



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

SWEDISH
PRESIDENCY
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Halmstad Declaration

Supporting a viable Europe through local
democracy and participatory approaches in
all rural areas and beyond

On the 1-2 December 2021 the ELARD conference “LEADER 30 years celebration” was held in Halmstad, Sweden. At this conference, the 149 delegates from 22 European countries representing about 2000 LEADER Local Action Groups of Europe, rural networks, managing authorities, Committee of the Regions and the European Commission, met and discussed the Long Term Vision of Rural Areas and the future of LEADER/CLLD. The following conclusions were developed for the future of Europe:



TURNING RURAL DEVELOPMENT INTO ACTION

1. Long Term Vision for Rural Areas

We welcome the strategic and structured initiative for strong, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas all over the European Union. ELARD, national LAG-networks and LAGs look forward to being integrated and included in further steps on European, national and regional level. We look forward to cooperating in the rural pact, but also in other initiatives on different levels, where stakeholders from rural areas should be involved, since ELARD, national LAG-networks and LAGs are the only rural actors with such a vast coverage of organisations. We suggest that EU, national and regional governments revise their budgets and provide sufficient means to make the LTVRA a reality now, because Europe has a window of opportunity in this very moment, in the wake of the pandemic. We therefore support the idea of the French senate to attach a real rural agenda to the vision.

2. Promote streamlining of resources for rural development

ELARD members partly witness the ineffectiveness of the funding available in rural areas. In these cases we see how several institutions, projects and actors are working incoherently with the distribution of too little funding. Promoting the convergence and optimisation of funds between public organisations ensures the common work towards the Long-Term vision on rural areas. This convergence should be a cross-cutting strategic priority in national and regional strategies. It will be essential to guarantee a permanent dialogue between the ministries, regional authorities, municipalities and the Local Action Groups and other actors in order to streamline the rural development of areas.

3. Transparency on guaranteed service as part of the societal contract

We call on our governments and institutions on different levels to ensure that modern solutions are taken into account when designing service packages for their citizens. Furthermore, we suggest governments and institutions to include criteria other than economic profitability when deciding on the access to services for their inhabitants. As citizens of rural Europe, we want to see to what extent we are part of the contract between tax-payer and government, which also include access to service. One solution could be to define a package of guaranteed base service which every citizen can count on. Another can be to develop a transparent decision-making process around service, for all levels, that include criteria like ecological and social sustainability. If the citizens are aware of what they can expect from their government, there will be more room for innovative solutions to fill the gaps.



4. Welfare as part of attractiveness

Rural areas are attractive, but inhabitants need to be able to count on basic welfare. We call on the responsibility of national and regional governments to ensure that all citizens in all geographical areas have a fair opportunity to engage with the welfare system that is there to provide social security for all of us. Citizens of rural areas also need a basic level of wellbeing through support for those in old age, support for the maintenance of children and medical treatment. In order to provide this, our society needs social services such as healthcare facilities, education facilities like schools, vocational training and kindergartens as well as support institutions for elderly and hospitals distributed all over Europe, including in rural areas.

5. Decentralise

In order to promote the decentralization of the offices and personnel of companies whose raw materials originate mostly from the rural environment, such as agri-food, energy, construction or textile companies, among others, we believe that it is crucial that public sector to go first. We therefore suggest national and regional governments to plan for how concrete decentralization of institutions and functions should be implemented, and the EU institutions could also consider this.

6. Change the story

Rural areas are diversified and therefor encompasses different opportunities. Local Development Strategies are the best tool to identify and make recommendations around the opportunities. Some opportunities that many rural areas share are:

- **Enhanced life quality and health:** the closeness to nature and the possibility to foster inhabitant's life quality as well as their physical and psychological health through this closeness, can result in enhanced life quality and enhanced health.
- **Attractive living-spaces:** Housing near to beautiful leisure areas are attractive areas for inhabitants and for possible immigrants from cities or other rural areas. Digital solutions make it possible for more new inhabitants to work from wherever they want and can therefore choose their living-space out of attractiveness rather than out of adjacency to their working location.
- **Resilience:** Smaller societies, where people know and trust each other, are more quickly adapting to new circumstances, which is needed in times of crisis. Space for small scale hobby-farming as complement to the food supply from stores raises the resilience of the people in that area. Short supply chains can enhance resilience even more, since food derives from rural areas. Psychologically sound people are more resilient on a personal basis.



- **Environment and climate:** inhabitants living and working closer to nature and our natural resources are more prone to be aware of the importance of its protection.

We call on all levels, including local rural, to start telling a different story on what strengths and opportunity your area has. Rural areas need a functional and transparent framework of services and welfare from local, regional and national authorities in order to be able to catch the opportunities.

7. Ensure the rights of rural youth and adolescents

The rights of rural children and youth, especially those mentioned in article 3, 12 and 31 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child risk being violated because of failing availability of leisure activities and meeting places for youth, combined with minimal or no public transport. It is therefore paramount to focus on

- higher involvement of rural youth in decision-making processes at all levels,
- flexible transport systems for rural youth and adolescents,
- digital infrastructure for rural youth
- increased access to education for rural youth, focusing more on transferable skills, studentcentred learning and non-formal education in order to achieve a truly equal and universal access to quality learning.

