their local area. The Irish Leader network believes that the Leader method can deepen the engagement of all local stakeholders throughout Ireland; the evidence of LAG membership demonstrates that this can be done. This implies finding new ways of mobilising the various human, social, economic, cultural and environmental potentials of each area, and adopting a broader perspective on competition and innovation.

Working as a network rather than as individual LAGs, considerable successes have been achieved in engaging rural people with government, agencies, programmes and projects in a variety of ways. Examples of these successes include the following.

- ▶ Working with the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs has resulted in open dialogue with the network and representation of Leader interests on several high profile government working groups.
- ▶ Government support for the network has been secured funding a full-time coordinator, 'small food programme' coordinator and an administrative base.
- ▶ Supporting LAGs to develop the small food artisan sector e.g. through the activities of the coordinator and local publications.
- ▶ Providing support for Leader participation in major rural events such as 'The world ploughing championships'.
- ▶ Through securing support for the network to deliver training programmes through its membership, e.g. specialist training to food companies.
- ▶ In contracting and delivering the 'Rural social scheme' for member LAGs, this encourages small farmers and fishermen to become more actively involved in community improvements and activities.

Through these and other approaches, the network has been successful in developing new ways for rural people to become actively involved.



## Network types

The diversity of networks and network activity has been highlighted throughout this article and the discussions and presentations on which it is based. What then are the principal network types which are present? The Leader+ Contact Point study on networking identified three types of Leader networks:

- ▶ the official networking units;
- ▶ the 'informal' networking structures;
- ▶ network of administrations.

In some countries one network type might exist, in another all three might be present and elsewhere there may be a combination of types.

Firstly it is important to address the principal distinction, that there is a difference between a facilitation body, the national network unit and the network of Leader LAGs, the membership itself. Both bottom-up (LAGs' own unofficial) and top-down (national support units') networks are needed and play their own important role. Bottom-up networks concentrate on networking and lobbying activities and top-down networks play a more technical role. The extent to which these entities are separate varies between Member States but there are clear distinctions in their function and accountability.

### Network unit

Too often the network unit is referred to as 'the network', and what people call 'network' is often, in fact, the networking unit. This misuse of terms has tended to create confusion about the whole concept. The networking units at European, national and sub-national levels are the tools and the structures which contribute to the general goal of networking. They are in fact catalysts for bringing people together, providing a framework for 'a system of developing and maintaining contact with people in the same field' (the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of a network). The different levels of networking units themselves all participate in one unique European network. They are normally accountable to the managing authority, and have no representative or lobbying function.

In the early stages of a Leader network, the network unit is often relied on to 'do' the networking. In many respects this reflects the critical role of the network unit in facilitating and initiating inter-LAG networking. This is a vital role in helping LAGs to get involved in networking activity at an early stage, and so that they begin to reap the rewards

of such activity. Networking is seldom the first thing which springs to mind when developing the strategy and getting the LAG operational. Inevitably in the early stages, the LAG focus tends to be local, and this is where the dedicated and focused resource and capacity of the network unit can play a vital role in developing its activity on behalf of the network and its membership. In effect it was suggested that the network unit, the top-down element of networking, offers services that the target group doesn't know it needs. In so doing it does however need to acknowledge and address the inherent danger of being perceived to be paternalist or didactic.

### Mini case study: Poland

The Polish experience demonstrated a clear understanding of the role of a network support unit. This suggested that such an organisation should:

- ▶ animate the network membership by facilitating and encouraging involvement, communication and exchange;
- ▶ organise conferences, training and events (but recognising that these activities do not necessarily constitute networking in their own right);
- ▶ encourage ownership of networking activity recognising that the main added value arises through the activities carried out by the membership;
- ▶ be guided by the needs of the membership e.g. through a steering group (through which the membership may also evaluate and feedback to the unit).

This split in responsibilities and the way in which the two parts can clearly complement each other was clearly demonstrated in the Irish case study. In Ireland the Irish Leader network and Irish Leader Support Unit have worked closely together for the last four years. Both organisations recognised their respective roles. The network is involved in supporting their members' involvement in shaping rural development policy, and participating in networking at national and European levels. The support unit provided the technical support for this nurturing and for promoting innovation, enhancing active partnership, and facilitating organisational development on behalf of LAGs.



### LAG networks

In looking at LAG networks it is useful to consider first the different forms and basis on which networks are created. The principal distinction identified is between so-called horizontal and vertical networks. Horizontal networks are those which are non-hierarchical and which include members who are at a similar level within a given population or given field of interest. Members may be individuals, organisations, businesses, agencies etc. Vertical networks are those which link members from many different levels of involvement in a society or within an organisational hierarchy, a sector, or a field of interest. For example, linking rural community groups with rural development practitioners, researchers and policy-makers.

Examples of such horizontal networks include:

- ▶ the world wide web, which is the largest (independent but interlinked nodes);
- ▶ electrical power nets;
- ▶ airports and flight routes;
- ▶ your friends, relatives and colleagues (can also be vertical); related organisations or associations.

Examples of such vertical networks include:

- ▶ the local LAG partnership in Leader;
- ▶ NGOs, community officers, private sectors, individuals;
- ▶ national, county and community administrations, e.g. in an environmental network;
- ▶ clusters and network of clusters such as;
  - ▶ technological parks related to a cluster around a university;
  - ▶ clusters linked in a network.

There are both vertical and horizontal networks within the Leader+ initiative:

- ▶ the local partnership of the LAG is both a vertical and horizontal network;
- ▶ local networks created by projects can be vertical or horizontal depending on the subject matter;
- ▶ transnational networks created in cooperation projects are most commonly horizontal;
- ▶ the national Leader networks in the EU are horizontal amongst LAGs.

The coming national networks for rural development are yet to be organised and the form and structure which these take will be interesting to observe.

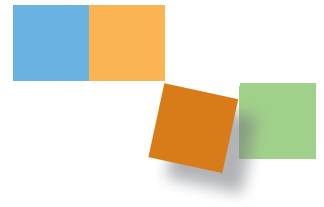
### Case study: Finland — interacting between networks

The Finnish experience confirms that we all are actors in several networks, formal and informal, consciously or unconsciously. In the Finnish case study the interaction of the Leader network with other formal networks was highlighted. Formal networks are given by other actors in the field, mostly top-down by authorities or other essential partners. In cooperating in these networks it is most important to remember that the network serves multiple clients and acts as an interface, e.g. the project applicants or potential applicants and public servants at all levels of administration. Working in formal networks is in some respects easier as the networks are established and are given. In other respects they are more demanding and bureaucratic because of formalities, rules and administrative requirements. Formal networks are different in all countries but their nature is often very similar.

The formal networks in Finland and their main functions and features are as follows.

- ▶ The national Leader network unit: provides training, information, contacts, help and assistance. It is easy to reach but too small. Good cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.
- ▶ Ministry: provides training, information and guidance on regulations. Good cooperation with easy and straightforward connections, although dependent on the individual contact.
- ▶ Regional authorities: very independent and with different attitudes in different areas. When everything goes well and the information goes in both directions, a good partner in developing the administration and decision-making in the LAG. This is a good example of an official network which needs a lot of maintenance on both sides in order to work.
- ▶ The local administrations, that is, the municipalities, act as the paying body and are an important network for development and information. They also have a lot of experience and have capable civil servants, who are the important contact persons inside the municipal administration. They are important partners, dangerous if ignored.
- ▶ Villages present a major part of potential applicants, and cooperating effectively inside this network is important in realising the LAG strategy. This network is both formal and informal. If it doesn't already exist in the LAG region the LAG must create it.





## Strengths, weaknesses, results and lessons for the future

That Leader plays an important role in rural networking appears on the basis of this seminar to be almost self-evident, and none of the presenters or participants in the mini-plenaries seriously challenged this. Leader appears to support a number of different forms of networking at different levels, and as a consequence, results in a strengthening of the culture of networking through such active targeting. The evidence presented highlights the multiplicity of forms this activity takes and the way in which it is inherent in so much of what Leader does. In evaluating Leader one of the greatest challenges is breaking out and attributing effects to the method and the component parts of that method. Networking, given the nature of the activity and its positioning within Leader is no different. Does the approach push people to seek to derive or deliver benefits through networking? It certainly appears on the basis of the evidence here to encourage them to consider and pursue networking actively as a tool. Is any part stronger or weaker than any other part? From the evidence of this seminar it appears impossible to say in absolute terms, such is the variation between networks. There are, however, a number of clear pointers for success which emerge from the collective experience considered, the aspects of networking which are most valued and the areas where care is needed.

### *The lessons*

First and foremost networks are about people and their participation, the best networking tool is a human being and without their involvement there is no network. The support for rural networking allows rural people to network actively and derive real benefits through coming together as opposed to relying on virtual networking.

