



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

FRENCH
PRESIDENCY
2023-2024



EXPLORING MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN LEADER-CLLD IMPLEMENTATION

For the 2014-2020 programming period

Summary

This report presents insights into the management structures and processes of the LEADER-CLLD approach during the 2014-2020 programming period, based on feedback from Local Action Groups (LAGs) across Europe

Introduction

This report is based on responses collected from representatives of regional or national federations of Local Action Groups (LAGs). The data provided was not sourced from official ministry representatives but rather from those actively engaged in the implementation of LEADER-CLLD programmes at the grass-roots level. A total of 44 respondents participated in the survey, representing 44 different ways of implementing LEADER, out of more than 60 ways. The survey was conducted online throughout the summer of 2024 (June-August). Additionally, some information was complemented through interviews with these representatives to enrich the data and gain deeper insights.

It is important to note that the advantage of gathering input from LAG representatives is the ability to capture a real-time perspective from the ground, reflecting how rules, structures, and processes are perceived and experienced by those directly involved in the operational delivery of LEADER. This provides a unique viewpoint into the functioning of the programme, beyond what official frameworks might suggest. If Managing Authorities (MAs) find discrepancies between this report and official documents, it may indicate gaps in communication or misalignment between MAs and LAGs. In such cases, it is possible that the information provided by MAs has not been adequately transmitted or clarified to those working directly on the ground.

This report does not aim to be a policy document but rather a starting point for discussions, encouraging countries and regions to engage in conversations about the diverse implementation of LEADER-CLLD across Europe. By presenting how the programme is managed and perceived in different contexts, we hope to foster a deeper understanding and inspire cross-country dialogue that acknowledges and addresses the fundamental differences in LEADER-CLLD implementation across various member states.

For any question regarding the study please contact elard@elard.eu

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A. Managing Authorities and LAGs

This part aims to give insights into the management of the LEADER approach across various European countries, focusing on the structure, size, and operational dynamics of the MAs responsible for its implementation. Indeed, the LEADER approach requires tailored management structures that vary significantly from country to country. We synthesize here key findings based on the data collected in our survey, highlighting similarities, differences, and unique challenges faced by MAs in the 2014-2020(-2) programming period.

1. MA structure

The management structure of LEADER varies across the surveyed: 28 respondents represent regions where the approach is implemented by a regional/federal MA, and 14 where MAs are national.

Only three of the representatives of regionalised approaches answering the questionnaire have answered that their regional MA **does not** receive instructions from their national MAs. The rest of regionalised respondents added that:

Italy - Basilicata	The regional managing authority refers both to national and European level
Poland	All main documents, instructions, interpretations come from the ministry level. LAGs must operate based on European and national law and adhere to the guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture - the guidelines are common for the entire country
Spain	NSP is nationalised, even though regions decide how to implement it. Their rules must be approved at national level. The Spanish Agricultural Guarantee Fund (FEGA) creates guidelines and there is a NSP (PEPAC) monitoring committee. Some consultations/clarifications were coordinated at national level like calls for strategies, selection of strategies and indicators.
The Netherlands	NSP was made on national level as well as the selection procedure and criteria of LDS'
France	There is a national Strategic plan, but details of application are up to each region. However, the paying agency is national and has its own set of rules that it transmits to regions. This has an impact on project instruction.

The size of MA teams is an important factor influencing the effectiveness of LEADER's implementation; The countries surveyed display a range of team sizes at both the national and regional levels. Notably, in some countries, despite a regionalised approach, there is still a significant team presence at the national level, and in some cases, nationalised countries also maintain regional teams.

Most countries with a nationalised approach (e.g., Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland) have established national-level teams that are responsible for managing the LEADER programme across the entire country. These teams typically consist of:

- 3-5 people in countries like Croatia, Estonia, and Hungary.
- Larger teams in Denmark and Ireland, where there are more than 10 people or 5-10 people, respectively, handling the national responsibilities.

Interestingly, in some countries where the LEADER approach is regionalised, there are still national-level MA teams that oversee or support the implementation. Bulgaria, for example, maintains a regionalised approach, with regional MAs being the primary implementers, but the national MA team still plays a significant oversight role. The national team in such cases typically has 3-5 people, ensuring consistency across regions. In the Netherlands for example, the national MA acts as an overall acting MA, but most decisions are delegated to regional MAs.

