European LEADER Association for Rural Development support activities for Georgian Local Action Groups

Brussels, 2019
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This publication reflects activities carried out by the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (hereinafter ELARD) during the EU-funded project “Strengthening Rural Development Models in Georgia” in 2017-2019, in cooperation with Mercy Corps Georgia (lead partner), CARE and PIN.

First, we provide a general introduction to the project, its partners, ELARD’s work arrangements and the main principles that were followed during the project activities. The main part of the document focuses on descriptions and the main funding of the project activities in which ELARD was involved - a review of the local development strategies, establishment, capacity building, and operational support for Georgian Association of Local Action Groups (GALAG). The final chapter of the publication contains the conclusions, lessons learnt and recommendations of the project partners.

The publication is annexed with various informative background materials and project outputs.

The publication was prepared by ELARD’s project lead expert Kristiina Tammets and project coordinator Kadri Tillemann with valuable input and support from project partners and ELARD’s expert team.

GALAG training in Tbilisi, December 2018
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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This publication reflects the activities and achievements of the EU-funded project “Strengthening Rural Development Models in Georgia”.

The project’s aim was to contribute to the reduction of poverty through integrated, sustainable and participatory rural development in Georgia. In order to improve the quality of life of the rural population in the Borjomi, Lagodekhi and Kazbegi municipalities, Mercy Corps, CARE, PIN and ELARD are strengthening the community-led local development approach to further extend support to the existing local action groups (LAGs) in the project’s target municipalities. The ideas incorporated into the project design are based on good practices and lessons learnt during the implementation of the ENPARD I projects. The focus is on the best ways to make LAGs more professional and sustainable, by enhancing their knowledge and capacity, and providing them with the tools to allow them to operate independently after the project’s completion. The project was launched as a 2-year project in November 2017 (to run until November 2019) with a total budget of 1,333,331 euros.

The following planned results were achieved during the project:

Result 1: The effectiveness and sustainability of LAGs in the three target municipalities is enhanced through capacity development and networking. This result was achieved by arranging awareness-raising campaigns in target municipalities, involving additional population groups in the activities of LAGs and providing a variety of capacity development support for the LAGs.

Result 2: Rural development priorities within the Local Development Strategies (LDSs) are further supported through the funding of viable, community-led projects. To this end, Local Development Strategies of the three pilot LAGs were reviewed and updated and LDSs were implemented through sub-grant calls.

Result 3: Georgian Association of Local Action Groups (GALAG) is established and operational. In order to achieve this, the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) supported project partners and Georgian LAGs during the establishment and capacity development of GALAG, and GALAG’s first activities in the field of advocacy and networking were also carried out.

ELARD’s responsibilities were mainly related to contributing to the achievement of results two and three. ELARD brought together a pool of experts at the beginning of the project in order to ensure knowledgeable, experienced and responsible expert support during the whole project. The open call was arranged and distributed among all ELARD members to propose experts who were capable of and suitable to provide the necessary expert support. For effective project management, ELARD’s responsibilities were arranged into work packages. As a result of the open call, the following expert team was formed and approved by ELARD to contribute to different ELARD responsibilities: Kristiina Tammets
(LAG representative, Estonia), Radim Sršen (LAG representative, Czech Republic), Maria Murciano (LEADER Network, Spain), Stefan Niedermoser (LEADER Network, Austria), Marion Eckardt (LAG representative, Sweden), Goran Soster (LAG representative, Slovenia), Walter Weidel (National Rural Network, Hungary).

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| 3           | Planning, preparation and conducting of GALAG capacity-building training on the following topics:  
|             |   – LEADER & Community-led Local Development within the EU  
|             |   – National network (NN) management  
|             |   – National network’s role in local development planning (LDS preparation and implementation)  
|             |   – Network Cooperation to share best practices between NNs and to support the international cooperation of LAGs  
|             |   – Stakeholder involvement, facilitation and negotiation skills |
| 4           | Mentoring and institutional (incl. involvement in national/international platforms and networks) support for GALAG during its first operational period, suggestions. |
| 5           | Coordination and quality check of WP 1-4, inputs into ELARD’s narrative reports. |

1.1 Introduction of partners: ELARD, Mercy Corps, PIN, CARE and LAGs

1.1.1 ELARD (www.elard.eu)

The European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) is an international non-profit making association (AISBL) set up to improve the quality of life in rural areas and to maintain their population through sustainable, integrated local development. ELARD was founded in Belgium in 1999 by the National LEADER Networks of Local Action Groups (LAGs) of France, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain.

More than 2,500 local action groups from 26 European countries (both EU and non-EU countries) are involved either through their national or regional networks.

Currently, ELARD members come from the following European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary,
Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. By the end of 2020, it is expected that Georgian network of local action groups will join with ELARD as an associated member.

ELARD advocates spreading the philosophy of the LEADER/CLLD method both at a local grassroots and at an institutional level. ELARD believes that sustainable rural development across Europe and beyond is best achieved by this methodology, which is grounded on the following seven key features:

- **Area-based local development strategies**
- **Bottom-up elaboration and implementation of strategies**
- **Networking**
- **Cooperation**
- **Innovation**
- **Local public-private partnerships: local action groups**
- **Integrated and multisectoral actions**

The association supports its members directly in their efforts to carry out innovative work in the field of rural development and to network with each other so as to facilitate cooperation and the dissemination of good LEADER practices and know-how from one territory to another.

The association works actively to make the LEADER approach better known among European and national decision-makers in order to secure and strengthen the LEADER/CLLD method’s position as an essential part of the European Rural Development Policy.

As of 2019, there has been 28 years of experience of LEADER method implementation in the European Union countries as well as many practices outside the EU. There are more than 2,500 LAGs, which cover 80% of the European territory with a population of 200 million. Altogether, more than 40 billion euros have been invested so far through national rural development plans (including public and private funding).