In the early stages of a new network there is a need for a common understanding of the word 'networking' itself, and a particularly clear difference between network (voluntary gathering of members, notably LAGs) and the technical support unit.

As with the Leader initiative itself, network development is clearly an evolutionary process and benefits through the pump, priming and nurturing approach. A critical consideration in this activity is how to develop the 'networking frame of mind' with people who do not have it, and to encourage people to join, participate, share and contribute.

The success of the approach to networking in Leader demonstrates the benefits of animation but also reflects Leader

itself in its bottom-up paradox, i.e. it works best where it is facilitated. It is therefore an intervention and by definition is less than wholly bottom-up. This applies whatever the type of network (voluntary association of structures or paid technical support unit), animation is of prime importance and this activity contributes strongly to the legacy of network unit input.

The independence of networks is challenged by this need for animation, most notably in the beginning when people have to be convinced to become members. The approach adopted through network units generally seems to have been effective here and consistent with the ethos of Leader in facilitating and supporting network development, whilst maintaining a degree of separation from the activity itself.

Both bottom-up (LAGs' own unofficial) and top-down (national support units') networks are needed and play their important role. In a situation where LAGs already operate and have formed their unofficial networks it is extremely hard to achieve legitimacy for a top-down network or new network unit, and a clear understanding of the different roles and how they can complement each other is required.

Lobbying can be a big and divisive issue in some networks, particularly in the relationship with the publicly funded network units. In other Member States this is not an issue. Perhaps in future (as is already the case in Ireland and Portugal for example) these two types of networks should be separated into two different organisations.

In addition to building on the collective strength of LAGs working together, networking also contributes significantly to the development of social capital at different levels within the programme. We see strong networking effects emerge at the local level linking projects and activities. Such capital is also built within local action groups, between the various partners and including the staff.

Within all this there appears, however, to be an assumption that only 'real Leader people' can be involved in an 'informal' network and that public organisations like managing authorities need to be addressed separately. This leads to the rather one-dimensional separation of networks into the three types and functions:

1. the official national networking units — technical support;
2. the 'informal' networking structures — political issues and lobby function;
3. network of administrations — management and direct support on limited subjects.



This then begs the question as to whether this is not counterproductive to the whole principle of partnership and networking? Can a balance be established between the respective duties and involvement of the different networking components in pursuit of the common objectives?

Networks have evolved through Leader and more generally, a network is always growing up either in the number of its members, in the types of partners that are involved, or in its maturity. It is contacts between networks (both at member

and animator levels) which make the evolution possible. To paraphrase what Liisa Hame from Finland said, 'networks are like children, they need a lot of attention and care when small, sometimes cause problems, but are a good source of creativity and information from the outside world when they are grown up'.

The following example from Poland reflects many of these lessons in the establishment of a new network in a new Member State.

### Case study: Poland PREPARE — (Pre-accession partnerships for rural Europe) — Practical solutions for establishing a new network

In considering establishment of Leader networks in the new Member States the following factors should be taken into account:

- ▶ small numbers of LAGs which are very new and have little experience to share;
- ▶ a tendency to rely on 'top-down' solutions (this tendency exists on both sides, i.e. the 'top' and the 'bottom' and is slowly diminishing);
- ▶ everybody is extremely busy (and does not have time for participation in networks) — or so they think;
- ▶ people are very open for cooperation and willing to learn from experience elsewhere.

What practical solutions have proved effective in Poland?

- ▶ A lot depends on personal contacts; 'virtual' networks (web-based) can be effective, but preferably after people have been able to meet each other face-to-face (develop trust, identify common interest, build up motivation).
- ▶ If there is a discussion forum, it should have a moderator to stimulate discussion, introduce new topics etc.; such moderation doesn't take a lot of work or time, but requires commitment and regularity.
- ▶ Formalities are less important than 'substance' — sometimes an informal network works better than a formal one, with well-defined roles and procedures this also means we should focus first on the 'substance' (e.g. a common cause).
- ▶ Flexible organisational solutions are desirable (for instance, rotating chairmanship, office/secretarial function) — this prevents passive attitudes.
- ▶ Frequent meetings are desirable but nobody has the time — we need innovative solutions to maintain involvement (linking network meetings to other events, e.g. video or tele-conferences, or Skype-meetings).
- ▶ People usually open up and become creative during study visits (even within one country) — a very useful networking tool.
- ▶ Some of the activities can be devolved to working groups (who do most of the work and then present solutions/results to others) although there is a danger that wider ownership is diluted.

The Polish national network unit played a critical role in supporting this by undertaking the types of exemplary activity highlighted in the section on network unit roles.

## Cooperation

### Introduction

Two mini-plenaries were conducted in parallel to consider the topic 'The added value and benefit of cooperation'. The overall consideration of this topic therefore benefited from a wider range of experience and knowledge being presented and discussed. There were therefore two different moderators' presentations, a total of six case studies presented and discussed, and two different reports drawn up by the respective rapporteurs. The case study presentations covered project, LAG, territory and NNU aspects of cooperation in Leader.

Despite their common basis the two mini-plenaries considered the topic in rather different ways and from rather different perspectives. Whilst this presented a challenge in drawing the key points and lessons out in a common structure, it also provides some added value in allowing a range of different aspects to be considered.

Both moderators set the scene with introductory presentations each giving an overview of the objectives which are pursued through cooperation, the results achieved and the underlying factors which contribute to successful approaches. This included their thoughts on the way in which cooperation has evolved along with the Leader approach by way of providing contextual background. This was succinctly drawn together by one moderator in the following text.

Informal in Leader I, fully supported at the transnational level in Leader II, extended to partnership with areas from the same country or outside the EU in Leader+, maintained in the 2007–13 programming period, cooperation is clearly a very central feature of the 'Leader method'. Cooperation is seen as a 'plus'; it is not compulsory, given that the cooperation projects can be complex and difficult to implement, but the groups are advised to engage in it since this could strengthen their local action.

The case study presentations and discussions covered a wide range of different aspects of cooperation, the main elements of which may be summarised under seven main strands as follows:

- ▶ motivating factors for cooperation activity;
- ▶ objectives of cooperating and in cooperation;
- ▶ the experience, basis and prerequisites for effective cooperation;
- ▶ the subsequent development of process and tools;
- ▶ the types of support which are required and valued;
- ▶ the types of results or benefits which may be achieved and how they are expressed; and drawing from this;
- ▶ learning from the Leader+ experience to build stronger cooperation projects in the future.

The rest of this article discusses these strands from the three main common elements of discussion around which the sessions themselves were constructed, these are:

- ▶ the main outputs from consideration of the experience presented;
- ▶ the key messages and lessons which emerge from this;
- ▶ the unresolved issues which challenge us and require some clarification.

This is illustrated and supported by case study examples drawn from the presentations. The achievements of Leader, the strengths and weaknesses which are evident from the way in which this activity had been implemented, and the lessons for future improvements are thus identified and discussed.

### *The main outputs and objectives*

Here we consider the main points which emerged from the presentations and the wider experience of participants which were drawn out in the subsequent discussion under the six main topics mentioned above.

The objectives of cooperative activity are complex and relate to both the process and product of cooperation. They may be both internal to the LAG and external relating to the wider territory, activity or process of rural development. The objectives may be multiple, that is to say a combination of these types. Clearly cooperation is much more than a simple exchange of information and that was something that was very clearly understood by participants.



The discussions identified three main types of objective, these were:

- ▶ political (promoting EU participation);
- ▶ strategic (e.g. seeking benefits through being more outward looking);
- ▶ operational (e.g. in gaining access to additional skills).

The main political objective which people identified was that of contributing to the European project, promoting civic involvement, and participation, which was thought to be an absolutely critical objective here. There is a recognition that LAGs and rural communities are stronger together and that cooperation can give permission to participate actively in a rural Europe. The other main political objective identified was that of extending the Leader approach more widely, reaching new areas, sectors, areas of complementarity etc: in short a contribution to the ongoing process of mainstreaming.

Strategic objectives tended to focus on strengthening the LAG and its strategy, developing awareness of issues, opportunities and tools to address these. The contribution to network development was a key consideration here, broadening and deepening the scope of cooperation by intensifying and pursuing existing relationships could contribute significantly to LAG and strategy development. There are also strategic objectives which relate directly to the specific

project or the LAG strategy. Examples cited here included targeting the development of new markets which could be done by improving the quality of offers and products through cooperation, or through common cooperative marketing activities. Drawing additional financial resources in to an area may be another strategic objective where a specific allocation of funds is only available for cooperation activity, i.e. by engaging in a cooperative project, additional finance is secured for the LAG area and strategy.