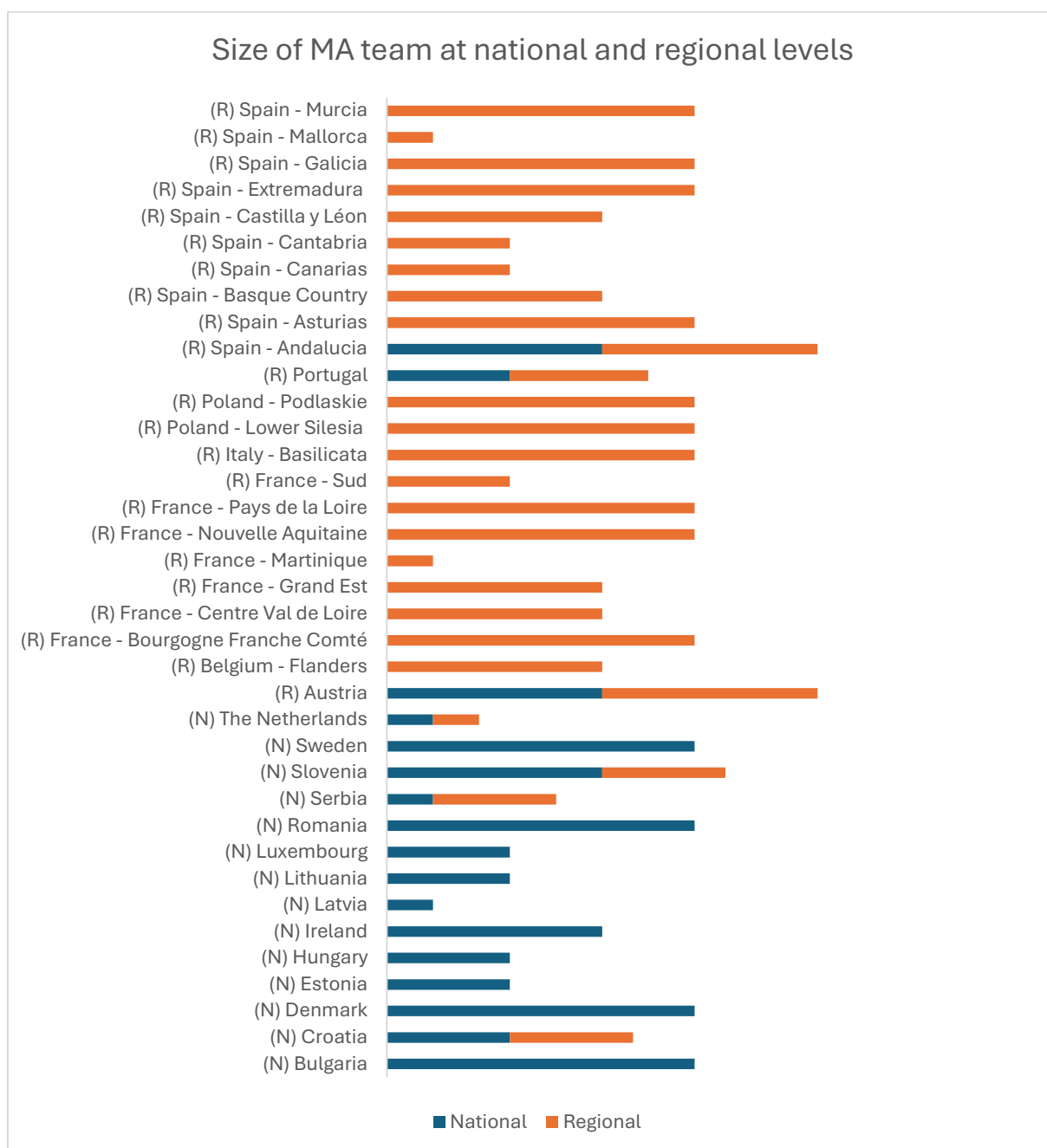


Figure 1 - Size of MA team at national and regional levels.



One of the challenges that comes back often is the high turnover of staff within the MA – this was raised by Sweden and a couple of French regions for example. This means that LAG staff are constantly dealing with new personnel that may lack experience to ensure a smooth implementation of the programme. This lack of continuity in staffing may result in delays, inconsistent decision-making, and an increased

administrative burden for LAGs and beneficiaries. The issue of staff retention was a recurrent one looking at MA but also at LAG staff, as we will see later on.

Even where approach is regionalised with an overarching national MA, approaches to oversee and implement the programme can vary quite considerably. This is the case of Spain for example, which demonstrates a range of team structures, with noticeable variations in resources and staffing across regions:

- Andalusia faces a staff shortage.
- Basque Country has a more robust team, with a service manager, 6 technicians, and 2 administrative staff, suggesting a more balanced approach to staffing.
- Murcia follows a hierarchical structure with a General Director, Deputy Director General, Head of Service, and several officials.

Likewise, France showcases a wide range of team structures, from small teams (Sud) to extensive ones (Pays de la Loire). Regions with larger teams may benefit from specialised roles, which could enhance efficiency, but smaller teams must ensure that they are not overburdened:

- Region Sud has a small but focused team with 1 coordinator and 3 instructors, likely enough for a region with moderate programme demands.
- Pays de la Loire has a much larger structure, including 1 department manager, 2 heads of division, 1 public procurement specialist, 3 supervisors, and 16 instructors across 5 departments.
- Nouvelle Aquitaine has a well-distributed team with 1 instructor for every 3 LAGs and 3 strategic facilitation mission heads, showing a structured approach that balances both operational and strategic needs.
- Centre-Val de Loire maintains 1 LEADER instructor per department, while other staff work partly on LEADER-related tasks.
- Bourgogne Franche Comté has a smaller, more targeted team, including 2 project managers, 2 coordinators, and 1 head of department, suggesting that they may rely on streamlined processes to manage the programme.
- Martinique is currently facing a temporary situation where the deputy to the territorial strategy department handles the LEADER programme on an interim basis. The lack of a dedicated LEADER manager may affect the consistency and focus of programme management.

3. Involvement of LAGs in problem-solving

The extent to which LAGs are involved in problem-solving varies significantly across countries. Indeed, the degree of their involvement in resolving issues with MAs can range from limited consultation to frequent collaboration, depending on the country/region and management structure.