In policy design, ELARD works closely with the following European institutions: European Parliament, European Commission, European Committee of Regions, European Economic and Social Committee, and the European Network for Rural Development. EU level advocacy requires joint efforts with other European umbrella organisations and for that reason ELARD contributes to common statements together with the European Rural Parliament and European Countryside Movement partners.
On an EU level, ELARD participates in various working groups such as Civil Dialogue Group for Rural Development (European Commission, DG AGRI), Structured Dialogue Group for the ESI Funds (European Commission, DG REGIO), Rural Networks Assembly, Rural Networks Steering Group, and Leader/CLLD sub-group.

In order to communicate the needs and statements of local action groups, ELARD publishes position papers to contribute to EU and national level rural development policy making. ELARD’s own positions and supported positions are available on the ELARD website http://www.elard.eu/leader-clld/positions.

1.1.2 Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is an international, non-governmental humanitarian relief and development global organisation that exists to alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression by helping to build more secure, productive and just communities. We empower people to turn crisis into opportunity. We catalyse community-led, market-driven solutions. We create social innovations that transform lives.

Mercy Corps tackles complex challenges by taking an integrated, adaptive and multi-sector approach, understanding that there are no easy or fast fixes. We work in partnerships to create change at scale - from the local village committee to global networks of business and government. We believe in evidence and learning. We use data to manage our programme more effectively, understand the impact of our work and influence other actors seeking to solve some of the world’s most complex challenges. We use a gender lens. Understanding the role of gender - especially making the right investments in the futures of girls and women - is critical to building stability and strength from within, in the world’s toughest places.

Mercy Corps’ conceptual framework - the Vision for Change - emphasises the importance of public, private and civic sector partnerships in boosting accountability, participation and peaceful change, thereby leading to more secure, productive and just communities. Mercy Corps has been operating in Georgia since September 2000 and has been implementing programmes in the field of community mobilisation, assistance of vulnerable people, assistance to IDPs and the population affected by war, and economic/agricultural, rural and market systems development.

Mercy Corps’ goal in Georgia is to create more productive, resilient and equitable communities through sustainable rural development and socially and market-oriented initiatives in the rural areas of Georgia and the entire South Caucasus Region.

1.1.3 PIN

People in Need (PIN) strives for a world in which people are not restricted by an unfree society, poverty, lack of opportunities or discrimination. We believe our world can be a better place for people who are suffering from poverty, injustice or inequality. We also
believe that people who are in need can play an active role in making global development more inclusive and sustainable.

In Georgia, empowering people is at the heart of all we do. PIN understands empowerment as a process by which people become more capable of claiming their rights and actively promoting change.

PIN’s goal in Georgia is to reduce poverty and inequality, particularly in rural areas. We work towards this goal by:

- Making the development process in Georgia more pro-poor and inclusive;
- Building the capacity of people, organisations and networks to advocate and implement changes;
- Protecting the poorest and most vulnerable households, which remain excluded from the development process.

In the event of a disaster, PIN also has a role to play in saving lives and protecting the dignity of people affected by the disaster, as outlined in PIN’s Emergency and Preparedness Plan.

1.1.4 CARE

CARE has been working in the Caucasus since 1988 when it responded to the Spitak earthquake in Armenia. At the beginning of the 1990s and in 2008, we responded to the armed conflicts that broke out across the region. This made CARE one of the first international agencies to aid the hundreds of thousands of people that lost everything overnight.

The majority of the displaced people were unable to return back home. Economies in the Caucasus were ravaged, social and healthcare systems were impaired and unemployment reached unprecedented levels. Simply distributing supplies no longer became a viable option. Sustainable change was vital in order to help the South Caucasus and its people get back on their feet. As a result, since 1995, CARE has shifted its focus from emergency relief to pro poor economic development.

CARE’s mission is to serve individuals and families in the poorest communities of the Caucasus. Drawing strength from global diversity, resources and experience, CARE promotes innovative solutions and advocates for responsibility.

CARE International in the Caucasus works to reduce poverty and injustice so that the rural poor can stand on their own with dignity. In order to systematically confront social and economic marginalisation, CARE targets four domains and cross-cutting themes where its efforts can make the biggest impact.
1.1.5 8 Georgian LAGs

Currently, implementation of the ENPARD programme covers eight municipalities in Georgia with only 8 LAGs registered in Georgia: Borjomi, Kazbegi, Lagodekhi, Khulo, Keda, Tetritskaro, Dedoplistskaro, Akhalkalaki. It is planned, however, to extend the programme to four more municipalities (Tsalka, Akhmeta, Tskaltubo and Mestia).

**Lagodekhi LAG** – The Local Action Group (LAG) Lagodekhi is an independent platform that contributes to Lagodekhi’s development and provides participation opportunities for the local population. It is part of the LEADER model used in the EU to stimulate rural development and is being adapted to Georgia. The Lagodekhi LAG combines representatives from all 15 communities of the municipality, and it is composed of 130 members from the private sector, civil society and local authorities, including the head of the municipal board. Lagodekhi LAG operates as an NNLE that is governed by a General Assembly and regulatory framework defined by its by-laws.

The General Assembly is the representative body, it has supreme decision-making rights and it elects a Board of Directors of 15 persons (5 from each sector). The board of directors elects the president and vice president, who are then approved by the General Assembly. Members of the LAG can be any individual (aged 18 and upwards) residing on the territory of Lagodekhi Municipality or a legal entity, including public law legal entities and their representatives, together with the representatives of Lagodekhi Municipality, City Council and Board, who share the main principles of the LAG work and wish to contribute to the achievement of its goals.