The operational objectives relate most directly to the development and delivery of projects and the benefits derived through mutual complementarity. For example, by pooling their strengths and resources cooperating Leader areas can overcome constraints and thus achieve results which otherwise would be inaccessible. Projects may seek to exchange experience and know-how to the benefit of all the partners. Cooperation may seek to draw extra resources into the area or activity allowing necessary critical mass to be developed. Barriers which might otherwise have arisen to project initiation, resourcing and development are thus overcome.

In many cases it is in reality difficult to separate these objective types as they are inevitably intertwined, complementing and contributing to each other. It is nevertheless important to be aware that these tiers of objectives exist, that cooperation is a multidimensional activity, and that effects may be delivered in each of these domains.

### Case study: multiple objectives, Haut Jura

The LAG PNR du Haut-Jura ([www.parc-haut-jura.fr](http://www.parc-haut-jura.fr)) has a long cooperation experience having implemented five projects over more than 10 years. These are with:

- ▶ Mont Sangbé (Ivory Coast) from 1994–2001;
- ▶ the High-Bellunese in Italy (2000–01) within Leader II;
- ▶ the Värmland in Sweden (2000–01) in the Recite II European programme;
- ▶ the High-Bellunese in Italy (2005–07) within Leader+;
- ▶ Rovaniemi in Finland (2005–07) within Leader+.

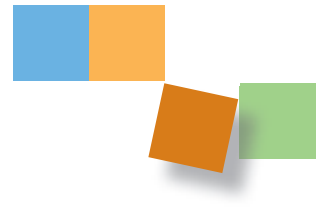
Cooperation is implemented firstly because of a political objective.

- ▶ With Mont Sangbé, the aim was to launch an exportation approach of a sustainable development concept in favour of third countries. Unfortunately it was unable to proceed as planned.
- ▶ With the High-Bellunese, Rovaniemi or the Värmland, within Leader or the Recite programme, the objective

is to participate in the idea of the construction of Europe, and to act in order for this construction to be made through and with territories and their inhabitants, and not only by governments.

The second objective is a strategic objective. It consists in thinking that the future of an area like the one of Haut-Jura, mountainous and thus difficult, is possible through opening networking with the outside. It is both a question of modernity and one of surviving.

The third objective is an operational objective. The area does not have all sufficient competences or experiences. It needs to be able to go and get them from outside. It was the case with the Värmland to have some eco-tourism experiences; with Rovaniemi for the use of new technologies; and with the High-Bellunese for knowledge concerning the history and the enhancement of heritage linked to events/productions. It is almost certain that the Haut-Jura could not have found these different levels of expertise only through inter-territorial cooperation with another French area.



## Experiences, prerequisites and basic conditions for cooperation

Experience across the generations of the Leader programme suggests that cooperation at national and particularly at transnational levels is the most challenging issue within the Leader programme. This is evidenced in many of the LAG and national programme evaluations. In considering the experience of cooperation activity some very significant prerequisites or basic conditions emerge which support the take-up of the cooperation issue by LAGs. If these prerequisites are met, Leader LAGs need less support to develop, start and implement cooperation projects. It is important to recognise however that even when these prerequisites or conditions are present, undertaking cooperation activity needs significant work and preparation. If these conditions do not exist then clearly even more work is required both in developing the activity and in creating these conditions.

The most important of these prerequisites or conditions which were identified are:

- ▶ A predisposition to become involved in cooperation together with the requisite skills are required, and a culture of cooperation involving communities, LAGs, regions and managing authorities is vital. The best case scenario is where managing authorities and other administrative bodies involved in managing or delivering Leader have an interest in cooperation and play an active role in raising awareness of the opportunities and benefits of cooperation. The role of the national network unit in working with these authorities and LAGs can be critical here.
- ▶ LAGs which possess well-developed social skills and social capital: cooperation works best where there are Leader managers, chairmen and local stakeholders with long-term development experience, language skills and (especially) open minds. The process of cooperation is predicated on openness, giving as much as receiving, that is how the benefits are achieved not through competition; those involved must overcome fears of participating and sharing.
- ▶ A logical prerequisite of such well developed social skills and social capital is a mature local or regional governance system for Leader that is able to implement the local development strategy in a way which is consistent with the application of the Leader method. For each of the partners cooperation projects must address the needs and the strategy. It is best when there is a natural link and common ground which makes it attractive.

- ▶ Finding and working with the right partner is essential; a basis of common understanding and the ability to complement each other is required. Ideally this can build on a basis of existing relations to possible partners and experiences from previous cooperation activities. Cooperation projects can be particularly challenging for small, poorly resourced LAGs, and this needs to be taken into account in choosing partners. Networking experience is vital in building confidence and an experienced and well informed national network unit can play a vital role here.
- ▶ Setting and pursuing clear and measurable objectives for cooperation early in the process is vital if quality results are to be achieved. Too often cooperation only appears when the local partnership is strongly established and the local strategy is already well implemented. The utilisation of the funds designated for cooperation comes late in the programme, and as a consequence they come under pressure from the N+2 rule. Frequently this impacts on the extent and quality of activity undertaken.

Ideally therefore cooperation is based upon: predisposition; experience; the LAG strategy; and partner search based on common ground, and a thoroughly developed project idea rather than just a 'general' exchange of information. The following example from the Verein Pillerseetal-Leogang LAG demonstrates the importance of some of these factors.



### Case study: the Verein Pillerseetal-Leogang LAG

The Verein Pillerseetal-Leogang LAG ([www.regio-tech.at](http://www.regio-tech.at)) led a cooperation project involving two other Austrian LAGs and one from Finland. The project was an intensive practical exchange of experience between small tourism companies cooperating around an outdoor and adventure tourism theme, currently seven companies offering a range of activities including rafting, white water rafting, climbing, and ice climbing, trekking, hiking, biking, fishing and hunting, and high wire. The companies and LAGs are involved in three major project activities:

- ▶ training, concentrating on technical issues;
- ▶ compensating for seasonal fluctuations in activity tourism; and
- ▶ cooperative marketing.

The Verein Pillerseetal-Leogang LAG built on positive Leader II experience arising from cooperation with a Scottish LAG in telecommunications. The initial contact for this project was made at a European seminar in 1999. The first mutual theme was family tourism, and once Leader+ was launched both LAGs immediately activated their contacts and started to develop the theme. The Lapland LAG worked with small companies, under five employees to 'think European'. The Austrian LAG invited the Tyrol-based LAGs to cooperate with them in working with small businesses trying to gain a foothold in the outdoor sports tourism market as their areas had businesses in this sector. The common aim was to create a partnership between these small companies to work together to carry out larger scale international marketing. They were able to benefit from this whilst still maintaining their companies' independence. This fitted directly with the sectoral focus of the individual LAG strategies and fitted in with many other projects and activities in these strategies.

The three activities used the specific skills of the various partners as most appropriate. Finnish instructors deliver the training component, and Finnish guides have been working in Austria during their low season. The companies are all working together in the marketing initiative, and are rolling the project out further through locally-based clusters, and extending the transnational exchange of experience through acting as mystery shoppers sampling their partners' offers.

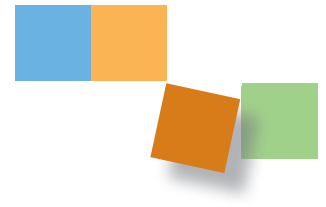
### *Motivating factors*

Motivating involvement in cooperation can be a tricky task. Committed and informed involvement in cooperation leads to a better understanding, not only of the Leader approach, but also of the rural area concerned. This reinforces the importance of a commitment to cooperation in principle as a strategic and political objective, which reflects a will for change and for lifelong learning.

Some programme partners and accountable bodies are nevertheless suspicious of such an activity, as it is seen as a 'jolly'. Cooperation has a low priority: it is seen more as an opportunity and chance rather than an essential or compulsory action. Local activity tends to take priority, since it is more obvious, tangible and direct, and the results are more immediately apparent. It therefore follows that in motivating involvement, we have to convince an accountable body, a funding partner, LAG, or the chair of a decision-making committee, and we have to demonstrate that cooperation delivers outcomes, and focus on the benefits rather than the activity itself. There is a need to demonstrate that cooperation brings added value within the project itself but also in the programme to all the projects. The need to focus on the benefits, the outcomes, was the clearest message here.

What then are the other main factors which arise in considering motivation for cooperation?

If the focus on benefits is an essential motivating factor for cooperation per se, then when it comes to implementing the action, having a project with clear objectives is equally vital. Cooperation alone is not sufficient motivation: it is as much a means as an objective. The project should therefore address a specific objective or opportunity around common issues. Experience shows that this has often been the initial incentive for starting a cooperation project.