Frequent involvement

In some countries, LAGs play a key role in the problem-solving process, contributing directly to decisions made by MAs. For example: Estonia and Denmark are prime examples where LAGs are often involved in resolving problems. In these countries, there is a strong partnership between LAGs and the MAs. In Estonia, regular online meetings are held between LAGs and MAs, ensuring continuous dialogue and facilitating a collaborative approach to addressing issues.

Occasional Involvement

In other countries, LAGs are involved, but their role is more occasional or situational, such as Croatia or Ireland. This reflects a more intermittent engagement between the MAs and LAGs, where LAGs are consulted when specific issues arise but are not systematically part of the ongoing management process.

- Croatia has seen some improvements in communication between LAGs and MAs in the 2021-2027 programming period, with MAs beginning to "listen more" to LAG feedback. However, this involvement is still not as frequent or structured as in other countries.
- In Ireland, LAGs often play a consultative role when issues directly impact their ability to implement local strategies, but the interaction may depend on the nature of the problem at hand.

Limited or no involvement

Conversely, in some countries, the role of LAGs in problem-solving is quite limited, or they are not involved at all. Hungary is an example where LAGs report not being involved in resolving problems.

4. Communication between MAs and LAGs

Effective communication between MAs and LAGs is critical for the successful implementation of the LEADER approach. The nature and frequency of communication can significantly influence the efficiency of problem resolution, the clarity of procedures, and the overall working relationship between the two entities. The methods of communication vary across countries, ranging from structured, frequent interactions to more ad-hoc or occasional engagement.

Regular and structured communication

In some countries, communication between MAs and LAGs is regular and structured, involving scheduled meetings and clear communication channels: Denmark and Estonia exemplify best practices in structured communication.

In Estonia, the use of regular meetings helps maintain a consistent dialogue between the MA and LAGs, fostering strong working relationships and ensuring that issues are addressed promptly. The reliance on digital tools for communication (such as online meetings) also makes it easier for MAs to keep LAGs updated on key policy changes and procedures.

Similarly, Denmark engages in frequent online meetings, which contribute to maintaining close cooperation and enabling real-time feedback.

Ad-hoc or Infrequent communication

In contrast, some countries adopt a more ad-hoc communication style, where interaction between MAs and LAGs occurs only when issues arise:

- Hungary follows an ad-hoc approach, where communication happens on a case-by-case basis, typically when a problem escalates or requires urgent resolution. In-person meetings are organised when specific problems arise, but there is no consistent schedule for interaction.
- Croatia also exhibits a more informal communication style, primarily relying on direct personal communication between the MA and LAGs. Without regular updates or meetings, some LAGs sometimes feel out of the loop on important policy or procedural changes.

B.LAG structure

While unified under common EU guidelines, LAG implementation varies significantly across member states. We examine here the similarities and differences in how LAGs are structured and operate and identify shared practices and distinct national adaptations.

While LAGs across Europe share foundational principles, their implementation demonstrates substantial heterogeneity. Differences in population thresholds, staffing, financial mechanisms, and legal support point to the adaptability of the LEADER approach to diverse national contexts.

1. Legal Structures and Public Representation

Across Europe, most LAGs adopt the legal form of associations (non-governmental). In countries like France however, it is reported that most LAGs are structured within a public institution (“A National/regional park entity, a “PETR”, a territorial institution for rural development), and about 2/3 of Irish LAGs report being tied to their local authorities as well.

When it comes to public representation within LAGs, although EU regulations have a history of advising that maximum 49% of LAG members come from the public sector, MAs on the ground have perceived the rule otherwise, as per the answers we received on graph on the next page.

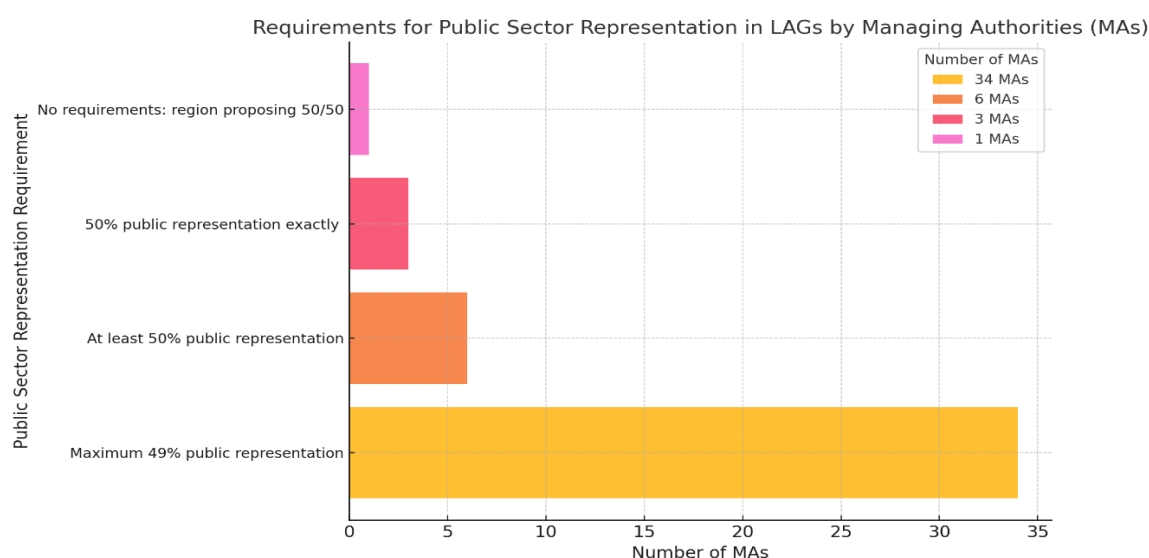


Figure 2 - Requirements for public sector representation.