**Kazbegi LAG** – The project introduces the LEADER approach in Kazbegi district. LEADER (“Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale”), meaning “Links between
the rural economy and development actions”) is a local development method that allows local actors to develop an area by using its existing local development potential. The LEADER approach has been an important component of EU Rural Development Policy for over 20 years. It is currently being piloted in Georgia for the first time. PIN supports participatory mechanisms in local decision-making processes and the district’s sustainable growth, and helps to improve the quality of life of its residents. Built in follow-up surveys, close monitoring and evaluation provide data and lessons learnt to facilitate LEADER implementation that is adapted to the local context in other rural regions in Georgia, in order to create an improved model of participatory decision-making process and a tool for sustainable rural development.

It is the basic principle of the LEADER approach that the action targets all types of local public, private and civic actors as well as individual inhabitants to create local partnerships and direct local resources towards more effective development. The active and committed representatives of Local Government, entrepreneurs, farmers, CSOs, citizens and other important local players, such as the Kazbegi National Park Administration, are all invited to participate in local strategy planning and become members of Local Action Group (LAG). Together, following on from regional research undertaken by the team, the LAG members formulate the Rural Development Strategy, with substantial input from other community members. Once the Strategy is developed, they solicit calls for proposals from residents and distribute small grants for projects in areas prioritised by the Strategy.

The whole process is transparent and open to any Kazbegi resident.

The Action includes a strong capacity building component for all target groups to enable a new methodology to be efficiently implemented, and to ensure the sustainability of the
project outcomes. Based on experience from EU countries, which have a long history of LEADER implementation, this approach ensures that active individuals are able to mobilise their social networks, the level of community participation increases overall and it helps economic development renewal.

The individual projects supported by small grants can become positive models to follow. The networking activities bring innovations to remote areas.

**Borjomi LAG** – Borjomi Local Action Group (LAG) has been established within the EU funded European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPARD). Borjomi LAG is a voluntary-based body consisting of both private and public-sector representatives. Membership of LAG is fee-free. There are 28 members in the group, in which, based on the LEADER principle, the number of private sector representatives should ultimately exceed the public-sector representatives. Borjomi Local Action Group is the main decision-making body that performs the following tasks and responsibilities:

- Consult with the local communities to develop, approve and implement the Local Development Strategy;
- Establish the assessment and selection procedures in a non-discriminatory and transparent manner for the review and selection of sub-projects and assess all the sub-project applications based on the criteria set out in the Local Development Strategy document;
- Identify and select the strongest sub-projects and define the amount of funding required before submission to the responsible body for approval.
- Perform the monitoring of implementation of the community-led local development strategy and the selected sub-projects to assess their efficiency and benefit for the region.

2. OVERVIEW OF MAIN PROJECT ACTIVITIES

2.1 ELARD’s support in reviewing and updating Local Development Strategies of operational Georgian LAGs in Borjomi, Kazbegi and Lagodekhi.

The project aimed to review and update the Local Development Strategies (LDSs) of the partner LAGs prior to the new sub-grant calls to be arranged during the project. ELARD contributed to this process by reviewing the existing LDSs and providing expert reflections, recommendations and guidelines within ELARD’s LDS review report.

[http://www.elard.eu/organization/elard-projects](http://www.elard.eu/organization/elard-projects)

The guidelines gave three local action groups (LAGs) in Georgia practical tools and suggestions for improving their strategies for the 2016-2020 period. The main aim was to provide feedback to Georgian LAGs and support in developing focused and high quality
Local Development Strategies (LDSs) that have a clear results orientation, are responsive to changing internal and external conditions, and take into account the lessons learnt in EU Member States during the previous and current EU rural development policy implementation period.

The report concluded that all three Local Development Strategies give a wide and comprehensive description of the territory and the main strategic lines chosen by the LAGs and involved stakeholders. Considering the fact that it is the first attempt of both the established LAGs and involved stakeholders in implementing the LEADER method and CLLD approach, Georgian LAGs have proven their motivation and dedication to incorporate the LEADER approach as an effective mechanism in contributing to Georgian rural development.

The three strategies have their individual strengths, which can be used as examples for current and future Georgian LAGs, and all three strategies can be considered a solid basis to start implementing the LEADER approach. As with all the LAGs in Europe, the Georgian LAGs face difficulties in maintaining a focus on the strategic objective and in setting up functional and effective monitoring and evaluation systems. In order to provide possibilities to improve the strategies and provide better coherence with LEADER principles and structural cohesion, this report provided a set of general recommendations for the strategy review process to be conducted as part of the “Strengthening Rural Development Models in Georgia” project as well as observations, suggestions and recommendations related to all three development strategies. The feedback, comments, recommendations and suggestions are based on similar practical experiences faced by other European LAGs.

ELARD’s report was used by partner LAGs during their participatory and bottom-up local process of LDS review and updating. It was up to LAG management and LAG members to finally decide to what extent ELARD’s recommendations and suggestions were necessary and possible to implement. The conclusive position of the project partners was that this kind of combination of external expertise and local knowledge to update Local Development Strategies was successful and effective in preparing for the project’s next step - implementation of LDSs.

GALAG training in Tbilisi, December 2018
2.2. Support for the establishment and operation of a local action group network (GALAG) in Georgia

2.2.1 Preparatory support to establish GALAG

Prior to the actual establishment of GALAG, ELARD prepared an overview and analysis of the LAG network models, and prepared a guideline document to be used by Georgian partners during the preparation process of GALAG establishment.

http://www.elard.eu/organization/elard-projects

The objective of this guideline document was to propose the most suitable network model to establish and operate a network of LAGs (GALAG) in Georgia. The document includes an overview of similar networks in other countries, suggestions for performing the identification of the GALAG members and cooperation activities with other EU LEADER networks, and proposes the structure, organisational format and modes of operations of GALAG.

The establishment of LEADER networks all over Europe has proven in practice that sharing know-how, ideas, best practices and common experiences provide a solid knowledge base for developing each LAG region and for developing the whole country and LEADER system.