Where does this project idea and objective come from, and where do we find suitable partners? In some cases, the starting point was a reflection on the local strategy. Cooperation is then seen as a solution, a way of solving some local problems or enabling a single LAG to do something that it could not do on its own. A more elaborate and systematic search for ideas and partners is then undertaken by the LAG. In other cases LAG managers or other local actors had previous experience of cooperation and associated

networks which are often the source of new projects. In some cases this was within Leader II (first cooperation experience, use of facilities provided by national or European networks), the Leader+ Cooperation Fair, and other events and networks. Informal contacts through the networking process may lead to the identification of common needs or opportunities leading to the development of cooperative activity. Once again the national network unit can play a key role in motivating and supporting this activity.

### Case study: an Irish transnational cooperation experience

First developed in Leader II this transnational cooperation project between two LAG's in Spain and LAG Duhallow (Ireland), strengthens the role of small rural schools in building local identity and fostering community development from a young age. This developed from informal networking contacts and seeks to extend the breadth of Leader engagement to target groups, new sectors and new geographies.

Rural schools have suffered a decline from depopulation and lack of investment over many years, yet they are the first experience of socialisation for rural young people. LAG Preperineo in the Pyrenees region and Integral in Murcia had come to the same conclusion. All three LAGs had participated in Leader seminars and during a conversation over lunch or interval time, the Spanish LAGs' aspiration to develop through Leader a European Rural Schools Network was discussed. The project began by sharing information and working with a small number of schools in each of the three LAGs' areas. A Spanish delegation comprising local mayors, school principals, teachers and boards of management as well as pupils and LAG members and staff visited Duhallow Ireland in 2001 for a week-long study visit. A return visit by an Irish delegation of similar composition followed, but also included in the delegation was a member of the teacher training college in Ireland who were at the time examining the role and future of small rural schools.

The project has now spread to three LAGs in Ireland and involves six schools. Through the project, learning from the Spanish experience, the Irish LAGs have developed a pilot project which 'clustered' small local schools to overcome the problem of economies of scale. This means that subjects like science, information communications technology, music and environmental studies can now be introduced in these schools.

Before, none of the schools had sufficiently large numbers of children to merit the employment of these specialist teachers. However, by clustering them together they had, and could employ specialists to teach these subjects. The LAGs have overcome local apathy by motivating parents to take a more active role in the local school, by forming local parents' councils and fundraising for the school. The teachers are supported to network and to work collectively to draw up and implement the various policies that are often a real headache for small, understaffed schools. This has brought Leader and the European Union itself to the core of the lives of these young children and their parents, making them both tangible and real to them.



Access to or better use of resources can be a key motivational factor and a number of elements of this were highlighted in the experience.

In many Member States, Axis three (networking) funds were not pre-allocated to LAGs and had to be bid for separately. For individual LAGs, therefore, becoming involved in cooperation can be used to attract more funding to the local area.

Cooperation funding can be used to undertake activities which might not otherwise be supported or results which could not otherwise be achieved. For example it may be allocated to human resources, often the most difficult type of funding to obtain for a local project. Alternatively this is often used for supporting projects that were not foreseen when the local strategy was developed. The need to achieve sufficient critical mass to obtain desired results can see the whole become greater than the sum of the parts. Rural areas only have a limited 'stock' of their own resources which are insufficient to solve specific problems or optimise potentials. By pooling complementary resources these areas can overcome these barriers to achieve results otherwise unachievable.

Good experience is vital and this is self-reinforcing in motivating involvement. Those who have been involved in successful cooperation find it highly motivating, demonstrating that this success can help to convince sceptics. For many of those involved, the exposure to new experience motivates further and wider involvement. This can result in a broadening of project relevance and the extension of community involvement. The increase in knowledge and the enlargement of the pool of experience have been major motivators encouraging LAGs to enter into cooperation projects. Cooperation helps rural communities to achieve an understanding of wider Europe with an enhanced understanding of each other. This extends the reach of Leader and the experience of the Leader laboratory within and between rural communities.

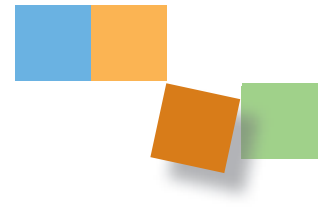
As there are motivating factors there are also challenges or disincentives, the challenges to successful cooperation identified are substantial.

The main challenges are: the differences between us which must be overcome; a new form of partnership which involves other people's objectives and priorities; and when we think about transnational cooperation, the differences in culture and in language. There is the fundamental issue of distance and the challenge which that places on working together effectively. There can also be unequal

involvement between LAGs within a project. A proactively cooperative LAG may become involved with less interested or less proactive LAGs, possibly through one or two more active individuals this can cause tensions and difficulties within and between LAGs. Differences between the different Leader programmes can present challenges with varying priority placed on cooperation and consequent impacts on motivation and budgetary allocations. Finally there can be also a certain tension between the local and the wider or transnational interests. As Jean-Pierre Dichter said in plenary summing up this topic, 'It's clear that the skin is closer to us than the shirt'.

It is therefore very important to face these challenges by addressing the positive motivating factors, setting clear objectives and tackling the prerequisites discussed above. Having done so, we then need to consider what processes, tools and support will help to ensure successful cooperation.





## Process and tools

The most important tool and part of the process in addressing the challenges and opportunities of cooperation is careful planning and project implementation. It is important to recognise that this is an intensive process which requires much work to keep it under control.

Firstly the project itself is vital. It must be a real project and it must be tangible. It must fit into the local development strategies of all the LAGs involved, not just the lead or initiating partner. It must address a real need or opportunity otherwise it will be an empty gesture and there will be no real partnership, real cooperation or actual benefit. It is therefore vital to remember who the real beneficiaries are here, and that the real cooperation is in fact 'actor to actor' and that 'LAG to LAG' is only facilitation (facilitation is their job). Ultimately this is a mechanism for building the involvement of the rural community in the European project.

Identifying and engaging with suitable partners is critical, and this requires an effective partner-search to find a common basis and intent. Ways in which this may occur are addressed above. A key consideration in this is ensuring the fit between the public authorities involved. This is not particularly exciting but it is of critical importance, particularly with regard to their respective financial systems. Within this, the ability to maintain self-determination is crucial in avoiding and simplifying the bureaucratic process and avoiding delays!

It is best if each partner retains budgetary control of activity in their state. There needs to be a mechanism to level costs between partners, and which reflects the differing costs of living between the Member States. It therefore follows that the budgeting of the project must be transparent. Everybody must know, agree and understand in advance what they have to pay for. Within this there must be at least one specific action for each partner. If there is no such action, there is no real cooperation.

The preparation phase is vitally important in establishing the contacts and lines of communication, and for making the decision to work together. The fund available under Leader II to facilitate this first contact visit is still fondly remembered by those who had experience of cooperation under that programme. A very high degree of importance is placed on an initial face-to-face contact as a basis for establishing working relationships, something which cannot be replaced by a telephone call, email, post, or by any other way of remote communication. Where people know each other already and have a clear basis of understanding on

the decision to cooperate, then communicating by other means can be sufficient.

The need for clarity on who does what, where and when is paramount. Effective planning of this is therefore critical. It's very clear that common actions need a very strong lead-partner but a strong lead-partner alone is not enough. The allocation of tasks inside the partnership undertaking the cooperation project is important. The lead partner should not be expected or allowed to shoulder all the responsibilities with the other partners following on. A distinct division of tasks is required. People need to have a clear picture as to what is expected of them and this must be communicated clearly and effectively. All the partners must therefore help to create a natural flow of information.

A key consideration within this allocation of tasks relates to the available human resources. On the one hand you need to do this in such a way as to facilitate the full engagement of the partners, and on the other you need to ensure that the right skills to organise and communicate effectively are present, and adequately involved and resourced. Within this there is one specific task which the lead partner must take responsibility for. In order to be able to follow the progress of the project after the Leader period has ended, they must ensure that some process of ongoing monitoring is in place.

Clearly a heavy emphasis on the need for cooperation to concentrate on real projects rather than just knowledge transfer or exchange emerged from these mini-plenary sessions. This begs the question, however, whether there is much value in such exchange projects: can they act as a precursor for fuller cooperation? The issue here revolves around the nature of the outcomes sought; 'soft impacts' such as introducing other areas and cultures, a sense of belonging to the same community across the country, or Europe; or confrontation of ideas with other perspectives or 'hard impacts' such as job or value creation, or new activity for the area. The experience suggests that if 'hard impacts' are sought then it is necessary to undertake a 'common action' and that this will result in deeper cooperation with a stronger cooperation culture and an enrichment of the 'soft impacts' that such exchanges bring.



## Support

Leader objectives expect that both experienced and less experienced LAGs become involved in cooperation projects. It therefore follows that specific support services are necessary to enable the participation of those LAGs with little experience; as one delegate observed, 'they can't know what they don't know'. What then are the key elements of this in the experience of participants?

First of all the creation of a positive atmosphere for cooperation within the Leader community at national level seems to be very important. Such encouragement is thought to be essential, in fact compulsory direction was favoured by some, but this needs to be resourced properly.

