



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

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PRESS RELEASE

Exploring new avenues: LEADER's Role in a renewed and more coherent rural vision for Europe

Brussels, 06 March 2025 - This week, ELARD engaged in high-level discussions on the future of European policies and rural development, meeting with Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms Raffaele Fitto and Director of the Policy Unit of DG Regio, Peter Berkowitz. These conversations opened new perspectives on how rural development could be better integrated across EU policies—including but not limited to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy.

As the EU reviews its Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and reflects on the future of Cohesion Policy, the challenge ahead is not just about securing funding for rural areas but about ensuring that rural development is recognised as a truly cross-cutting priority across all EU policies. LEADER, with its bottom-up, participatory approach, has been embedded in CAP discussions in the last programming periods, but the time may have come to position it again as a broader territorial tool that bridges multiple EU policy areas.

A more coherent approach to rural development

One of the key takeaways from our discussions was the need for greater coherence in how rural areas are supported at the EU level. For the first time, the reform of Cohesion Policy is being guided alongside CAP, the blue economy, and European Territorial Cooperation. Could this be an opportunity to rethink how rural development is structured within the EU?

At ELARD, we have traditionally focused our advocacy towards agricultural policies, ensuring that LEADER remains a strong pillar of CAP. However, we recognise that rural development extends far beyond agriculture—it is about economic diversification, social cohesion, youth retention, and climate adaptation. The EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) calls for an integrated approach, but navigating the complexity of multiple funds remains a challenge for many Local Action Groups (LAGs).

Bridging policies: LEADER as a cross-cutting solution

Europe's rural areas face pressing challenges:

- Urban-rural imbalances with depopulated villages and overpopulated cities,
- Security concerns in rural border regions,
- The need for new ways to engage citizens in shaping their territories,
- A just climate transition that leverages rural areas as key actors in Europe's future.

LEADER has proven its effectiveness in fostering community-led solutions, but its impact is often limited by funding silos. The next MFF could be an opportunity to explore a more integrated approach,





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where LAGs can access a wider range of EU funding beyond LEADER—such as Horizon Europe, LIFE, and Cohesion Policy programmes—while maintaining their autonomy and local leadership.

A Moment for strategic thinking

These discussions mark an important moment of reflection for ELARD and its members. As the future of Cohesion Policy and the MFF take shape, we must ask:

- How can we ensure that rural development is no longer fragmented across separate policy silos?
- What role should LEADER and LAGs play in a more coherent, cross-sectoral approach to rural policy?
- How can we make the case that rural areas are not just beneficiaries of policy, but essential actors in shaping Europe's future?

This is not about advocating for a shift of LEADER into Cohesion Policy, but about exploring how LEADER can be better embedded across multiple EU policies to fully contribute to Europe's territorial development.

We will continue to bring these reflections into the European policy debate, working with stakeholders across CAP, Cohesion, and beyond, to build a more integrated vision for rural areas.

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The LEADER approach

LEADER (Liaison Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy) is a European rural development programme. Created in 1991 as a complement to the first pillar of the CAP in order to support the transformation and diversification of rural areas, it now is a cross-cutting axis of its second pillar. The LEADER programme, with a minimum budget of 5% from the EAFRD in every Member State supports innovative projects that are part of a local strategy for the development of rural areas, developed and supported by a Local Action Group (LAG). These groups bring together public actors (ex. elected representatives of local authorities) and private actors (ex. companies, cooperatives, or associations). It allows local actors to define priorities and actions at their level (bottom-up approach), rather than having ready-made measures imposed on them.

ELARD

ELARD is a European association that represents nearly 2,600 Local Action Groups (LAGs) from 30 countries, including countries in the European Union's neighbourhood, which have adopted and implement the LEADER methodology for local development by local actors.

We are actively working to make the LEADER approach better known among European decision-makers and to showcase it as the solution it can become to the many challenges rural areas face. We support actor-led local development and represent the interests of LAGs to national governments and European institutions.

Since 1 January 2025, ELARD has been chaired by the Polish network of Local Action Groups, Polska Sieć LGD.

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