There are four main types of activities on which the LEADER networks should focus:

- Operational activities;
- Strategic activities;
- Organisational activities;
- Value-based activities.

A good network needs to reflect on all 4 of those aspects. There should be an operative part of the network, which is able to exchange information, respond to the requests of members/partners and engage in effective communication.

The strategic part of the network should be open for new processes, trendsetting activities and setting up frameworks, declarations and statements, which positively influence the LEADER system.

The organisational part of the network needs to ensure that the technical and organisational requirements are met in order to actively run the network. That means that structures (how many representatives, who is allowed to vote and speak for the network, financial arrangements, etc.) are established and clearly executed.

Additionally, the role of the network is to contribute to the development and maintenance of the LEADER values and its key principles. Even if networks are different in terms of
operative, strategic and organisational activities, they share common values and goals in using networking and communication to make LEADER/CLLD a more effective and successful rural development tool.

The report is based on principles stated in the ENPARD project proposal and partnership agreement between ELARD and Mercy Corps. The following pre-defined aspects are adhered to throughout the report and the GALAG establishment process:

— This network - termed the Georgian Association of LAGs (GALAG) - will be a conduit for information exchange and learning across the country and will act as an advocate for community-led local development with key state and non-state actors.

— The aim is that two members from each LAG (approximately 16 representatives in total) will volunteer to be founding members of GALAG. These members would be supported by a GALAG Coordinator, who would be financed through project funds and based in Tbilisi at the Mercy Corps office. It is felt that there is no requirement for GALAG to have a physical and costly operational structure (salaried staff, office space, transport, etc.) at this initial phase, but rather that it be a fluid structure with members working from their own localities and meeting only for trainings and events.

2.2.2 Capacity development support for GALAG

In parallel with the GALAG establishment process, ELARD and other project partners started to plan and implement GALAG’s capacity development programme. This enabled the partners to use the knowledge and output of the programme during the early operations of GALAG. The capacity development programme involved three practical and participatory training events that were held between July 2018 and June 2019. The content of the trainings were planned according to the pre-defined topics from the project proposal, but they were adapted to the expectations and needs of the project partners and GALAG members. For that purpose, a feedback survey was carried out after the first training module and the results were taken into account during the planning of the next trainings.

The following were the leading principles during the capacity development programme by ELARD:

1. Training methods: about 45-minute presentations with Q&A and participatory leadership methods for group work to build common understanding and trust. The following methods were used: Circle, World Café, Open Space and Appreciative Inquire [http://www.artofhosting.org/home/](http://www.artofhosting.org/home/)

2. The ELARD trainers enriched the training with inspiring examples from across Europe.

3. Participatory and facilitatory practical sessions were held during the trainings in order to prepare strategic elements (vision, mission, strategic objectives) or documents (activity plan, structure, work plan, set-up of the committees) for GALAG. This aimed to support GALAG’s operations and gave GALAG members sustainable knowledge on
how to use the participatory approach in subsequent phases of GALAG’s work after
completion of the project period.

4. Apart from training methods that supported cooperation and networking between
participants, training days were supplemented with a social programme (excursions,
site visits, etc.) to enable informal networking and team building among the GALAG
members.

The first of three training modules “GALAG as a national LAGs Network - its role and
responsibility” was held on 12-14 July 2018 in Batumi. It aimed to kick-off and introduce
the whole training programme to be held by ELARD and to introduce and implement the
main features and suggestions from ELARD’s “Analytical report and expert opinion about
the establishment and operation of local action groups network (GALAG) in Georgia”. The
specific aims of the training were to prepare a vision of GALA, identify common
values and goals, draft a GALAG preliminary action plan with priority areas, and discuss
structural units and the sharing of responsibilities between GALAG members. The three-day
training was prepared and conducted by ELARD’s expert team members Kristiina Tammets,
Stefan Niedermoser, Walter Weider and project coordinator Kadri Tillemann. The training
was attended by representatives of all the 8 LAGs currently operating in Georgia (2-3
representatives from each LAG) and representatives of Mercy Corps, Georgia. The main
practical output of the training was the summarised strategy map with the main planned
activities co-created by ELARD trainers and GALAG members (Annex 1 of the publication).

The second training module “GALAG as cooperation and communication platform”
was held on 14-16 December 2018 in Tbilisi. During the training, ELARD trainers Kristiina
Tammets (Estonia), Marion Eckardt (Sweden), Goran Soster (Slovenia) and Kadri Tillemann (Estonia) introduced different practices and approaches related to the effective cooperation and communication of LEADER networks. As a practical output of the training, GALAG’s communication plan was co-created and the following operational working groups formed within GALAG:

- **Policy design working group** - first task is to start drafting GALAG’s policy paper together with the ELARD team in order to prepare an outline and draft and to bring together a representative(s) to facilitate information exchange between ELARD and GALAG.

- **Financial working group** - to start with a baseline study to address the budgetary issues and draft the budget with allocations from different sources for LAGs and GALAG to be operational for the coming years.

- **Legislative working group** - to work with legislative proposals about the recognition issue.

The third and final training module “GALAG sustainability” was held on 6-8 June in Tskaltubo. The training was attended by approximately 25 participants/GALAG members and carried out by ELARD trainers Kristiina Tammets (Estonia), Marion Eckardt (Sweden), Goran Soster (Slovenia) and Kadri Tillemann (Estonia). The training concentrated on GALAG’s policy work and advocacy (crosscutting with other policies), monitoring and self-evaluation, and the creation of a financial model for sustainable Georgian LAGs and GALAG. The outcomes of the training included an adjusted policy paper (Annex 3 of the publication), a dissemination plan for the GALAG policy paper and a financial sustainability model for GALAG.