A need for technical assistance to encourage LAGs and help create the right conditions and capacities was clearly identified. Particularly in the initial phase of cooperation inexperienced LAGs need some kind of technical assistance free of charge. This could include the delivery of cooperation training or development events or workshops, expert help, a start-up fund for partnership development etc. There was considerable enthusiasm for the previous funding support for exploratory meetings to initiate cooperation. This kind of cooperation comprises few financial risks and represents a first step towards concrete cooperation projects.

It should not be assumed that start-up support is all that is required. During the implementation of cooperation projects it could be helpful to offer LAGs the support of an expert to reflect on the process of implementation from time to time, and to discuss upcoming conflicts.

The national network units and Leader+ Observatory Contact Point have a key role here, for example, in assisting with partner-search, moderating start-up workshops or in elaborating the project proposal. Real networks of LAG partners are vital too, since these can provide mentoring support sharing between LAGs. This is a separate role from the national network units.

The key objective for cooperation support is to reduce participation thresholds, facilitate the sharing of simple solutions, identifying the legacy of previous Leader experience and sharing with those who follow: in effect cooperating with the future!

The case study example below from the French national network units demonstrates two elements of their involvement in facilitating and developing real cooperation showing added value and helping to convince local actors of the interest of cooperation.

### Case study: the French NNU

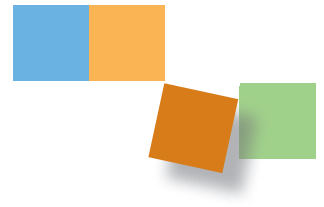
French LAGs can benefit from a grant of EUR 6,000 to finance the first meeting with transnational partners. This fund is an opportunity to finance this first step based on exchanges. This step is necessary, but not enough in itself to implement a cooperation project! Developing a real cooperation project with a common action is a unifying element and shows more the added value of cooperation. If the cooperation project is based only on exchanges, it's really more difficult to convince local actors (and especially elected people) of the benefit of cooperation, since there are no tangible results. Cooperation is not an aim. It is a way to extend and to reinforce the local development strategy. Moreover the definition of the common action in France was not too restrictive. Creation of a common communication support was judged to be an example of a common action. All the common actions were not very ambitious, but in all the cases it was one step more than an exchange. What have cooperation partners gained from their projects?

In France, the NNU has formalised seven good reasons for cooperating:

- ▶ to develop local products;
- ▶ to reinforce cohesion, identity and image;
- ▶ to meet new people and discover alternative ways of thinking and acting;
- ▶ to increase Europe's openness to and awareness of rural areas;
- ▶ to take advantage of the substantial support on offer from Leader+ for cooperation;
- ▶ to avoid delay and prepare one's area for the challenges of post-2006.

More concretely, the main effects of cooperation for the French LAGs are as follows:

- ▶ economic benefit (reduction of costs) and increased benefit from a new product market;
- ▶ new solutions for local challenges;
- ▶ reinforcement of the identity of rural areas.



## Results

The benefits of cooperation at the national and European levels were beyond the scope of consideration in these sessions. Broadly speaking the benefits of cooperation which were identified at the LAG level may be divided into three main categories: tangible; intangible; and spin-off results; and may produce benefits which are social, technical or strategic.

**Tangible results:** these are relatively easy to assess and arise as a result of the common action outputs e.g. the festivals, new products or joint marketing initiatives. These results are jobs created or sustained, infrastructure in place, local value created for small enterprises, enhanced image of the local area etc. 'Real' projects are needed to provide real added value. This may be very simple, e.g. in operations such as LAGs sharing purchasing or dividing work to share or reduce unit costs. This can underpin real cooperation and there are very strong networking effects.

**Intangible results:** these are more difficult to assess and tend to be softer and more 'process oriented'. Examples of these include: the 'mobilising' effect of cooperation; the capacity to reach a critical mass; the sharing of resources to reach a better value added; enlargement of the knowledge pool; creation of networks within the Leader community; reflection on the image of one's own region vis-à-vis the experience of another region; learning about problem perception and solving in different countries and cultures, and thus contributing to the European integration process.

**Spin-off results:** these are more difficult to formally assess although the results may be very apparent to those involved. Examples given here include: better mobilisation of local partners in delivering the local strategy by gaining a fresh perspective on their day-to-day activity; increased motivation; and greater self confidence amongst rural actors. They can contrast their problems with those of other areas, become more open-minded, and be inspired by ideas implemented elsewhere. Thus rural areas can gain new perspectives for future development. There are significant results in developing human potential, e.g. professional development.

Many of the results of cooperation projects fall into the final two categories where the main result of cooperation was the exchange of experience which often means that the demanding initial objectives (e.g. developing new products and markets) could not be achieved.

The tangibility of these three types of results varies considerably but the effective demonstration of results and associated publicity is vitally important in motivating involvement and effective cooperation. The legacy of such cooperation is the tangible and demonstrable results which can be transferred to future programmes and outside Leader confines. Cooperation was highlighted as being a vital means of sharing the results of the Leader laboratory. The single biggest unresolved issue identified here was how to capitalise and realise the full extent of the benefits and experience of cooperation and the projects undertaken.

It was suggested that the Commission could and should do more to help LAGs capture and realise the benefits achievable and achieved through cooperation, thereby capitalising the benefits of this activity. It was observed that 'We don't need to invent always new things, because there are so many good projects and ideas around — we just need to connect each other', i.e. make the links that Leader depends on.

# Human competence and capacity building

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## Introduction

This article is based on the content and results of the miniplenary session 'Human competence and networking'. It aims to highlight the importance of building on human competence and show some examples and methods used during Leader+ for the continuous development of human competence at different levels. The article is by no means exhaustive, since everyone involved in Leader has most certainly learned from their involvement in it. Hopefully the article will provide some important lessons learned from the work using the Leader method, and provide some struc-

ture for personal reflection about your own and your Leader group's future learning process.

When referring to human competence in this article, it is not only a question of individuals in the local setting, but to persons at all levels, including politicians and officials, which is the very spirit of Leader! In parallel, capacity building not only relates to individuals, but also to structures that can enable and empower individual and group action. This is one of the important innovations which Leader has brought to rural Europe.



## Manage change: focus on learning

In the early 1990s a Stanford scholar named Peter Senge, after studying organisational change, published a book entitled 'The fifth discipline — The art and practice of the learning organisation (1990)'. Senge argued that continuous learning is necessary for both individuals and organisations to handle and bring about change. He stated that learning organisations are: '...organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.'

This is very much the vision behind Leader, but has Leader been implemented in such a way that this potential has been fully exploited? Everyone has the capacity to learn new things, but the structures and daily routines do not always stimulate reflection and learning. Most people seem to agree upon the importance of knowledge and capacity building. However, in many organisations this is seldom put into practice.

In Leader+ many LAGs have such visions and have implemented appropriate structures, as will be explored later in this article. Many actors who have been involved in Leader are very positive towards it, but find it difficult to be precise about what the difference is working in Leader compared with other programmes. Perhaps the answer lies in feeling part of a reflective and learning environment.

According to Senge 'when you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It becomes quite clear that, for many, their experiences of being part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest.'

It is in this sense that it becomes possible to shape the reality, to create the future, rather than only reacting to the forces of change. It is important to acknowledge that many of these people, given the permissible context, have created this space, not only passively taking part, but have actively or rather interactively created this situation. A manager of a regional advisory service company, elected member of a LAG group, expressed his views about his work with Leader:

'I attend many different development meetings in my region with different people, but it is when I meet with the LAG group that I feel we are really discussing the important issues and move the process further.'

The question is, of course, how these kinds of teams and situations are created. We will in the following pages explore some of the methods used during Leader+ and close the article with some concluding remarks on commonalities that these methods seem to have.

### A brief note on theory

From the theories on organisational learning (Senge, 1990, *The fifth discipline*), we can see that for efficient learning over time, we require the following.

- ▶ Systems thinking: humans tend to focus on short-term feedback and response, which can result in steps being taken in the wrong direction. While we do learn from our experience, we never directly experience the consequences of most of our important decisions or actions. Therefore we need to broaden the reflection in time and space.
- ▶ Personal mastery: the process of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision and professionalism, of focusing our energy, of developing patience and of seeing reality a bit more objectively, and being aware of our incompetence.
- ▶ Mental models: these are images and stories which influence how we understand the world. Getting to know these requires turning the mirror inwards to bring forth our own pictures of the world, and finding a balance between inquiry and advocacy.
- ▶ Building shared visions: to formulate a shared vision of the future that we seek to create based on a set of common principles and guiding practices.
- ▶ Team learning: from the greek word 'dialogos'; a free flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually. It requires a dialogue between members with the capacity to be objective and enter a genuine 'thinking together'.