2. Population Coverage

The population sizes covered by LAGs demonstrates significant variability. Countries like Lithuania, or regions like Galicia have a minimum number of inhabitants set under 10 000 inhabitants whereas the minimum number of inhabitants in Flanders is between 100 001 and 150 000 already.

The maximum population range also varies, with Asturias capping it below 25 000 and countries like Sweden or regions like the Basque Country to more than 150 000.

3. Staffing and Resources

Most LAGs operate with small teams, typically employing one to five full-time equivalents (FTEs).

Staff number	N° of answers
One person, part-time	1
One person, full-time	6
2 people	15
3 to 5 people	20
5 to 10 people	2

When it comes to funding of FTEs, 7 respondents reported they were always funded by the EAFRD (4 regions from France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Bulgaria), whereas 5 reported they were never funded by the EAFRD (Luxembourg, Mallorca, Basilicata, Canarias and Navarra).

Composition of LAGs

We have asked respondents to detail which roles were most generally awarded within LAGs in their region/country. While we found a common base which includes LAG managers, LAG president and board, some regions/countries have chosen to add in extra components, as can be seen in the table on the next page.

Element	Occurrences (out of 44)	More details
LAG Manager	44	
President	40	<i>Did not select" president": Estonia, Latvia, Ireland, Mazovia (PL)</i>
Board	39	<i>Did not select" board": Portugal, Bulgaria, Canarias, Hungary, Latvia</i>
Project evaluation committee	18	
Financial Manager	16	
Economic partners	13	
Thematic committees	12	
Censoring body	4	Podlaskie (PL), Swietokrzyskie (PL), Romania, Pomeranian (PL)
Auditing committee/s	4	Sweden, Mallorca, Canarias, Serbia
Project communicator	1	Lithuania
Selection committee	1	Slovakia

Figure 3 – Table 1: LAG composition.

LAG manager age

The most common age group for LAG managers is 35 to 55 years old, which indicates most mid-career professionals in these roles.

However, four respondents indicated that most LAG managers in their regions were between 25 and 35 years old (four French regions). This could point to potential issues such as:

- High turnover rates in areas with younger or inexperienced managers.
- Insufficient professional recognition or compensation, leading to a lack of long-term retention of qualified individuals.

Four regions reported a mean age above 55 years old when it comes to LAG managers (Basilicata, IT, Navarra, SP, Latvia and Ireland).

While this could prompt us to conclude the importance that is given to the role of LAG managers in each region/country, this should also open the conversation on the profile a LAG manager should have, how to retain and attract them, and what tools should be given them to allow success in their mission.

Working within the LAG

Remuneration of board members is:

- Authorised: 7 respondents. For regions like Podlaskie (Poland), it is common practice to have all board members remunerated for the time and knowledge invested in project evaluation. Some countries offer to pay at least the LAG president.
- Prohibited: 11 respondents
- Not proposed: 21 respondents

In countries like Latvia, Board members are not paid, however evaluation committee members are.

Volunteer engagement is an important resource in LAGs. While half of respondents reported not encouraging or proposing the participation of LAG members in LAG activities outside the regular board meetings and committees, others have fully engaged LAG members outside of these responsibilities, such as:

- Participating into thematic networks, working groups or events,
- Taking part to convivial activities and networking events like field visits
- Facilitating and participating in other projects for the development of the LAG area
- Participating into transnational cooperation projects
- Representing the LAG in regional, national or international events.

Within those, most are not remunerated but travel costs are compensated.

Average work of committee members

Core work (per year per person)	Additional work (per year per person)
Less than 5 days: 10	Less than 3 days: 11
Between 5 and 10 days: 16	Between 3 and 5 days: 13
Between 10 and 15 days: 2	More than 5 days: 6
More than 15 days: 3	
Cannot quantify 13	Cannot quantify 14

Figure 4 - Table 2: average work of committee members

4. Simplified Cost Options

Half of respondents indicated using SCOs. Among them, the most common are:

- **Standardised percentages for specific costs:**
 - o Indirect costs: Often set at 15% of eligible labour or salary costs.
 - o Direct costs: A common approach is applying 40% of staff costs to administrative expenses.
 - o Travel expenses: Some apply a flat percentage, e.g., 10% of salary costs.

- **Lump sums**
 - Estonia: All LEADER grants are settled based on a lump-sum approval process.
 - Poland: Lump-sum settlements are tied to meeting milestones annually.
 - Spain: Preparatory support under EDLP 2023-2027 has used lump sums for the first time.
- **Flat-rate systems**
 - Spain: 5% of direct personnel costs are allocated to indirect costs.
 - Hungary: Flat-rate costs are widely applied to administrative expenses.
- **Other:** Countries like Latvia use methodologies that do not require reporting certain indirect costs to the Paying Authority, simplifying administration.

