



ELARD

WWW.ELARD.EU

JUNE 2022

Contribution of European rural areas to the European Commission's 8th Cohesion Report





Ruralising European policies

European rural areas take note of the 8th Cohesion Report presented on 9 February 2022 by the European Commission. Given the place of rural areas in Europe and the issues at stake in terms of European cohesion, European rural areas wish to express their position and guidance regarding several important elements of this report.

European rural areas welcome the increased cohesion within the European Union, although significant disparities remain, especially in rural territories. The EU must continue to make economic, social and territorial cohesion a major policy objective, in the light of the growing support for Eurosceptics in many Member States. The benefits brought by the European Union must therefore be highlighted in all policies and measures stemming from the European cohesion policy.

However, ELARD deplore the fact that the report does not mention the context of rural areas to a greater extent, since these areas represent a major challenge for territorial cohesion, without necessarily underrating the challenges of urban areas.

« Rural areas deserve their share of Europe because they are a Europe of territories and the future of rural areas depends on a long-term vision integrated in the European cohesion policy. »

Rural areas account for more than half of the European Union's territory and nearly one third of its population. These areas are characterised by an important geographical, economic or demographic diversity. They face wide range of challenges: diversifying rural economies, energy, access to healthcare, digital facilities, and services to the population. Rural territories play a key role in the European energy, green and economic transition. They have renewable resources, which can be exploited to generate added value at territorial, national and community level. They are also pioneers of the circular economy and short supply chains.

In this context, the ELARD regret the fact that the Commission does not mention issues related to the European rural agenda, i.e. the changeover of rural development support measures from the Common Agricultural Policy to the Cohesion Policy after 2027, and urge the Commission to put this agenda at the top of its political priorities.

Rural development should not be solely limited to the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy. While we must strive to ensure that more and more European funds are channelled to rural areas, we also need to **ruralise all European policies** and thus place rural areas at the very core of the cohesion policy, in particular through a **European Rural Pact** or a **European Rural Agenda**, expressing the commitment of the European Union to the development of its rural territories. It will constitute the political framework and operational guidelines for the future specific policy for rural development, in line with diversity of rural territories and the multi-sector dimension of their economies.

ELARD plead for the recognition of rural territories as major partners in European policies and advocate implementation of a European rural agenda based on two basic principles

Strengthening the integrated territorial development approaches

ELARD welcome the recognition of **the integrated territorial development approach and the strategic objective "Europe closer to its citizens"** and their role to help « *address pressure on democracy by increasing ownership of European policies.* » An appropriate response to the context and challenges of rural territories can be found in the desire to improve the effectiveness of the place-based strategies to ensure cohesion by 2050, and in particular to enhance the use of community-led local development, a method that has been widely adopted through the LEADER programme since 1993. This contribution is even more relevant in this current period of health crisis to face the economic, social and societal impacts of the Covid-19.

The importance of this programme lies well beyond its direct financial impact. Thanks to its intrinsic functioning, innovative projects have emerged in the territories, which are particularly well fitted to support new local initiatives, innovate, experiment, and build partnerships between the public sector and private actors. LEADER-CLLD is more than a funding tool; it is a rural development programme with its own fundamental principles: networking of local actors, bottom-up approach, capitalisation and dissemination of good practices and cooperation. It is one of the main initiatives that since 1993 have provided a democratic structure to the European project and have ensured the presence and visibility of Europe in every municipality and village in Europe.

In the same way, given the emphasis placed by the European Commission in this report on the regional level as the most relevant level for the development and implementation of cohesion policy, ELARD advocate **the recognition of Local Action Groups as essential partners** for rural areas and their active involvement by governments and institutions at all levels in a more transversal way. The significant impact of Local Action Groups goes beyond the added value brought to the projects. The LAGs' added value is best understood in terms of their presence within the territories and the networks. Each rural area is unique and offers its own assets and opportunities to be taken advantage of.

The LAGs are the only link between European and national policies on the one hand and territorial issues on the other. In order to improve the efficiency of multi-level governance, it is also necessary to take into account and promote the participation of rural population in the development of their territories.



Strengthening the accessibility of European policies for rural areas

Rural territories across Europe have the same need to **further simplify this policy in a practical way, especially for LEADER-CLLD projects**. Although this simplification is often stated, it is hampered by competition between different stakeholders and thus cannot be implemented in practice.

In this respect, along with the European regions, ELARD urge the Commission, as well as the Council and the European Parliament as co-legislators, to take a strong lead in simplifying and consolidating the implementation and management procedures as far as possible. Flexibility and simplification are necessary to ensure that the requirements are in line with the amounts committed.

For this reason European rural territories underline that *"the key tenets of a place-based and participatory delivery, such as multi-level governance and partnership principle should be reinforced"*. A mutual trust and benevolence agreement between the European Commission, the Member State, the Managing Authorities, the Local Action Groups and the LEADER-CLLD projects could limit over-regulation and over-protection against the risk of control and could make the access to European funds more fluent. The European rural areas are willing to participate in discussions with the European Commission and the Managing Authorities on concrete and operational proposals concerning this issue.

ELARD also believe that, given the recognition and implementation of integrated territorial approach, the adoption of a single inter-fund regulation for the post-2027 period becomes a key issue in terms of simplification. Numerous regulations hamper the deployment of multifund strategies in the territories and undermine the efficiency of cohesion policy in rural areas with no appropriate administrative and financial engineering.



In addition, ELARD believe that European territorial cooperation should be strengthened. Transnational cooperation is becoming of utmost importance to make our European Union a union of territories, actors and populations. European rural areas therefore urge the European Commission to take all necessary and useful legal and administrative initiatives in order to ensure an efficient territorial cooperation at European level. This approach will help to strengthen the European territorial dimension, and to foster the precious ties between Europe and the rural territories tempted by Eurosceptics.

Proposals:

- **Encourage territorial and inter-fund approaches**, based on fundamental principles of community-led local development and LEADER-CLLD, in order to increase the overall financial support of the European Union for rural development;
- Initiate a **European rural agenda** that meets the needs of rural territories - and takes into account the specific requirements of areas facing natural constraints - through **multifund financing [1] with earmarking of at least 8% for CLLD**. This would also ensure a more consistent interaction with urban areas in designing our common European future;
- Develop a stronger **rural proofing** for all policies and create a permanent **Committee for Rural areas** that will be independent from the European Parliament's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee;
- Implement a **single inter-fund regulation** for the post-2027 period as a key issue in terms of simplification.
- Create opportunities for **urban-rural cooperation** when building projects and mobilising funds;
- Promote a greater use of **local development led by local actors** approach, in particular by supporting the fundamentals and funding of the LEADER-CLLD approach and by giving the Local Action Groups a **role of major partners in European policies**.

This contribution is inspired by the Halmstad Declaration of 2 December 2021 during the "LEADER 30 years Celebration" conference organised by ELARD and by the LEADER European seminar, an event organised by Leader France in the framework of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, held in Ploëuc-L'Hermitage on 7 March 2022.

ELARD is an international non-profit association created to improve the quality of life in rural areas and to maintain their population through sustainable and integrated local development. ELARD brings together Local Action Groups committed to involving all actors of rural development at local level. The European LEADER association represents almost 2200 Local Action Groups and Fisheries Local Action Groups from 26 countries, including non-EU countries that have adopted and are implementing the LEADER-CLLD methodology.

[1] <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/system/files/ged/tartu-declaration-leaderclld.pdf>