



LEADER/CLLD explained

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The LEADER approach

This briefing explains the origins of the LEADER approach, its key characteristics (the 'seven features' of LEADER) and the transition from LEADER to Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). The section includes links to selected LEADER II period archive materials which explain these features as originally conceived.

The acronym and the method

The LEADER approach was introduced in response to the failure of traditional, top-down policies to address problems faced by many rural areas in Europe. The acronym 'LEADER' derives from the French phrase "*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*" which means, 'Links between activities for the development of rural economy'. The idea was to engage the energy and resources of people and local organisations as development actors rather than beneficiaries, empowering them to contribute to the future development of their rural areas by forming area based Local Action Group (LAG) partnerships between the public, private and civil sectors. When first proposed in 1990 by a group of officials at the European Commission, this LEADER concept of connecting and involving local people was quite new.

These Local Action Groups are the main tool for the application of the LEADER approach to area development directly involving local representatives in the development and delivery of local strategies, decision-making and resource allocation. The added value of this approach is associated with local empowerment through local strategy development, delivery and resource allocation.

Brief history

LEADER was first introduced as a Community Initiative, i.e. a special financial instrument of the EU structural policy aimed at finding new solutions to specific problems affecting the whole EU. In its experimental phase between 1991-1993, LEADER involved 217 areas in designated disadvantaged rural regions. This focus on disadvantage also applied to LEADER II between 1994-1999 although the number of LAGs increased to ca. 900. The encouraging results led to the applicability of the method being expanded under LEADER+ (2000 – 2006) to cover all types of rural areas. The approach was 'mainstreamed' in its fourth programming period (2007-2013) as an integral part of the EU's rural development policy, covering 2416 rural territories across all the Member States. It became a mandatory component of all Rural Development Programmes, with a minimum budget allocation (5% in EU-15 and 2.5% in EU-12, i.e. new Member States excluding Croatia who joined in 2013). In 2007 the method was also extended thematically to fisheries policy with over 300 Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) being developed in 21 Member States.

For the 2014-2020 funding period, the applicability of the LEADER approach was further extended as Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) in rural, fisheries and urban areas. CLLD may be applied under the EAFRD (as LEADER), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and, where Member State programming permits, LAGs may now prepare and deliver integrated strategies using multiple funds.

As LEADER has developed so too have the mechanisms to support the approach; formal networking structures through National Rural Networks and the European Network for Rural Development

provide technical support and other networking services for LAGs. [ELARD](#), the European LEADER Association for Rural Development, is an international cooperation forum of LEADER areas.

- [The LEADER Approach: A Basic Guide](#) (2006)

The seven features of LEADER

The LEADER approach or method is based on seven specific features and is dependent on **all of these being present and employed together**. These seven features define LEADER as a methodology and separate it from being simply a funding programme.

- [The principles of LEADER video \(2012\)](#)

1. Bottom-up approach

The bottom-up approach is at the heart of LEADER. LEADER conceives that local people are the best experts to drive the development of their territory. This bottom-up approach means that the local community and local players can help define a development pathway for their area consistent with their needs, expectations and plans. Doing this through a collective approach with delegated decision making enables them to take charge of their own area's future. They make decisions about the local strategy and the selection of the priorities to be pursued. Active participation is encouraged at every stage throughout the process; during LAG and strategy development, implementation, evaluation and review. The involvement of local actors should be fair and transparent including the population at large, economic, civic and social interest groups and representative public and private institutions.

This bottom-up approach is enshrined in the EU regulations with provisions for animation and for decision making ensuring that no one interest group can have a majority.

- [The Bottom-Up Approach](#)

2. Area-based approach

LEADER and Community Led Local Development is based on a different way of doing things, linking the three elements of a local area, partnership and development strategy within a single approach. The area forms the basis for the development of the local partnership and strategy, creating a positive vision for what could be backed up by an active alliance of local stakeholders. Under the 'Area-based approach' the programme funding targets the priorities of the area as a whole, not specific projects or groups of projects (thus it is distinct from a 'project-based approach').

The area normally involves a small, homogenous, socially and functionally cohesive territory, often characterised by common traditions, a local identity, a sense of belonging or common needs and expectations. Having such an area focus enables the local partnership to work together to identify and address local strengths, challenges and opportunities, mobilising the area's endogenous potential and resources.

The area chosen must have sufficient coherence and critical mass in terms of human, financial and economic resources to support a viable local development strategy.

The area must have clearly defined geographic borders, the LEADER principle is that these don't have to follow the administrative borders (perhaps rather following functional ones).

Areas must meet the LEADER population criteria (between 10,000 and 150,000 in most cases, as set out in the Common Provisions Regulation EU No 1303/2013) and may also be subject to further Member State specific criteria. The borders of the area may be revised as the strategy and partnership develops depending on the development priorities and who is involved.