### 2.2.3 Operational support for GALAG’s policy work and networking

Operational support provided by ELARD to GALAG and other project partners combined the following elements:

- Ongoing mentoring support by the ELARD expert team for GALAG in parallel with the capacity development programme to ensure the implementation of plans and agreements made during the trainings. This was mainly done by written consultations and online meetings coordinated and arranged by the GALAG coordinator;

- Support and guidance for GALAG during the policy work activities - the main results of the joint efforts of project partners in this field was the successful organisation of the GALAG conference in March 2019 (see details below) and the preparation and submission of GALAG’s 1st policy paper;

- Suggestions and facilitation of the networking activities of GALAG members, such as participation in a number of international networking events as well as initiation of the process of GALAG becoming an associated member of ELARD.
The main results of the joint efforts of ELARD, GALAG and project partners in the field of policy work was the co-organised GALAG conference and the submission of GALAG’s policy paper.

The GALAG conference was held on 26 March in Tbilisi (please see Annex 2 of the publication, full programme of the conference) and it was attended by all relevant rural development stakeholders from Georgian governmental institutions, an EU delegation, international donors and civil society organisations. GALAG introduced the policy paper with its key statements at the conference.

In the policy paper, GALAG (Georgian Association of Local Action Groups) highlights that there is clear evidence of the positive results of LEADER implementation in Georgia. The implementation of local development strategies is creating added value and is comprehensively contributing to rural development in Georgia. LAGs are recognised as local drivers for change and development, and their activities have helped empower people and encouraged innovation in their areas. In 2016-2019, 307 LEADER projects have been implemented in the amount of 3,443,849 euros with more than 300 jobs created in Georgian rural areas.

GALAG is urging the Georgian Parliament and governmental authorities to recognise LEADER methodology as being a relevant and effective tool for rural development in Georgia and it calls for the development of clear communication and well-coordinated dialogue between national authorities and GALAG. The full version of GALAG’s policy paper is available in Annex 3.
ELARD’s role was to compose a conference session designated to showcase the strong support of the EU and its Member States for LEADER/CLLD. To this end, a team of speakers from different EU institutions and LEADER practitioners from different EU Member States and different implementation levels (managing authority, national support unit, LAG) were asked to share their views during the conference.

In addition to the aim of supporting GALAG’s policy work, the process of co-organisation of this kind of high-level international conference in cooperation with GALAG and Georgian LAGs served as a practical advocacy, networking and communication exercise for GALAG.

Special attention during ELARD’s support activities was paid to facilitating GALAG international networking. Networking is one of the key principles of the LEADER approach. Networking within the LAG is a must, but networking with other LAGs and stakeholders on regional, national and international levels is very important. The national network organisation of LAGs is a platform that enables and enhances networking and cooperation between LAGs. The need and necessity for this kind of network organisation have been acknowledged by EU LAGs since the very beginning of LEADER implementation in 1991. Therefore, GALAG representatives were provided with various opportunities to attend international networking events in order to give them the sense that they are part of a broader international movement and that the information gathered at these events could be brought back and shared with LAGs around the country.
One of the platforms for international networking between LEADER stakeholders is the LEADER Inspired Network Community (LINC, www.info-linc.eu)\(^1\) conference. LINC is an annual European LEADER conference, which brings together the European exchange of experience in rural development. It was originally initiated by LAGs and National Network Units for rural development in Austria, Germany, Estonia and Finland, but it has since inspired a wider range of EU Member States to become organisers and participants in the event. 10 conferences have been held to date, and during these years LINC has shown its growing popularity among LAGs, national authorities and other rural development stakeholders as well as its role as an effective and sustainable platform for networking, the exchange of experiences and setting up partnerships for further fruitful cooperation. Usually, there are more than 300 participants from about 20 European countries at the LINC event. During the project period, the Georgian delegation had an opportunity to attend LINC conferences in Finland (2018) and in Estonia (2019). As a result, Georgian LAGs obtained many contacts for further international networking and the first successful cooperation project has already been initiated as a result of these contacts.

The active participation of the Georgian delegation in LINC events gave a strong signal of the importance and relevance of involving non-EU LEADER actors in the European LEADER network. This has resulted in the acknowledgement of LEADER implementation in neighbouring countries in the policy work of ELARD as well as in the initiative to hold a LINC conference in Borjomi, Georgia in 2023.

\(^1\) http://www.info-linc.eu/
In addition to LINC conferences, the GALAG delegation participated in several other international events such as:

- “Future of the Leader Approach 2020+” conference in Bulgaria, on 4-7 June 2018, in which the GALAG coordinator and ENPARD director of the Mercy Corps participated. The conference was co-organised by the Bulgarian LEADER Network, Managing Authority and ELARD.

- ELARD’s conference “Leader Reloaded” in Evora, Portugal² in September 2018. The conference’s plenary acknowledged the vital role of non-EU LAGs (in addition to the Georgian delegation, representatives of Moldovan LAGs and implementing agency participated at the event) and the designated trans-national cooperation session provided additional opportunities for networking with other LAGs from all across Europe;

- In April 2019 the Georgian delegation (including GALAG members) participated in a LEADER conference in Moldova³; the conference was co-organised by ELARD. The participation allowed GALAG representatives to familiarise themselves with the experiences and challenges of LEADER implementation in another EU Eastern Partnership country and to find cooperation partners from Moldova.

International networking led to a co-operation project to tackle forest fires in Borjomi

Based on information and contacts gained during international networking events Borjomi LAG partnered up with Estonian Voluntary Rescue Association. They prepared a project application together that addresses the need to create local firefighting capacities in Borjomi area.

There is a need for equipment and trained personnel to react to fires quickly to avoid major harms to natural and living environment. Their application was successful and the project with the budget of 222 000 euros will be launched in 2019 – during the project Estonian voluntary rescuers will train and capacitate volunteers in Borjomi and necessary equipment (ATV-vehicles, fire detection systems, watchtowers etc.) will be purchased for local use.

