



European Leader Association
for Rural Development
Brussels, www.elard.eu

FRENCH
PRESIDENCY
2023-2024



LEADER and CLLD within European policies post 2027

Declaration of Brussels, December 2023

Strengthening LEADER/CLLD post 2027



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Declaration of rural stakeholders at the 2023 European LEADER Congress on LEADER / CLLD

On 18 December 2023 the European Leader Congress was held in Brussels, Belgium. At this conference, the 800 delegates from 38 countries representing about 2600 LEADER Local Action Groups in and beyond Europe, rural networks, representatives of managing authorities, the Committee of the Regions, the European Commission, the European Parliament and of the European Economic and Social Committee met and discussed the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas and rural development policies as regards to the role of LEADER/CLLD (Community-Led Local Development). The following conclusions were developed for the future of LEADER/CLLD.

Rural stakeholders:

- Underline the fundamental role of the 2040 Long-term vision for EU's rural; but regret the absence of mandatory budget lines and better targets and indicators to emphasize the benefits of the bottom-up approach and activating the potential of LEADER in supporting territorial cohesion, green and digital transitions, meeting the demographic changes, creating attractive spaces in harmonious territorial development, providing food security, economic opportunities, goods and services for wider society developing dynamic communities focusing on well-being, advancing gender equality, ensuring better infrastructure and services. It is imperative to make sure that it is adequately financially supported and implemented in a simplified way as outlined in the European Commission's report on the implementation of the Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas and in the existing EU monitoring systems.

Strengthening the role of LEADER-CLLD in European policies.

- Welcome the recognition of the integrated territorial development approach and the strategic objective "Europe closer to its citizens" and its role to help « addressing pressure on democracy by increasing ownership of European policies » as underlined in the European Commission's Cohesion Report and the conclusion of the « Evaluation support study of the costs and benefits of the implementation of LEADER» of the European





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Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development. An appropriate response to the context and challenges of rural territories can be found in the improvement of the effectiveness of place-based strategies to ensure cohesion by 2050, and in enhancing the use of community-led development, a method that has been widely adopted via the LEADER program since 1991.

LEADER is a method, a tool, with which already established stakeholders are familiar. It is not a European fund but a European rural development philosophy with a method, programming tools and fundamental values: experimentation, innovation, networking, participation, cooperation, capitalization, and dissemination of good practices.

LEADER makes visible the benefits of the **European project in local areas**. It brings Europe to every town, every village, and when applied correctly, contributes to reducing **Eurosceptic tendencies**. LEADER is a direct tool that works against the Geography of Discontent, as defined in DG REGIO's publication from 12 June 2023.

- Advocate for the **recognition of Local Action Groups** as essential partners for rural areas and their active involvement in governments and institutions in a more transversal way. The significant impact of Local Action Groups goes beyond the added value brought by the projects. The LAGs' added value is best understood in terms of their presence within the territories and the networks, as people with "boots on the ground". Each rural area is unique and offers its own assets and opportunities to cultivate and develop. The LAGs are a unique link between the European and national policies on one hand and territorial issues on the other. To improve the efficiency of multi-level governance, as well as innovation, resilience and strengths, it is also imperative to consider the real local needs, the vast diversification of European communities, and promote the participation of rural population in the development of their territories by making them owners of their own strategies.

Developing new financial resources for LEADER-CLLD.

- Ask for a reasonable reliable financial resource for rural development by local actors with a multi-sectoral approach under simplified and unanimous European rules and **encourage territorial and inter-fund approaches**, based on fundamental principles of community-led local development and LEADER, to increase the overall financial support of the European Union for rural development. To this purpose, we suggest exploring several possibilities:
 - If the approach chosen is to strengthen **multi-funding**, then it needs to be simplified and made mandatory for all member states.



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- If the approach chosen is to be a **direct EU managed program**, it will need to ensure the rapprochement of European and local levels, the autonomy and visibility of Local Action Groups, and the principle of the **bottom-up approach**.
- If the approach chosen is to be a **new fund dedicated** to local rural development, it will have to be adequately funded, sufficient ring-fencing of at least 10 % and index linked. According to the results of the Commission study, LEADER plays the most important role in achieving the objectives of the LTVRA within the CAP. The bottom-up approach of LEADER/CLLD therefore needs an adequate financial basis and a mandatory contribution of each fund.

A simplified framework for LEADER-CLLD.

- Call for a **simplified framework**, and better **working conditions** and 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. The heavy bureaucracy that comes along with LEADER and CLLD harms the narrative of both LAGs and the EU. All levels, especially national governments, need to take responsibility to simplify – for the end-users – the implementation of CLLD. An administrative system designed specifically for CLLD needs to be put in place with the inclusion of the opinion of the LAG networks. 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 gold plating and absence of coordination due to different administration requirements and thus cannot be implemented in practice.

Starting to think of the future of LEADER-CLLD.

- We urge the European Commission, other European institutions and Member States to engage all their efforts in reviewing the framework for LEADER/CLLD while reforming the ESI Funds for the programming period post 2027.
- We urge the European Commission, other European institutions and Member States to take into consideration the rich and valuable experience of Local Action Groups.





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This contribution is inspired by the Halmstad Declaration of 2 December 2021 established during the "LEADER 30 years Celebration" conference; by the Tartu Declaration of 23 November 2016 established during the "Renewing LEADER/CLLD for 2020+; Celebrating 25 years of LEADER in Europe!" conference organized by ELARD; and by the Sigüenza conference of September 2023, Spain.

ELARD is a European association that gathers 32 national networks, including neighbouring countries of the European Union, which have adopted and implement the LEADER methodology for local development by local actors. These 32 national networks represent 29 states and nearly 2 600 rural territories organised in Local Action Groups.

The association is actively working to make the LEADER approach better known by European decision-makers to guarantee its funding in European rural development policy. It supports community-led local development (through networking of private and public actors, dissemination of good practice, support for innovative actions, European cooperation, etc.) and represents the interests of LEADER Local Action Groups in national governments and European institutions.

