



European Leader Association
for Rural Development
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PRESS RELEASE

ELARD welcomes recognition of rural target but calls for clear framework to ensure real territorial impact

Rural communities must not be left behind as EU shifts to a more flexible, nationalised funding structure

Brussels, 10 February 2026

We welcome the recognition of rural areas in the future EU budget architecture and the proposed introduction of a dedicated rural spending target. [In a recent letter addressed to us](#), European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reaffirmed the importance of rural communities and acknowledged the value of LEADER- CLLD as a mandatory instrument in the future policy framework.

We consider this recognition a positive and long-awaited political signal demonstrating that rural voices are being heard at European level. However, the rural spending target risks remaining largely symbolic unless it is accompanied by a clear strategic framework and robust implementation safeguards.

A rural target must deliver territorial development, not accounting exercises

While the proposed rural spending target represents an important step forward, as currently framed, it could be fulfilled through sectoral measures merely labelled as “rural” without genuinely addressing rural development challenges.

If everything can be partially tagged as rural, nothing is strategically rural. The rural target must ensure meaningful territorial development, not become a box-ticking exercise.

LEADER-CLLD must form the backbone of the rural target

Today, we call on the European Commission to explicitly recognise LEADER-CLLD as the core delivery mechanism of the rural target within the forthcoming National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs). LEADER-CLLD is the only European territorial instrument that fully combines place-based development with a bottom-up governance model, actively engaging civil society and local partnerships. In doing so, it directly contributes to the Commission’s priority of *protecting democracy and upholding European values* at local level. While other territorial instruments may finance similar types of projects, LEADER’s defining strength lies in its community-led approach and local decision-making. LEADER-CLLD can complement and, where appropriate, substitute other territorial tools, but no other instrument can replace LEADER-CLLD in delivering genuine rural democracy and locally driven development. For this reason, LEADER-CLLD should not be treated as a minimum compliance requirement, but as the strategic backbone that gives real substance and meaning to the rural target.





Prevent misuse of rural tagging

Large sectoral interventions, such as transport, energy, or employment programmes, could be partially tagged as rural without demonstrating genuine rural development impact.

To avoid this, we recommend that NRPP guidance should:

- Apply stricter conditions to sectoral measures partially assigned to rural spending
- Require Member States to clearly distinguish between investments merely located in rural areas and interventions specifically designed to address rural challenges
- Ensure transparent justification of pro-rata rural allocations

Ensuring strategic ambition and local leadership

Merely including LEADER-CLLD in national plans will not be sufficient. NRPPs must clearly demonstrate how LEADER-CLLD functions as the primary territorial instrument for delivering the rural target, addressing specific rural development challenges through local leadership and participatory governance. While Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) play an important role in EU cohesion policy, for example, they are predominantly oriented towards urban and functional urban areas and cannot be considered equivalent tools for achieving rural development objectives. We therefore underline that investments implemented under ITI should not be tagged as contributing to the rural target. ITI and LEADER-CLLD may operate in parallel and be complementary, but only LEADER-CLLD provides the governance model, territorial focus and civic engagement necessary to ensure that rural spending genuinely serves rural communities.

Programming LEADER-CLLD at a purely symbolic or technical level would undermine the effectiveness of the rural target, even if formal compliance is achieved.

Protecting LEADER-CLLD from budgetary volatility

Given the long-term nature of local development, we also call for safeguards protecting LEADER-CLLD funding from reprogramming risks and excessive flexibility mechanisms. Concretely, we recommend:

- Ring-fenced LEADER-CLLD allocations within NRPPs
- Avoiding postponement of LEADER-CLLD implementation to mid-term reviews
- Recognising local development as a structural investment that requires continuity and stability

The recognition of rural areas in EU spending is a major opportunity. Now we must ensure that the rural target is equipped with the right tools, governance mechanisms and strategic vision to truly transform rural territories.

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The LEADER-CLLD 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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