The project is funded by Estonian Environmental Investment Center and by Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the funds of development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

¹ https://leaderconference.minhaterra.pt/
² https://leaderconference.minhaterra.pt/
³ https://events.enpardmoldova.md/
3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The project provided a valuable opportunity to pilot an approach in which a national LEADER network is being established and becoming operational with analytical, knowledge-based and participatory support activities co-prepared and provided by a range of international, national and local partners. It provided an opportunity to combine ELARD's international LEADER networking expertise with Georgian local knowledge from project partners and already operational LAGs. One of the results of the project - LAGs with stronger and more advanced networking possibilities, an expanding and organised Georgian LAG network and a nationally and internationally recognised network association (GALAG) - prove that this approach was suitable and successful in Georgia in establishing and supporting the creation of a national LEADER network.

The main lessons learnt and recommendations from the process include the following:

— The approach in which networking and cooperation between LAGs were planned and implemented in a very early stage of LEADER implementation in the country proved to be useful and effective. GALAG establishment, capacity development and first tasks were already planned during the very early stages of ENPARD project implementation in Georgia, shortly after the first three Georgian LAGs became operational. It led to a practice whereby new pilot LAGs that were established during the current project could already join GALAG and benefit from the knowledge exchange with national and international counterparts, as well as contribute to the work of GALAG with their ideas and input;

— Although international expertise during the process of kick-starting the work of GALAG proved to be useful, it is important to maintain the approach by which all the decision making is participatory and adopted to local needs. To this end, ELARD used an approach to introduce different network models to project partners and enabled GALAG members to have the opportunity to use participatory and facilitated training tools to co-create practical inputs for GALAG's operations;

— The Georgian case proved the need to invest financial and human resources into the formal and well-coordinated networking of the LAGs, as well as the possibilities to receive expert support, facilities and platforms to learn from each other and to benefit from the support staff (GALAG coordinator, project team). It also provided opportunities to implement cooperation and networking as one of the key elements of LEADER. As a result, LAGs could receive valuable information for their operations, and the achievements and challenges related to LEADER implementation and rural development in Georgia were disseminated to national and international stakeholders;

— As the linkages established by Georgian LAGs through GALAG with ELARD becoming stronger, it is vitally important to continue this partnership in the future to forge strong connections with EU LAGs and have increased an opportunity to access various funds outside Georgia.
## ANNEXES

### 1. GALAG’s strategy map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VISION</th>
<th>JOINT ACTIONS FOR STRONG VILLAGES AND SUCCESSFUL GEORGIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic priority areas</td>
<td>Capacity building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOALS</td>
<td>1. To increase the capacity of GALAG members and LAGs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. To arise awareness about LEADER, GALAG and LAGs in Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities 2018-2019</td>
<td>• To organize research and work out Google questionnaire to collect figures about LAGs;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To make a mapping of LAGs’ local development strategies and their SWOT analysis;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• To exchange experience about good and bad practices; etc</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To exchange experience about good and bad practices; etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To organize monthly Zoom meetings between all LAGs to exchange information;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To make a mapping of joint project ideas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To prepare to set up GALAG website; etc</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2. Full programme of the “Future of LEADER approach in Georgia” conference

THE 4TH CONFERENCE ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA
FUTURE OF LEADER APPROACH IN GEORGIA

26 March, 2019
Radisson Blu Iveria Hotel
1 Rose Revolution Square, Tbilisi, Georgia

Main topics for the event:
- Georgian political agenda regarding rural development, state of play of local action groups establishment and local development strategies implementation. Future plans for rural development (representative of ministry to talk about rural development policy, LAG representative to talk about added value of LEADER, challenged and support needed);
- GALAG introduction and presentation of GALAG position paper with its main messages (GALAG representative);
- EU political agenda: CAP for the period after 2020 and future directions for rural development and LEADER/CLLD (DG Agri, ENRD);
- LEADER/CLLD: state of play at the moment in EU. Role of bottom up approach and LEADER/CLLD 2020+: proposals, opinions of different players (ELARD, European Committee of Regions, European Economic and Social Committee);
- European Union neighbourhood policy and programmes related to the rural development and LEADER (DG Near);
- Sharing experience: good practices and examples from different countries implementing LEADER: Managing Authority representative, LEADER Network representative, foreign LAG representative.