It is worth noting that in some cases, such as Bulgaria, SCOs are formally included in regulations, but their application leads to increased bureaucracy, as full documentation is still required for all expenses.

5. Differences noted for the 2021-2027 programming period

Several countries have introduced modifications to their LAG frameworks to align with the 2021-2027 programming period. Bulgaria, for instance, has restructured its LAG selection process, while Croatia mandates the inclusion of young people in governance roles. Estonia, although maintaining its LAG network, has further integrated SCOs to enhance financial management.

C. Management circuits

We've asked respondents to describe the overall management circuit of how a project ends up being sponsored by LEADER. We could identify following sequence as the basis for implementation:

1. **Initial Contact and Application Process:**
 - Applicants initiate contact LAGs for guidance. This phase includes informal consultations and formal calls for proposals. *This phase only happened for about half of respondents*
 - Applications are primarily submitted online.
2. **Evaluation and Decision-Making:**
 - After application submission, the LAGs conduct preliminary evaluations. Depending on the country, MAs may review these decisions for final approval.
 - This step often includes checks for alignment with local development strategies and budgetary considerations.
 - In most countries there is then a time for project beneficiaries'/LAG to provide further documents to the PA/MA.
3. **Contracting and Implementation:**
 - Contracts are drawn up following approval, detailing the terms for funding and project execution.
 - Implementation includes regular reporting and compliance checks to ensure projects adhere to agreed standards.
4. **Payment and Finalisation:**
 - Beneficiaries submit payment requests post-implementation milestones. In some cases, advance payments are provided to ease cash flow.
 - The timeframes for processing payment requests vary significantly, with some countries reporting delays due to bureaucratic inefficiencies (read more about this below)

The analysis of the process in each region reveals significant differences when it comes to digitalisation, to the role of LAGs and LAG staff in supporting the project “file”/aid, conditions for payment and general effectiveness.

Digitalisation of Processes:

- Some countries rely heavily on online tools for application submissions, evaluations, and payments (e.g., Estonia).
- Others still depend on manual processes – and those can be put in parallel with slower systems

Role of LAGs

In several regions, LAGs are central to the evaluation and selection of projects, ensuring alignment with local development strategies. More than one third of respondents mentioned the preponderous role of the LAG staff in filling in the various requests for aid and payment because of the complexity of documents. Some have further mentioned that beneficiary should officially be those that fill in forms but that they all requested the help of LAGs to do so. Only in about 1 third of cases the LAG has no input whatsoever in the beneficiaries' applications.

However, the extent of LAG authority and involvement varies, with some relying more on MAs for final approvals.

Payment Systems:

- Advance payments are rare but exist in specific cases to support cash flow for beneficiaries. Interim payments are similarly limited.
- Timeframes for processing payments range from less than a month in efficient systems to over six months in slower ones, highlighting inconsistencies. See next table for more details.

Project timeline and procedure

- The effectiveness of circuits varies from "effective" to "not effective," often depending on procedural complexity and administrative capacity. Countries like Estonia demonstrate exemplary efficiency through streamlined, digitalised processes whereas other regions face significant bottlenecks due to outdated procedures or insufficient administrative support.
- Centralised systems tend to face more significant delays than decentralised systems, where regional authorities or LAGs share responsibilities.
- Many systems struggle with inefficiencies such as slow reviews, approval processes, and lack of standardisation.
- Complex bureaucratic requirements often deter potential applicants and extend project timelines.
- Checking for completeness and regulatory appropriateness only can be done in some regions like Canarias by all stakeholders (MA, PA and LAG).
 - o 6 respondents report a double check by the LAG and Managing Authority
 - o 5 respondents report a double check by the LAG and Paying Authority
 - o 20 respondents report a single check by the LAG
 - o 11 respondents report a single check by MA

The countries and regions that rate the effectiveness of their processes the highest include those that have effectively streamlined their management circuits through digitalisation and simplification. For example, Estonia is one of the countries with an effective system. Its success is attributed to the integration of online tools for the submission and evaluation of applications, as well as payment requests. This digital approach significantly reduces administrative burdens and ensures faster processing times. Estonia's system also demonstrates a clear structure, allowing for better coordination between LAGs and MAs. The minimal delays and higher transparency in decision-making processes contribute to its high rating.

On the other hand, countries such as Croatia, Denmark or most French regions rate their processes as the least effective. The challenges stem from cumbersome administrative procedures, which include excessive layers of review and approval. In Croatia, for instance, the Payment Agency's slow controls are a primary bottleneck, causing extensive delays in the processing of applications and payments. Similarly, Denmark faces issues with an overly complex process that deters many potential applicants. These inefficiencies are exacerbated by a lack of standardisation and limited use of digital tools, which further slows the overall process and reduces stakeholder satisfaction. Both countries highlight the need for significant reforms, including procedural simplifications and greater autonomy for regional or local entities, to improve their ratings.

The following table puts into parallel some aspects of the management circuit, its overall effectiveness and the final time that is needed from the start of a project to its final payment.