### Capacity building: soft words or crucial focal point?

When asked to talk about experiences on how to safeguard human competence and capacity building within Leader+, Peter Backa, as someone closely involved with the Finnish Village Movement, stated that:

*We are dealing with 'soft' words such as competence, social capital, and capacity. It is hard to define, difficult to measure, but still real and crucial for development.*

During a seminar on the proposed monitoring and evaluation scheme for Leader it was also stated that some effects of the programme relate to:

*... immaterial aspects and impacts that are difficult to assess (e.g. behavioral changes);*

and that 'a driver for good LAG performance is that learning is structured in some way'.

One of the foundations of Leader has, since the very beginning, been to work with a participatory approach. This draws upon the fact that development has to be built upon and can only be carried out by the people themselves. Any programme that seeks to contribute to change needs to build on the competence and readiness of those concerned. It is the visions, capacities and willingness of the local peo-

ple, individually and collectively, that can give rise to development and change. In Leader the passion and engagement of civilians, the entrepreneurship and acting ability of the private sector, and the responsibility and organisational strength of the public sector comes together.

### The added value of Leader

A LAG group in Italy concluded that the lessons learnt all point to the good results produced by the combination of analytic, participatory and experimental approaches:

'The main added value of Leader+ through the LAG has been to address critical problems for the area, and provide its expertise in communication and participatory approach to convince local people and municipalities to develop an experimental approach of interest for the territory as a whole, through a sample of municipalities, and having a large impact on it.'

The added value of Leader is to provide a structure to bring together people from the different sectors, and to formulate a plan for the area, and create arenas, structures and methods for their efforts. Leader can offer working models for joint actions, including acknowledging the importance of trust, sensitive and multilevel leadership, enhancing entrepreneurship and innovation, and keeping a constant focus on reflection and collaborative learning. In brief, this could be illustrated as follows:

### Explanatory model for local and regional development





There is a strong connection between all these foundations, not least between leadership and learning. Introducing and working with the Leader method means shaping the governance context. The leadership must be carried out both by the managing authority, at the administrative level above the Leader group, as well as within the LAG itself. The local community can only become co-creators in the process if good leadership is demonstrated and by inviting them to share their knowledge and aspirations, thus giving them an opportunity to make use of their competencies. This leadership must by default incorporate an atmosphere of sharing and learning to be sustainable.

‘One of the most important experiences is that Leader has opened an ongoing learning process. A process anchored in the local society. Another experience has been the development of better planned projects and vigorous networks. A soft ‘cultural revolution’ based on the assumption that the local society is able to take responsibility for solving its own problems.’ (Quote from a Danish LAG manager.)

#### *Enabling and empowering*

The key role of committed individuals and teams that, for example, was observed in an Austrian study <sup>(1)</sup> of Leader mainstreaming, cannot be achieved by merely introducing a new measure, or new funding opportunities, or by administrative directives: ‘It is much more a question of enabling (the administrators and support structures) and empowering (the local actors and intermediaries), and it requires the combination of an explicit strategic purpose with more indirect interventions.’

An Italian LAG described their relatively long experience from working with the Leader method and mainstreaming it in this manner: ‘The application of the same Leader method to develop actions supported by other programmes has in particular allowed it to overcome some “limits” of the Leader environment itself (limitation of time, economic resources and inhibition of some types of initiative due to some specific rules, etc), and to obtain excellent results, put problems and good practices of rural areas into wider contexts, and proceed with a consistent, unitary and sustainable development programme.’

The comment above relates to a specific business development approach which turned out to be very successful. The

<sup>(1)</sup> ‘Methods for and success of mainstreaming Leader innovations and approach into rural development programmes’, final report by ÖIR-Managementdienste GmbH, Vienna, 19 April 2004.

mainstreaming of Leader is suggested at the regional level, and to consider the methods in Leader as instrumental for integrated regional development.

The Austrian study also stated that: ‘... the real advantage of a Leader-type approach lies in its higher ability to encompass the complexity of the territorial system, i.e. in view of rural infrastructures, common goods, local heritage, organisational capacity, knowledge transfer, cultural enhancement etc. The area-based approach can be cross-fertilised with a sectoral approach to design strategies aimed at improving competitiveness of an added value chain, e.g. in the food or wood sector.’

So the conditions afforded by the EU policy can indeed enable positive learning and the feeling of ‘being part of something bigger’. However, this context does not automatically bring about a learning process. For this to happen, a conscious learning approach involving setting aside space and time for reflection must be implemented, and this starts with a dialogue to develop a plan.

#### *Building shared visions and plans*

*Human competence is people knowing how — and why. It is not enough to know how and what to do. You have to know why you are doing it. A vision without an action plan is a day-dream — an action plan without a vision is a nightmare.*

(Backa)

One of the methods implemented by Leader is the development plan required for every LAG. Developing a functional plan requires the participation of those concerned. The planning process is sometimes as important as the plan itself. This is the reason why plans written by external consultants or smaller teams may often look good but often fail in their implementation.

In Finland, and quite possibly in many other European countries, the village movement has been an important foundation for local development. The method used to produce a ‘village development plan’ brings together people from a local setting to discuss and elaborate possible futures and reflect on local strengths in relation to these scenarios. The Leader programme for the region of Ostrobothnia stated that Leader projects can be funded only if it is in line with what the people in the village want. This did not mean that everyone in the village had to decide on every project, but that every village that wanted funding for a project in their village needed to have a village plan that showed the strategy they had chosen.



### *Know how — and know why!*

The plan shows the will of the people (i.e. know why) and inspires people to develop new projects and gives a context (know-how) for the individual projects. This process, according to Backa, gives 'the highest power to the lowest level'.

As Dr Ann McGee-Cooper, creator of the concept 'servant leadership' writes in the book *Insights on leadership*,

*Within teams who know how to dialogue... collective intelligence rises to become much higher than the brightest member of the team. However, in teams where individuals compete to be right and have the last say, the collective intelligence falls below the level of the least bright team member because the brighter members begin to cancel each other out with power plays and intimidation.*

Thus a participatory approach does not imply not advocating your own view, but requires you to be explicit in what you mean, and properly balanced with a listening approach to hear what others mean with the same words or expressions. Many testimonies from LAG group work over the years speak about becoming more of 'we' than 'from my point of view', and becoming a true collaborative team. This requires time as well as a conscious, common approach to where we are heading and why. It is not an easy process, but every LAG will have to work their way through it. A way to get more profound in this process is recommended by The Dalarna Region, who presented their experiences in the Leader+ Observatory seminar in Tihany, Hungary, November 2006 (see box).

### **The Dalarna region: be explicit!**

Regional authorities in the county of Dalarna, Sweden, have worked for years with different participatory planning tools involving the 15 communities, as well as civil and private sector representatives. One case looked at creating local plans which would reach the national goal of acceptable private and public services in all parts of the rural areas (shops, access to authorities etc.). This process was from the very beginning designed to focus on learning from each other and over time. There were ongoing meetings to rebuild the plan in light of factual realities and changed visions. However, in spite of these many meetings and discussions, there was not much in the way of results. To cut a long story short, the process showed that different words meant different things to different people. In fact it was easier to agree on vague 'buzz-words' than to actually pinpoint real problems.

This experience showed that the only chance to get functional plans in place is to consciously work on moving from implicit to explicit, so that every person really tries to be very clear about what is being said/communicated to the group. The basis for the work lies in an explicit root-cause analysis: why are we in the current situation? Only then can a programme planning process by open discussion go ahead.

*Will we be able to recognise that our programme will have the effects we want?  
How do we find the relevant changes that we want to occur to make the effects come true?  
(methods to reach effects)  
Are they based on the right assumptions?*

While these questions seem basic, the answers to them are in theory a precondition for all project and programme planning. To deepen these questions, the following questions might be useful:

*What is the most important change that must take place in order to achieve our goal?  
Why does it not happen today?  
What is the problem/obstacle behind it?*

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### *Acting and learning: reflective practitioners*

'What did you learn at work today?' I fear the day when my own question to my kid: 'What did you learn at school today, dear little boy of mine', is returned to me with 'And what about you, Daddy?'

In 1983, Donald Schön wrote a book on day-to-day learning called *The Reflective Practitioner* which became a standard for managers, and was followed up by many articles. This comes close to what Peter Senge means with 'personal mastery' (see 'A brief note on theory'). Leader provides a space for action which allows a partnership to try new and innovative approaches. This, in combination with a conscious time and space for reflection, provides a good ground for learning, both on the individual and group level.