Participants:
- Officials from different ministries in Georgia, Parliament members, etc.
- Representatives of LAGs in Georgia, local municipality and village leaders;
- Representatives of development aid agencies in Georgia and CAARD platform members;
- Officials from the European Commission, ENRD;
- Representatives of EU consultative bodies: Committee of Regions, European Economic and Social Committee;
- Representatives of European LEADER Association for Rural Development.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>SPEAKERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:30-10:00</td>
<td>Registration, Coffee</td>
<td>George Khanishvili, First Deputy Minister of Environment Protection and Agriculture of Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-10:20</td>
<td>Welcome, opening speeches</td>
<td>Ketevan Khutschishvili, Delegation of the European Union to Georgia</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Irakli Krasrashvili, Country Director Mercy Corps in Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kristiina Tammets, European LEADER Association for Rural Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:20-10:35</td>
<td>Georgian political agenda regarding rural development. Future plans for rural development and LEADER.</td>
<td>George Khanishvili, First Deputy Minister of Environment Protection and Agriculture of Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:35-10:45</td>
<td>History of LEADER implementation in Georgia</td>
<td>Giga Sarukhanishvili, Mercy Corps in Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:45-11:00</td>
<td>LEADER as behavioural change platform for Good Governance and rural development</td>
<td>Salome Bakashvili, People in Need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00-11:10</td>
<td>GALAGs’ positions about LEADER and LAGs role in rural development</td>
<td>Lana Chaduneli, Georgian Association of Local Action Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00-12:30</td>
<td>EU political agenda - rural development and LEADER under the Common Agricultural Policy for the period after 2020.</td>
<td>Karolina Jasinska-Mühleck, European Commission, DG Agri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30-13:15</td>
<td>Sharing experience: good practices and examples from different countries implementing LEADER - advantages, disadvantages and main learning points.</td>
<td>Representatives of Managing Authorities, Rural Development and LEADER Networks from the European Union member states: Taavi Kurvits, Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs, Alistair Prior, Scottish Rural Network Support Unit, Scottish Government Bettina Betzhold, LAG representative from Saxony, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:15-14:15</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td>14:15-14:45</td>
<td>Role of bottom up approach and LEADER/CLLD 2020+: proposals, opinions of different players</td>
<td>Kristiina Tammets, ELARD Roman Haken, European Economic and Social Committee</td>
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<td>Radim Sršen, European Committee of Regions</td>
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<tr>
<td>14:45-15:30</td>
<td>Panel discussion over the future of LEADER approach in EU and in Georgia.</td>
<td>Representatives of Georgian and EU institutions: Karolina Jasinska-Mühleck, Radim Sršen, Roman Haken, George Khanishvili, Lana Chaduneli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:30-16:00</td>
<td>Coffee break</td>
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<tr>
<td>16:00-16:30</td>
<td>European Union neighbourhood policy and programmes related to the rural development and LEADER. Progress of the LEADER approach implementation outside EU</td>
<td>Ketevan Khutschishvili, Delegation of the European Union to Georgia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Representative of the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment of Moldova (to be confirmed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>16:30-17:00</td>
<td>Challenges in LEADER implementation ENPAD I &amp; II</td>
<td>Shorena Sujashvili, Kazbegi LAG</td>
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<td>Nino Tikurishvili, Tetritskaro LAG</td>
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<tr>
<td>17:00-17:15</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>17:15-17:30</td>
<td>Wrap-up of the conference</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

27th March - field visits to conference guests.
3. Full text of GALAG’s 1st policy paper

Final version 13.06.2019

Georgian Association of Local Action Groups seeks effective implementation of LEADER-approach to address Georgian rural development challenges

LEADER, the integrated and bottom-up rural development approach, has had success and gained recognition for its contribution to rural development in the European Union (EU) and countries outside of the EU. LEADER implementation has seen tangible results and has had a positive impact on good local governance, employment, diversification of local economy, social cohesion, involvement of different stakeholder groups, enhancing cooperation and advancing the capability of people. The European Commission has addressed the importance of further strengthening the integrated and innovative nature of the LEADER approach as well as fully utilising the potential of local action groups to stimulate activity in their territories. The importance and effectiveness of LEADER are reflected in various European policy documents; therefore, the positions presented below are in line with the European Commission strategic views stated in the Cork 2.0 Declaration and its action plan, the Tartu Declaration on LEADER/CLLD by the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD), the European Countryside Movement Rural Agenda, the European Rural Manifesto, the analysis of surveys and collected case studies in the field of LEADER/CLLD conducted by ELARD and the European Network for Rural Development in 2016-2018. Beyond this, the following statement is defined as one of the strategic priorities in the Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the “External Policy of Georgia”: Accession to European Union and undertaking the relevant measures are priorities that have no alternative in the external policy of Georgia.

It should be noted that the expansion strategy of the European Union is based on the “Copenhagen Criteria”, one of the most important aspects of which is the required approximation of legal and administrative structures and functions of agricultural and rural development to the European Union regulations and standards.

There is clear evidence in the results of LEADER implementation in Georgia that the implementation of local development strategies is creating added value and is comprehensively contributing to rural development in Georgia. LAGs are recognised as local drivers for change and development, and their activities have helped empower people and encouraged innovation in their areas. In 2016-2019, 307 LEADER projects have been implemented in the amount of EUR 3.443.849 and more than 300 jobs created in Georgian rural territories.

The preparation process for rural development planning in Georgia is ongoing, both on a national (rural development strategy preparation) and EU level. Therefore, GALAG (Georgian
Association of Local Action Groups) is urging the Georgian Parliament and governmental authorities, the European Commission, the Delegation of the European Union for Georgia, development institutions, partners and other local and rural development stakeholders to engage all their efforts in a planning process for rural development policy and to draw attention to the following arguments:

— in their years of operation, from 2015 onwards, Georgian LAGs have proven that they have the ability to coordinate and implement effective, cross-sectoral and democratic rural intervention that strengthens the local economy, diversifies services, contributes to agricultural competitiveness, improves the social and technical infrastructure and tackles environmental challenges. The external evaluation of the first phase of the LEADER implementation process in Georgia (ENPARD I) also stated that the activities of the first LAGs were in accordance with Georgian national needs and effectively combined bottom-up and top-down interventions;

— Georgian LAGs, with support from international implementing agencies, EU institutions and partners, have built a unique multi-layered network that brings together knowledge, experience and stakeholders at grassroots level, along with representatives from the civil sector, the European Union and its neighbours. This is an intangible, yet invaluable asset in supporting Georgian efforts to improve the living quality in rural areas;

— the need to integrate the LEADER approach with national policy-making was recognised in the EU during the early stages of the evolution of the LEADER programme. The ex-post evaluation of LEADER noted that the success of this community initiative should not to be assessed in terms of project impact alone; the institutional and administrative processes and procedures should also be taken into account, as the implementation of the LEADER approach in pilot regions of Georgia has contributed to the establishment of good practice in the area of approximation to European Union rural development programmes, which paves the way for the strengthening of future cooperation. The LEADER impact cannot only be measured in terms of local results. It has also affected the entire system of national and regional rural policy delivery. Furthermore, the external evaluation of the first phase of the LEADER implementation process in Georgia (ENPARD I) recommended the need to institutionalise LAGs at national level within the framework of respective policies.