Country/Region	Regulatory check by	Reported effectiveness (by respondent)	Builds application	Administrative project documentation is made...	Average time between the submission of the aid application and the final payment of the project
Austria	MA	Moderately effective	Beneficiary and LAG	Electronically	Between 6 months and one year
Belgium - Flanders	LAG and MA	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 6 months and one year
Bulgaria	LAG and PA	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 1 and 2 years
Croatia	LAG	Not effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years old
Denmark	MA	Not effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 6 months and one year
Estonia	LAG and PA	Effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 1 and 2 years
France - Bourgogne Franche Comté	LAG and MA	Not effective	The LAG	In hard copies, originals are needed	More than two years
France - Centre Val de Loire	LAG	Effective	Beneficiary and LAG	In hard copies, originals are needed	Between 1 and 2 years
France - Grand Est	LAG	Not effective	Beneficiary and LAG	In hard copies, originals are needed	Between 1 and 2 years
France - Martinique	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
France - Nouvelle Aquitaine	LAG and MA	Effective	Beneficiary and LAG	Paper first, then switched to electronic with COVID	Between 1 and 2 years
France - Pays de la Loire	LAG	Effective	Beneficiary and LAG	Both in hard copies and electronical files	More than two years
France - Sud	LAG	Effective	Beneficiary and LAG	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Hungary	LAG and PA		Grant writer	Electronically	Between 1 and 2 years
Ireland	LAG and MA	Moderately effective	The LAG	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Italy - Basilicata	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Latvia	LAG and PA	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 1 and 2 years
Lithuania	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 1 and 2 years

Luxembourg	MA	Effective	The beneficiary	In hard copies, originals are needed	Between 3 and 6 months
Poland - Lower Silesia	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Poland - Podlaskie	MA		The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	More than two years
Poland - Pomera-nian	MA	Not effective	The beneficiary	In hard copies, originals are needed	More than two years
Poland - Swie-tokrzyskie	LAG and MA	Not effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 1 and 2 years
Poland- Mazovia area	MA	Effective	Beneficiary and LAG	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 6 months and one year
Portugal - new	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	More than two years
Romania	LAG and MA	Not effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Serbia	MA	Moderately effective	LAG manager or president	In hard copies, originals are needed	Between 3 and 6 months
Slovakia	LAG and PA	Not effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	More than two years
Slovenia	MA	Moderately effective	The LAG	Electronically	Between 1 and 2 years
Spain - Andalucia	MA	Not effective	The LAG	Both in hard copies and electronical files	More than two years
Spain - Asturias	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 6 months and one year
Spain - Basque Country	The LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 1 and 2 years
Spain - Canarias	All	Not effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 6 months and one year
Spain - Cantabria	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 6 months and one year
Spain - Castilla la Mancha	LAG	Effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Spain - Castilla y León	MA	Effective	Beneficiary and LAG	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Spain - Navarra	LAG	Effective	The LAG	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Spain - Extrema-dura	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years

Spain - Galicia	MA	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	Between 1 and 2 years
Spain - Mallorca	MA	Not effective	The beneficiary	Both in hard copies and electronical files	More than two years
Spain - Murcia	LAG	Not effective	The beneficiary	Depends on LAGs	More than two years
Sweden	LAG	Moderately effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	Between 3 and 6 months
The Netherlands	LAG	Not effective	The beneficiary	Electronically	More than two years

Figure 5 - Table 3: rated effectiveness of project management processes

Countries with the Most Efficient Systems

Countries like Estonia and Luxembourg stand out as having the most efficient management systems. Estonia, for example and as stated before, has effectively integrated digital tools for regulatory checks and documentation, involving both the LAG and the Payment Agency. The process, from submission to the final payment, takes between one and two years. In Luxembourg, where the MA handles regulatory checks, the system is highly streamlined, with an average processing time of three to six months and fully electronic project documentation. These countries benefit from minimal bureaucratic hurdles and clear procedural frameworks.

Countries with moderate effectiveness

Countries such as Lithuania, Ireland, and Spain (e.g., Galicia and Asturias) demonstrate moderate effectiveness. These systems often involve both the LAG and the MA or Payment Agency in regulatory checks. While processes are functional, they are occasionally slowed by hybrid documentation practices (both hard copies and electronic files) or less digitalised procedures. Processing times typically range from six months to two years, reflecting room for improvement in administrative efficiency and coordination.

Countries with the least efficient systems

Croatia, Denmark, and Slovakia are among the countries with the least efficient systems. These countries face challenges such as excessive reliance on hard-copy documentation, insufficient digital integration, and overly complex administrative layers and approval systems. For instance, Slovakia relies on electronic documentation but reports significant delays, with project processing times extending beyond two years. Similarly, Croatia's dual-format documentation system and burdensome procedural requirements lead to inefficiencies, extending the average processing period to over two years.

Efficient systems correlate strongly with the use of electronic documentation. Countries with fully digital processes, such as Luxembourg and Estonia, report higher effectiveness and shorter processing times. Conversely, those relying on hard-copy documentation, such as some regions in France and Croatia, face significant delays.

D. Funding aspects

Like many other implementation aspects of the LEADER approach, MAs can choose the level of funding of projects if they wish to do so.

While this is discussed heavily in some countries, this approach ensures MAs and their instructors a maximum number of projects to be funded among their LAGs and gives a specific meaning to LEADER aid.

Among our 44 respondents, some have set minimum levels to request LEADER aid. Indeed:

- For one respondent, a project beneficiary must request a LEADER aid equivalent to 5 000 € minimum.
- For six of them, the minimum must be between 3 000 and 5 000 €
- For another six, the minimum is set between 5 000 € and 10 000 €
- For 20 respondents, it is not up to the MA but to the LAG to define a minimum.
- For the rest, there is no minimum set to request LEADER aid.