In a Swedish study by Cecilia Waldenström, on actors in rural development (including Leader), it was found that there are two prerequisites for a true learning process for local development: the availability of 'space for action' and 'space for reflection'. This can only take place in a permissive context. Elena Saraceno, an early advocator of the Leader model and an experienced person on the implementation of EU policy, explicitly stated that:

*'Local action groups, with a global allowance, and having a substantially free hand in deciding the contents of their business plans was the true radical innovation of Leader.'*  
(Elena Saraceno)

One may well argue that learning is not a 'cause-effect-reflect' process but rather works like a prism. The amount of influences which affect the outcome of a learning process is impossible to control, and sometimes difficult to specify. It is not always (probably very seldom) possible to get all the facts into the open and draw correct conclusions. Any entrepreneur or business manager would witness and tell you that many of the decisions taken are done so on a gut feeling. This requires the LAG group to create a sense of trust, not only among its members, but also in relation to the beneficiaries.

Having said this, it is also necessary to argue that this does not imply that it would be of little or no use to be structured, and to gather and store as much information as possible to improve and create the best possible preconditions for new, innovative ideas. This is true both at the individual and organisational level.

### **Learning from others**

#### *Prior evaluations*

Throughout Europe there are numerous programmes being carried out to enhance the development of the quality of life of citizens. Most of these are also evaluated, with efforts being made to monitor that the programmes implemented are managed in the most efficient way, and are purposeful in relation to their objectives. Many important conclusions are drawn in these evaluations. For Leader, it can be very useful to study the mid-term review of Leader+ or the *ex post* evaluation of Leader II, [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/library/eudocuments/evaluation\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/library/eudocuments/evaluation_en.htm)

However, there are many other evaluations of programmes which include rural development, at European, national and regional levels. According to Peter Backa: 'One of the ideas behind the Leader method is to cross borders. Only focusing on Leader is against the soul of Leader! Crossing sector, regional and other borders is a trademark of Leader. This means we should not forget to use the experiences, competence and networks of other programmes; European, national and even regional, like Interreg, EQUAL, URBAN...'

#### *Best practice*

Evaluations seldom reach out to those who are on the brink of implementing new programmes and projects. People who are directly involved in the development of their community or region very seldom have previous evaluations as a basis for their planning and development work. Instead, they often search for ways to enter a dialogue with people who themselves have made efforts to create development in an area. People who have tried, failed and tried again. Personal testimonies are considered more heavyweight than printed reports.

This is a perfectly rational way to relate to information. Actually having tried to learn how to do things is respected more than knowing about how to do it. We have a tendency to place greater value on learning by doing than on academic studies, although this is not to say that there is necessarily a contradiction with this.

*Best practice is inspiring and a good way of animating. But best practice is not always easy to use in a different context; local variations, cultural differences and so on, can create problems if best practice is copied from elsewhere and implemented in a new context.*

(Backa)



Indeed, experience from a certain area and a certain time might very well be counterproductive in a new area and a new time. Thus any experience needs to be processed and put in relation to other experiences to draw any conclusions as to the value of any findings in a new context. This was explicitly stated by Arne B. Thomsen at the Danish national network unit (NNU) when inviting new Member States to learn from Danish experiences:

*You are welcome to visit us and to see what and how we have done but I prohibit you to try to copy it! Visit us and visit others, but draw your own conclusions and do it your own way!*

In our everyday practice, this is how we handle information. New experiences are 'filtered' by our previous experiences to see how they fit in. We may seek support for our previous conclusions rather than information that overthrows old truths. Many of us do not actively process new information but rather act as 'collectors' of experiences and store them, ready to be used later when similar situations occur.

#### *Networking*

Networking is the most individual form of collective work. Keeping up a good network is one of the major assets that anybody can spend time on, and thus providing time and space for LAG members and officials to network is important. Attending workshops, national or international, is often indicated as one of the most important ways to find new contacts.

#### **Learning by doing: the need for methods**

'Competence is individual but it is always related to other people, groups of people, organisations, networks and community. Therefore we have to look at it by considering both aspects, and find methods for this'. (Peter Backa.)

Methods are often based on several best practices trying to find and describe the similarities leaving aside the individual features. To make a method explicit and transferable it should be written down in a handbook. This is know-how. A good method in relation to community or rural development should be participatory and have an added value in making people also understand 'know why'.

Education should be mentioned as an important method. For officials and LAG-members there are many courses in many countries being implemented to facilitate the transfer of knowledge between programme periods, and this is also important for competence and capacity building, not

to mention the networking aspect. In the Austrian study, it was concluded that: 'The competence challenge is posed by the increase in complexity, and engendered by the integration of Leader features into mainstream rural development programmes. Technical assistance and animation at two levels (between programming authority and local groups and between the local group and the beneficiaries) play a crucial role, as well as sufficient time to learn and to optimise organisational processes. Capacity building must not be only constrained to the local group'.

It is not only formal education and training that is important, but also more innovative methods like the Nordic 'study-circle', which involves learning from your peers. There is no teacher having the knowledge, and no ignorant pupils. In a study circle everyone is equal; everyone has unique and valuable experiences. Everyone has their say and everyone listens. The combined experience in a group is greater than that of any individual teacher. In a perfect world, hearing other people's experiences creates synergies in the form of new understanding and ideas. A study circle could be based on given study material or using a structured method for generating new ideas, new themes etc.

Transnational cooperation is a good strategy to find new ways of thinking and not least to get a chance to look at your own work with new eyes, by receiving visitors who ask those 'stupid questions' which you never ask yourself.

*The fact that Leader+ promotes transnational cooperation in order to stimulate mutual learning as well as the creation of a critical mass was a key incentive for the project promoters. (Austrian LAG manager)*

*The similar LAG-approach in the respective area made cooperation possible. (UK LAG manager)*

When organisations such as LAGs are networking it is important to have good teamwork in the LAG. There should not be one 'international secretary' being 'expert' on everything concerning the cooperation. That is a weak structure, since if that person leaves, then the network goes as well. In many countries around Europe the LAG groups have remained the same for some time. In some respects this is good, as the continuity of the LAG group in itself secures a certain bridging of human competence between programming periods.



*The Leader method has already been mainstreamed in Finland, meaning that all of the countryside is covered by Leader or Leader-like groups. In practice this means that almost all LAGs are continuing their work from the last period. This means that it is easy to preserve the human competencies and the networks. All that is needed is to make arrangements for the 'gap' between the programming periods, and to make the gap as narrow as possible and to keep the people strong and ready.* (Quote from a Finnish LAG.)

As long as the LAG maintains its ability to stand strong and is ready to revise and renew their plans and processes, this is true. At the same time these regions stand the risk of not becoming innovative enough, not allowing for new thoughts to flourish. Finally, in terms of methods for learning, the evaluation done by a UK LAG in reflecting on one of their projects, points out: '...The importance of fun — play for adults as well as children — and the effective way it produces incidental learning.'

### Focus on how!

In a study on mainstreaming Leader, it was underlined that in designing a development strategy, it is important to focus on **how** things are done, and not only on what should be done. Five critical success factors were found in this study, which deserve to be repeated as they represent a hands-on practical approach to methods and LAG work in general:

- ▶ plasticity: sufficient time, resources and flexibility for building up the administrative capacity for internal and external coordination, and for defining the interfaces with support structures and local groups;
- ▶ service orientation: intermediary operational support structures for technical assistance and animation, networking and capacity building;
- ▶ responsiveness: dialogue-based feedback mechanisms connecting all levels and types of key actors, integrating capacity building measures;
- ▶ localness: mixed (tripartite) local groups with the right and responsibility for strategy formulation and project selection. (Space for action required for learning!);
- ▶ strategy orientation: a strategic orientation of the regional operational programmes and of the local business plans in combination with a wide range of activities eligible for funding.

When speaking about the need for methods, self-evaluation should be mentioned. It is used extensively as a conscious process to monitor and evaluate how the LAG is doing and to take actions to improve the programme.

### One step further — regional knowledge management

A region is a somewhat abstract figure based on a geographic area. The Leader method suggests that the development of a region is enhanced if the region is defined based on a common identity. The important asset of a sense of community is, of course, something which needs to be constantly affirmed and renewed. However, what if the common sense of community is weak, or is charged with negative feelings?

#### *The Styrian volcano land: a success story*

The Styrian volcano land is a Leader+ association of 76 communities in the south-east of Styria/Austria. It is mostly an agricultural area with around 100 000 inhabitants. Typical in this part of Austria is: the gentle, hilly volcanic landscape; the small-scale farmer; a high density of craftsmen; the natural landscape; and the variety of regional products (home of the pumpkin-seed oil, great wines, fruit juice, processed ham, beer etc.).

In order to benefit from European enlargement and to strengthen the regional economy, the regional development programme was initiated. Under this programme, important stakeholders (politicians, institutions, schools and universities, companies, communities, citizens) participate and work together towards a prosperous future of the region.

