

# Engaging Youth in LEADER and Rural Development

Only 9% of LAG council members are under 30, highlighting a need for greater youth representation within LEADER to ensure its longevity. Addressing this, the European Court of Auditors has underscored that young people are underrepresented in rural development initiatives. This issue was central at the recent Young LEADER Forum in Finland, where 200 participants under 30 discussed the importance of youth inclusion in LEADER. ELARD actively supports this goal, emphasizing that youth voices are essential in shaping policies that address diverse population needs, not only in agriculture. Young people bring fresh ideas and perspectives, and intergenerational dialogue is critical for sharing experiences and insights.

Surveys also reveal that strong local governance is vital for democratic rural development. However, young people in rural areas face distinct challenges: limited support for innovation, restricted decision-making roles, and limited access to higher education, public transportation, cultural activities, employment, and housing. The lack of affordable housing, in particular, drives young people toward cities where they settle and start families, further contributing to rural depopulation. The increasing trend of remote work has also intensified demand in rural housing markets, making affordable housing solutions even more urgent.

Communication is another challenge, as many young people remain unaware of available rural support programs. Enhancing communication about LEADER and other resources is thus a core objective to ensure young people in rural areas know what support is accessible. Youth engagement is a key element of LEADER's bottom-up approach, helping to strengthen local communities and inspire sustainable rural development.

In Estonia, for instance, efforts to develop rural housing and markets have faced challenges due to businesses' reluctance to establish a presence in rural areas. To make rural life attractive to young people, targeted incentives and programs are needed. However, government interventions in the housing market can also push prices up, making it harder for young people to stay. As more young people pursue higher education, the demand for skilled jobs—predominantly found in cities—further pulls them away from rural communities.

Engaging young people in rural areas may be easier than it appears, as many are interested in participating if the right opportunities and supports are in place. By addressing these challenges, LEADER can better attract and retain young people, ensuring the sustainability and vibrancy of rural areas.

At European LEADER Congress