When it comes to maximum amounts, the same principle holds true.

- Max: 100 000 €: 1 respondent
- Max 200 000 €: 5 respondents

- Maximum somewhere between 80 000 € and 200 000 €: 6 respondents
- Max between 20 000 and 40 000 €: 1 respondent
- Defined by the LAG: 22 respondents.
- Some have requirement per beneficiary, whereby for example there is a set limit for private beneficiaries (120 000 € in Swietokrzyskie, Poland).
- No maximum: 6 respondents

Regions and countries that authorise leasing options within projects: Canarias, Basque Country and Murcia (Spain), Martinique and Nouvelle-Aquitaine (France), Estonia, Bulgaria, Basilicata (Italy), Austria, the Netherlands, Podlaskie (Poland) and Sweden.

Overall, on the rules established by MAs, our respondents may feel at times that un-necessary rules are being added that could perhaps be reconsidered.

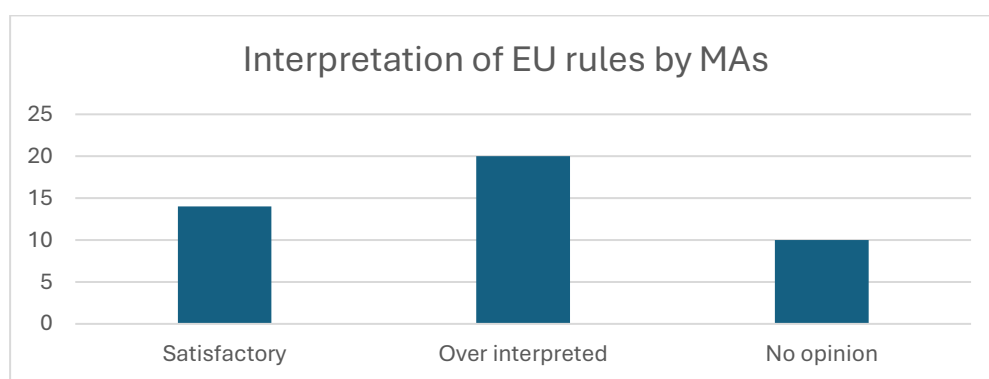


Figure 6 - Interpretation of EU rules by MAs.

On multi-funding

Out of the 12 respondents where multi-funding is set, the efficiency of implementation is rated as follows by respondents.

The difficulties of the region that responded negatively have to do with the complexity of EAFRD-dedicated instruction and non-EAFRD-dedicated instruction.