To support and constantly improve the sustainable regional development activities, a 'regional knowledge management system', combined with a permanent evaluation of the regional development process, was started. The goal is to support the region in further developing its strengths through documentation, preparation and public accessibility of regional knowledge. By building on this regional knowledge base, know-how will be generated which supports the integrated, endogenous regional development process, and therefore enhances the region's potential to innovate.

The tasks of the 'regional knowledge management system' are:

- ▶ documenting development activities;
- ▶ building up a regional knowledge base;
- ▶ generating the necessary knowledge;
- ▶ involving citizens in regional development;
- ▶ distributing the relevant information and knowledge;
- ▶ developing a regional human competence network;
- ▶ preventing mistakes.



The 'regional knowledge management system' comprises a technological part in the form of an Internet portal (Internet and intranet) with constantly growing content, and an awareness creating part, which aims to build up a knowledge sharing culture within the community of regional players.

There are two parts. The technological part is in the form of an Internet portal, and is built on a multi-dimensional database which contains different modules in order to fulfil the demands of the system. The other part aims to create awareness and to involve citizens in regional development activities so as to create a knowledge sharing culture. A knowledge management system is considered to be successful if every person involved is able to identify the benefit of the system in her/his daily work. The following activities will help to create a sound comprehension of regional knowledge management and its benefits to the regional players:

- ▶ familiarisation workshops;
- ▶ incentive systems;

- ▶ story telling: tell stories about the benefits of knowledge sharing;
- ▶ dissemination of regional knowledge through 'game of the region';
- ▶ user manuals;
- ▶ public relations;
- ▶ regional 'knowledge management events';
- ▶ expert panels.

### ***Innovation and sustainability***

Two of the guiding principles of Leader are 'innovation' and 'sustainability'. Innovation may at first glance seem a bit contradictory to sustainability, since sustainability does not imply something static. On the contrary, as has been stated 'the only constant is change!' A pre-condition for sustainability in a societal context is the ability to cope with change. Indeed, for both communities and companies it is the ability to bring about innovation and change which is the basis for sustainability. This was also clearly expressed by the Styrian volcano group.

### **Styrian volcano region: never stop renewing**

According to those involved in the Styrian volcanic region, it is important to identify and keep focused on the strengths of the region. Losing this focus may result in vague strategies, which in turn will not be effective in its implementation. The second step is to identify the key players. Often these are people with deep knowledge in certain fields, and who are working in parallel with broad external networks. To identify who they are, and to constantly motivate and provide clear incentives in order for them to be part of the process, is a very important strategy. This requires providing them with the benefits for their daily work. Regular communication with the key players is crucial for success.

When the strengths of the region and the key players are identified, it is possible to define the important information that should be built into the regional knowledge base. This should not be too technical since there is a risk of losing yourself in technical solutions, and losing focus on the people and their contribution.

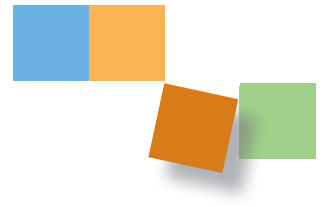
The two last recommendations from the Styrian volcano region are: to never stop developing; and to constantly improve the system (not only the technical part). Sustainability relies on constant development. This also implies that the leadership needs to continuously provide space and time for the dialogue on new visions.

For more information, please visit [www.vulkanland.at](http://www.vulkanland.at) or send an e-mail to [gerstl@vulkanland.at](mailto:gerstl@vulkanland.at)

### ***The type of innovation needed***

At the seminar in Corsica, Mr Robert Lukesch, ÖIR Austria, presented his experience on the kind of innovation that can be brought about through the Leader approach:

A LAG does not operate in a virgin area. Most probably there have been and still are a number of more or less successful attempts to foster development in the area, either endogenous approaches or external interventions. The initial analysis must therefore assess:



- ▶ what has already been done and with what outcome;
- ▶ what role the LAG should assume with respect to other players in the area, and finally;
- ▶ what type of action is most needed to produce a maximum leverage effect.

Following the classic model of evolution (mutation, selection and recombination), we know basically three types of innovative actions:

- ▶ animating actions which: 'ignite the spark', mobilise people, scan the territory for hidden treasures, interesting ideas, lost concepts and courageous pioneers;
- ▶ structuring actions: confirm a business idea, found a partnership or cooperation, create an enterprise, set up a new organisation, develop a brand, and invest in new technologies;
- ▶ consolidating actions: create value added chains by inter-linking hitherto separated (research, production, marketing and distribution) processes, support self-organised structures to become sustainable, help them to generate revenues, and to preserve long-term values.

### **The Leader competence pool — national and transnational resource**

We have previously described the need for 'personal mastery' in terms of continuous reflection. We have described the need for the LAG to set aside time and space for group reflection. We have described a possible approach to 'regional knowledge management' and the need for innovation (and learning from actions!) to be sustainable. Now we turn to the international level: how can the multitude of Leader competence be made visible and accessible for local, regional and national actors?

Elena Saraceno in her speech at the Leader+ seminar in Corsica addressed the risk of losing human competence in the transition between programme periods:

'The history of the Leader initiative is therefore a story of a gradual 'learning by doing': first the local action groups, mobilisation and animation, then innovative actions and networking, and finally more substantive forms of cooperation and thematic concentration. There has been a substantial accumulation of know-how and a progressive territorial coverage of the rural areas of Europe (and even beyond with Leader+), that is precious both for the mainstreaming of the initiative in the next programming period, as well as for third countries interested in the approach. However this

knowledge is still embedded in experience and bilateral transfers rather than being systematised and codified for its mainstreaming within administrations and as rural know-how. This is a step forward that needs to be taken.'

To take an initiative in this direction, the Leader+ Observatory's Contact Point has developed a web-based tool to: make visible the human competencies developed during the Leader+ programme; to provide them in a trustworthy manner; and to make these individuals available for the period 2007–13. In the following box you can find more information about this tool, which now includes more than 150 knowledgeable colleagues with Leader experience.

#### **The Leader competence pool**

##### **Why has the 'Leader competence pool' been developed?**

The Leader competence pool (LCP) tool has been developed to allow those involved in Leader to describe, in their own words, their experiences and competencies gained. It is a tool which captures some of the knowledge and learning which has taken place during the Leader programme. The aim is to complement other more traditional forms of reporting, thereby making those individuals who have participated, both visible and available for new areas of cooperation and/or various types of contribution.

##### **Who developed this tool?**

The LCP was developed by the Leader+ *Contact Point* following a request made by the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, which arose out of the results of the Leader+ mid-term evaluation. This showed that the learning effect between Leader II and Leader+ was in many cases lost. The idea for the LCP tool was discussed and developed with representatives of LAGs, national network units and managing authorities during the course of the Leader+ Observatory seminar in Tihany, Hungary, in November 2006. It is now a part of the 'Leader virtual community', which already includes a number of interactive web tools such the partner search tool (PST).

##### **For whom has it been developed?**

The LCP hopes to bring to those people working in rural development all around Europe, a tool where they can find peers or expertise in certain fields, and which





can help them in whatever their situation. Registration in the LCP is open to all actors who have contributed to the Leader programme at local, national or European levels. It includes professionals involved in: LAG management; the regional, interregional or national networks; and institutional bodies such as the managing authorities. Many researchers and consultants have been involved in Leader programmes, and their experiences are clearly valuable for future work in the field of rural development.

**The LCP tool can be found at:**

<http://leaderplus.cec.eu.int/cpdb/public/competence/CompSearchFS.aspx>

**So, what did you learn at work today?**

Where did this journey take you? Keep repeating this question and don't forget to write things along the way, and repeatedly go back to revise your notes in a structured way, both on your own and in the LAG. This is the key message of this article. Start now. Then set aside time to reflect upon your observations, and set aside time to discuss these with others. A key feature of Leader is to strive to create a genuine 'thinking-together-environment' built on trust, open minds, and meaningful and purposeful dialogue.

A second message which should be emphasised, whether you are at an early stage or in need of renewal, is the words of Arne B. Thomsen, from the Danish NNU: 'Visit us and visit others, but draw your own conclusions and do it your own way!' Trust your own capacity as a group to find your own way

in your region. You are the only ones who can do it, you rely on yourselves, and what has been done elsewhere can serve as an inspiration and help you see things more clearly, but do it your own way!

A third important conclusion is to have a focus on how things are done, not only on what, and to never stop developing! To safeguard the Leader method is to develop it.

The Leader+ initiative has not yet ended, and the effects of what has been accomplished are yet to be seen. During the initiative so many people have learnt so much, either as individuals or in groups. Yet, to enable and empower each other we can take several small steps to improve this learning process in the new programme. Some of these steps have been expressed in this article. So, to start anew: what did you learn at work today?

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Documentation from Leader+ Contact Point Seminars in November 2006 in Tihany, Hungary, and April 2007 can be found at: [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/events/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/events/index_en.htm)