8. Transformative actions for sustainability

are necessary now. All citizens need to be engaged in the transformation to a more sustainable way of life, that should start with and from the citizens themselves. We call on all levels to build on engaged citizens and put the theme of our common future on the agenda on all levels. The framework, however, needs to be put from politicians and overarching institutions. We demand action in constructing these frameworks, and we look forward to being consulted in the process. We call on national and European institutions to create a credible framework to reach the global sustainable goals.

9. The cohesion of Europe

We are concerned that EU-critical voices are being raised around our union. We therefore suggest that all policies and measures deriving from the EU also promote the gains of the EU. Furthermore transnational cooperation and real exchange between rural areas need to be promoted in all European programmes. Apart from that, national and regional level need taking responsibility in bringing Europe closer to its citizens, and all stakeholders need to work together in order to make traditional media start reporting the questions that tax-payers finance through the EU.



10. Strengthen the role of Local Action Groups

Each rural area is different and have different strengths and opportunities that need to be built upon. LAGs and their Local development Strategies aim at building on the local circumstances. LAGs are furthermore the only instrument bringing global, European and national policies to meet the demand of local people and this multilevel governance instrument should therefore be strengthened. We call on all level of authorities to put a framework in place for the support of LAGs, as below.

USING THE OPPORTUNITIES OF LEADER/CLLD

1. LAGs as partners in public policies

After 30 years, we want to highlight that LAGs are working towards a TERRITORIAL and non-sectoral policy. It is time to recognize the LAGs as a management tool far beyond EAFRD-CAP. Governments and institutions at all levels, especially national and regional, should include LAGs in their programming in a more holistic manner. This would be especially meaningful in themes like sustainable development, ageing population, food systems, circular economy, smart villages, to name a few.

2. Promoting the European community of LAGs

Transnational cooperation is more important than ever in order to make our European Union a union of people as well as institutions. LAGs around Europe already enjoy a European family that should be cherished and developed. It is important that national and regional authorities give LAGs a functional framework, that make it possible for LAGs to launch Transnational Cooperation projects at any time in the programming-cycle in order to find transnational partners around Europe. NRNs and ENRD should support IRL-meetings with LAGs from different parts of Europe.

3. LAGs as partners in public policies

We urge LAGs, networks and authorities to start talking about, promoting and showcasing good examples that go far beyond unique projects. The impact of Local Action Groups cannot be shown through showcasing single projects. It is the added value of LAGs in their geographical area that needs to be evaluated and showcased. Activation of rural people taking responsibility for the development of their local area is key to a multilevel governance and only one aspect of the added value.



4. Rural youth

LAGs, networks and authorities need to make space for and involve youth, and include them in the daily work. For this it is necessary for the authorities to make the framework possible, f.e. enabling umbrella projects for youth.

5. Transformative actions on the ground

are crucial to meet the climate change and environmental challenges we face today. Many LAGs are already contributing to the sustainable development goals and are ready to take more action. It is urgent for governments and institutions at all levels to include LAGs as partners in this important task.

6. Funding for a stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous Europe

We still believe that at least 8% for CLLD from EARDF, ERDF, ESF and EMFF are necessary for LAGs to have real impact, as we have stated since the Tartu declaration in 2016 [1]. This also enables urban LAGs to be active in shaping our common, European future. We demand that future programmes and projects – at all levels - that are aiming at rural citizens should be considered to be distributed via LAGs.

7. The 7 principles

It is a prerequisite for the added value of LEADER that all national and regional governments respect the seven principles in all phase, meaning in preparing the strategies, in implementing and in evaluating. We want to put extra focus for the bottom-up principle in the creation of the LAGs and their Local Development strategies.

8. The LEADER-brand

We suggest the whole support system to start working with the LEADER/CLLD-brand together. After 30 years of working for participatory development in rural areas and beyond, LAGs should be better known to the public. Keeping the LEADER-logotype from the European Union is a good idea, since this shows how many years and in how many places LEADER has been present in rural Europe until now. LAGs, LEADER-networks, National Rural Networks and Managing Authorities need to work together in order to make the method known. NRN and MA would be very helpful to showcase good examples of LAG-work. LAGs and LEADER-networks should be consulted in this work.

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



9. Simplification

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 customers – the implementation of CLLD. An administrative system designed especially for CLLD needs to be put in place with the inclusion of the opinion of the LAG-networks. Any gold plating is to be avoided.

10. Timing

We ask our national governments start the concrete simplification process now, in order to have it in place well before start of the next programming period. With regard to LEADER 2023-2027, we are calling for full operability of the LAGs for the 1st of January of 2023, from the authorities at all levels. This means that all the Local Development Strategies should be approved and the corresponding agreements with the LAGs should be signed in order for the LAGs to start operating 1.1.2023.



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The conclusions derived from panels and debates, and has been consulted with participants of the conference and all 29 ELARD members networks around Europe between 6-17.12.2021, after the conference.

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