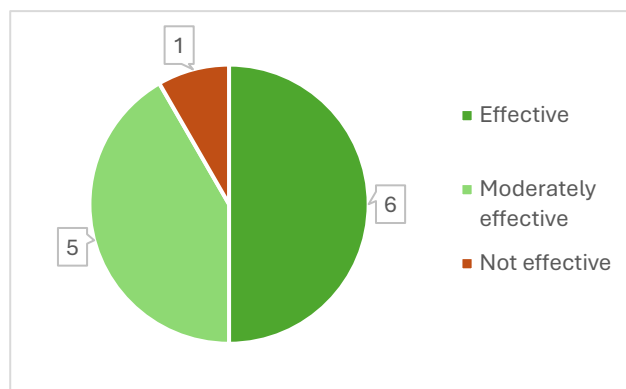


Figure 7 – Rated effectiveness of multi-funding

On co-funding

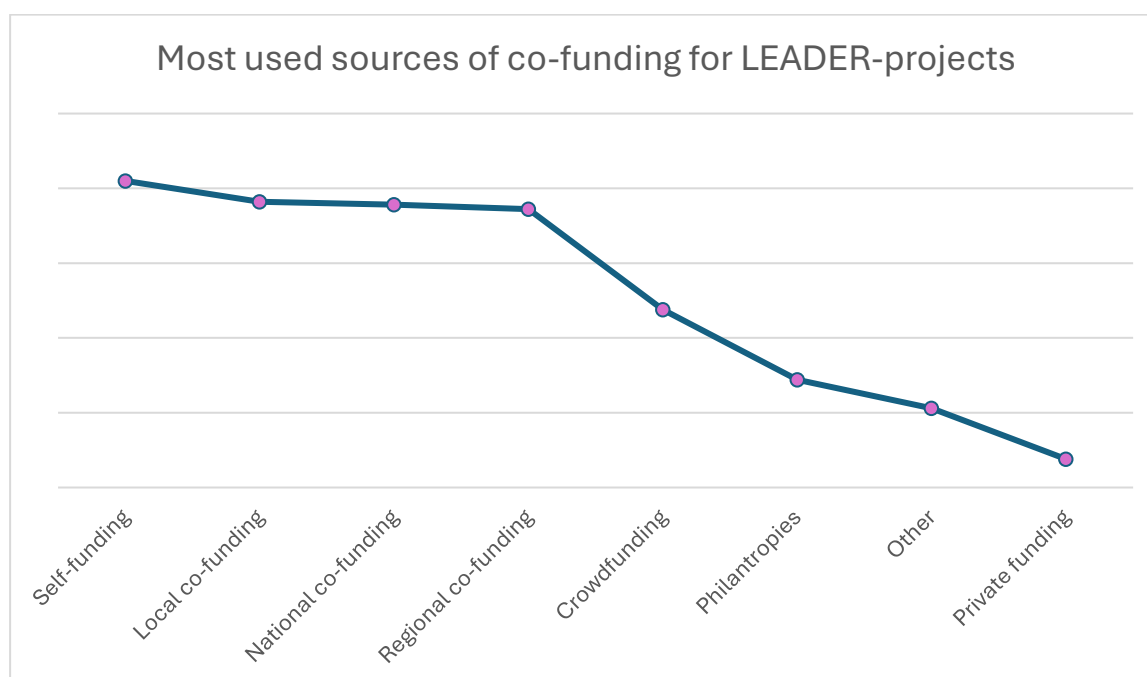


Figure 8 - Sources of co-funding.

Some key insights on co-funding include:

- For one region, Swietokrzyskie (Poland), national co-funding is the least used source of funding and philanthropic funding is the second most used source of funding (after self-funding).
- For one region, Flanders (Belgium), regional co-funding is the least used source of funding.
- Crowdfunding is the second most used source of funding in: Slovenia, Estonia, Podlaskie (Poland)
- Philanthropic funding is the third most used of funding in Flanders after self and local co-funding.

Whereas LAG staff is trained to advise on project funding, EU or local available, depends on and changes drastically between regions. 23 respondents reported that only some LAGs took the time to advise on co-funding outside of LEADER, but 12 confirmed that most LAGs did so. When it comes to training on funding available, the answers vary once again, see graph below.

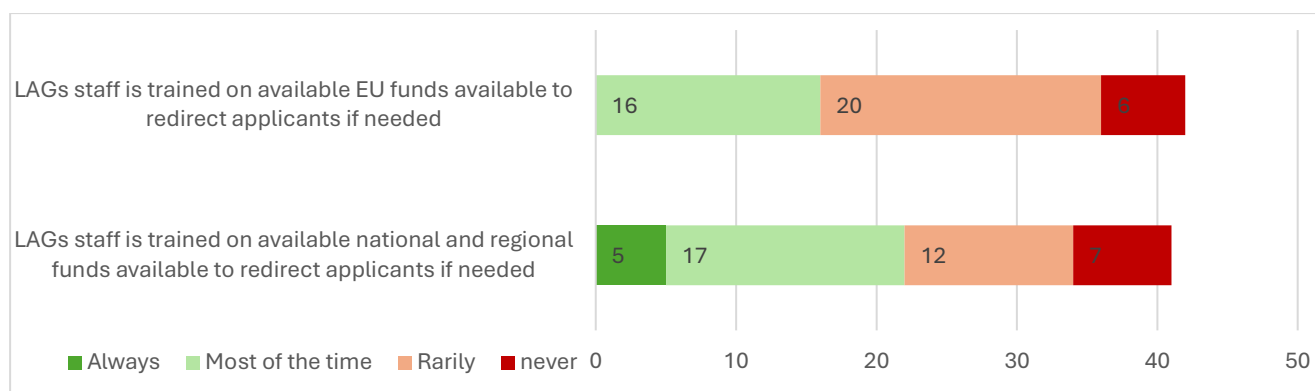


Figure 9 - LAG training on co-funding.

E. Final considerations

To summarise the feedback collected on the implementation of the LEADER/CLLD approach during the 2014-2020 programming period by our various stakeholders, we have asked them to highlight key success factors, and recurring challenges, to offer a comprehensive overview for refining future programming.

Key Success Factors

1. **Efficient Processes and Systems:** many regions highlighted the importance of electronic document management systems, which facilitated swift decision-making and ensured transparency. For example, Estonia reported success due to clear rules and an efficient electronic platform.
2. **Strong civil society:** in Denmark, the tradition of an engaged and empowered civil society was noted as a critical driver of success. This societal structure allowed for stronger collaboration between stakeholders.
3. **Regional adaptation:** regions with tailored approaches to local needs, such as Austria, performed well due to decentralised decision-making and regionalised strategies.
4. **Supportive frameworks:** where national and regional authorities provided clear guidance and resources, the implementation was smoother and more effective.

Main challenges

1. **Procurement and administrative burdens:**
 - Many respondents identified restrictive procurement rules as a significant challenge. These rules were often more cumbersome than expected, creating delays and additional costs for beneficiaries.
2. **Delays in approval:**
 - Lengthy approval processes for projects were reported, particularly in Bulgaria and other regions where bureaucratic procedures hindered timely implementation.
3. **Communication and Support:**
 - Several regions noted gaps in communication and a lack of sufficient support from MAs, leading to confusion and delays in project execution.

This report serves as a starting point for dialogue, providing insights into the diverse ways the LEADER-CLLD approach has been implemented across Europe during the 2014-2020 programming period. By reflecting on the experiences and perceptions of LAGs, it highlights both shared successes and unique challenges, encouraging a deeper understanding of this multifaceted programme.

Rather than offering definitive policy recommendations, the findings aim to stimulate discussions among stakeholders, foster connections, and inspire mutual learning, at the start of this new programming period and during the conversations that will shape the upcoming ones. We hope it prompts all stakeholders involved in LEADER-CLLD to explore further how these practices are adapted and experienced in different regions, to ask critical questions, and to seek out collaboration opportunities.



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