In light of the above-mentioned arguments, GALAG calls for the consideration and implementation of the following proposals:

— recognition of the LEADER methodology as a relevant and effective tool for rural development in Georgia. GALAG urges the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment to consider the LEADER approach as one of the tools to support the priorities set in the 2020-2027 Georgian Rural Development Strategy document, which will create the administrative and legal basis for cooperation between public institutions and LAGs (with possible retainment of the pilot format in the areas of existing LAGs coverage in 2019-2020). In addition to the rural development policy, it is recommended building linkages with other relevant policies and programmes (social, regional development, etc) in tandem with designing the framework of LEADER implementation in Georgia;
With regard to the aforementioned, we suggest the insertion of the following wording to the 2020-2027 Georgian Rural Development Strategy document at strategy level: “To support rural development based on socio-economic development, poverty reduction and area-based development through the “bottom-up” principle, including the LEADER approach”.

— building clear communication and well-coordinated dialogue between national authorities and GALAG. In order to design a policy that truly addresses local challenges, it is important to increase the engagement of local stakeholders and local action groups in the planning process of rural development policy in Georgia. GALAG brings local level knowledge and issues to the table, which help in finding solutions to specific problems and territories. Furthermore, GALAG in cooperation with ELARD, has over 28 years’ experience of LEADER implementation in the EU and practices outside the EU, which can be harnessed during discussions such as by giving examples from other countries and finding appropriate solutions for Georgia;

The Ministerial Order being prepared to formalise the LEADER approach is being based on the European Union Regulation on Rural Development, the Regulations of the European Parliament and the European Council 1303/2013 and 1305/2013, and it will define the following:

• The key characteristics of the LEADER approach;
• The criteria of the Local Action Group (LAG);
• The criteria of the Local Development Strategy;
• A Department or Unit within the Ministry structure responsible for the implementation of the measures related to LAGs (Managing Authority);

— GALAG appreciates the expertise and support of the European Union and other contributors who have initiated and helped establish the LEADER implementation in Georgia. GALAG urges the European Commission and different donor institutions to recognise the achieved results and clear potential of the LEADER methodology and LAGs as effective and transparent local development hubs in Georgia and to continue their support to assure the sustainability of implementation of this valuable approach. In this respect, local communities strongly rely on the EU, and both the continuity and expansion of the LEADER approach will help avoid disappointment and a loss of trust among local stakeholders;

The Ministry of Environment and Agriculture of Georgia, within its role of overseer (curator) of the Interagency Coordination Council for Georgian Rural Development, shall ensure stable financing for LAGs and will support coordination and cooperation among the GALAG, LAGs and different public institutions involved in the field of rural development.

To achieve this purpose:

— A defined role for the staff who are responsible for the coordination of cooperation with GALAG and LAGs in the relevant competent unit established based on the Ministerial Order;
— A database developed in the Ministry for authorised LAGs, GALAG and Strategies, and for the information to be made accessible to the public;

— Authorisation is given to existing LAGs based on the set criteria and the applications seeking the authorisation. This will enable the Local Action Groups (LAGs) active in Georgia - the instruments for LEADER implementation - to have access to financial support from the relevant European Union Funds for international partnership projects and to achieve the goals set out in the local development strategies in Georgia in specific coverage areas;

— GALAG calls for comprehensive co-operation between all rural and local development institutions and stakeholders to increase knowledge about the LEADER approach among local and national level authorities and institutions. All LEADER stakeholders need to be well trained and introduced to the effectiveness of governance based on the LEADER principles. It is suggested organising training programmes for national and local level actors and to launch national information campaigns aimed at increasing public awareness of the LEADER approach and its opportunities. For that purpose, authorities and institutions are strongly encouraged to cooperate and exchange experiences with their partners and counterparts in the EU and in non-EU countries with LEADER experience and/or interest;

— GALAG supports increasing the existing local knowledge resource and launching the dialogue process regarding local challenges, which will contribute to determining solutions to existing problems in specific territories. By bearing in mind that we acknowledge the importance of sharing and considering the experience of the European Union membership candidate and non-member countries in successful implementation of the LEADER approach as an integral part of rural development, GALAG in cooperation with ELARD will place on the agenda for discussion its 28-year experience in the European Union and the practices of LEADER implementation beyond the borders of the European Union. These are aimed at enriching the dialogue by using relevant examples from other countries and will help establish the format that is most appropriate to Georgian reality;

— development of further bottom-up processes to contribute to decentralisation in Georgia. During their years of operation, LAGs gained valuable first-hand knowledge and experiences related to the potential and challenges of local democracy in contributing to the process of revising the roles of Georgian national, regional and local authorities and bringing decision-making processes closer to local citizens. The LEADER approach is about broad-based participatory decision-making to increase the responsibility of local people for their living and working conditions in rural areas. GALAG urges governmental authorities to speed up the decentralisation processes in rural territories and ensure the broader involvement of local people who are seeking solutions for rural development in Georgia.

It is significant to achieve acknowledgment of the LEADER approach by government structures in accordance with the best practices of the European Union, and the role of
LEADER as an important tool in promoting the decentralisation of the decision-making process in the field of rural development, at both strategic and formal levels. In order to ensure the sustainability of the achieved results, continue the successful implementation of the LEADER approach and join forces for the development of rural Georgia, GALAG sees a clear need for formal recognition by Georgian governmental authorities at central and local level of LAGs and GALAG as stakeholders that develop and implement Georgian rural and local development policies by contributing with their knowledge, experiences and local, national and international networks.

GALAG is an association of Georgian LAGs that was established in 2018 and is currently representing all 8 operational Georgian Local Action Groups. Its main aims are to improve the living quality in Georgian rural areas, transfer experiences and good practices from European Union Member States, encourage the representatives of different sectors to contribute to regional development by implementing the bottom-up approach and support rural development in Georgia using LEADER methodology.