- [Area-Based Approach](#)

3. The local partnership

The local partnerships for area development work through a specific and structured governance mechanism – in LEADER this is referred to as the Local Action Group (LAG). Involvement in the partnership means that the people who were previously the passive ‘beneficiaries’ of a policy become active partners and drivers of their area’s development; this is a defining characteristic of Community-Led Local Development.

It is important to note that no two partnerships are the same in their origin or development and that no partnership is born perfectly formed. Partnerships must fit their area and the realities of their local context recognising that it takes time, effort and commitment to build the necessary trust and working relationships. It is normal for the membership of the partnership to evolve as the strategy and work of the LAG develops.

However, there are some essential principles enshrined in the EU Regulations. A LAG should comprise partners from public, private and civil society; it should be well-balanced and broadly representative of local interests and the different socio-economic sectors in the area. At the decision-making level no one sector can represent more than 49% of the membership of the local partnership (Common Provisions Regulation EU No 1303/2013). The LAG's legal form may vary from country to country, but it is often a non-profit, registered organisation. Regardless of their legal form LAGs may nominate a suitable partner to act as their formal accountable body.

- [The Partnership Approach](#)

4. An integrated and multi-sectoral strategy

The Common Provisions Regulation (EU No 1303/2013) specifies that CLLD be carried out through integrated and multi-sectoral area based local development strategies. This has been a feature of successive generations of LEADER distinguishing the approach from traditional top-down sectoral agricultural policies. As the acronym LEADER suggests it aims to build the ‘links between the rural economy and development actions’. Partnerships and their Local Development Strategies (LDS) therefore aim to capitalise on the links between local sectors to exploit the potential multiplier effects.

In doing so they explore and address the needs and opportunities of the area in an integrated way to achieve the desired common goals. The actions and projects contained in local strategies should therefore be linked and coordinated as a coherent whole. Integrated does not mean all-encompassing however, strategies should not try to tackle everything at once or give everything the same weight, some things lie out with local scope to influence or deliver. In their integrated LDS LAGs should make

choices and focus on those objectives and actions that add value to support which already exists and have the greatest chances of contributing to the changes they want to achieve.

- [An Integrated Multi Sectoral Approach](#)
- [LEADER Local Development Strategies Guidance](#)
- [Better Local Development Strategies: Focus Group 4](#)

5. Networking

Networking lies right at the heart of what LEADER is and how it works. The LAG is a network of local partners which through its strategy and activities promotes links between local actors and others in the development chain. The benefits of networking in LEADER extend well beyond this local horizon; local, national and international networks have become ever more important linking rural people, places and actions. With the advent of CLLD wider networks involving links with non-rural areas can bring new possibilities. Networking brings those involved together in disseminating and sharing knowledge, their experience, innovations, ideas and information, developing peer support, overcoming isolation and building capacity. Networking plays an important role in stimulating and supporting cooperation activity.

National Rural Networks (NRNs) are established in all the Member States through the Rural Development Programmes. Although they target a wider range of rural stakeholders, their remit specifically includes support for LAGs; some involve LAG subgroups. The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) acts at the European level, directly helping both the NRNs and the LAGs and includes a LEADER / CLLD sub-group.

The European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) is an international non-profit making membership organisation and cooperation forum. ELARD membership includes a large number of LAGs and many of the voluntary national and regional LEADER groupings.

- [Networking and Cooperation Between Areas](#)

6. Innovation

The quest for innovation remains one of the most exciting, ground-breaking and yet challenging parts of the LEADER approach. Seeking out and fostering new and innovative solutions to local problems or to take advantage of opportunities has been a core part of LEADER from its outset. Innovation applies to what is done, the types of activity supported, the products or services developed etc. but importantly it also applies to how things are done. In fact, in the beginning the LEADER approach itself was the main innovation.

Each LAG should aim to bring new elements and solutions to the development of its territory. This applies in its strategy, its delivery and animation structures and processes and in its decision making and project selection. Of course, not every innovative idea will succeed; there will always have to be careful project assessment but a permissible level of risk must be factored into LAG decisions. By creating the right conditions and carefully cultivating new and fresh ideas LAGs can produce substantial and sustained changes and benefits for their territories, the real added value which LEADER is designed to achieve.

- [Innovation](#)

- [LEADER Innovation Resources](#)

7. Cooperation

Inter-territorial and international cooperation adds a wider dimension to local development in rural areas. Co-operation goes further than networking by involving local people and Local Action Groups in working with others to undertake a joint project. This can involve other LEADER groups or with a similarly formed group in another region, Member State, under a different European Structural and Investment Fund (ESI), or even in a non EU country.

Of course, cooperation is not an end in itself, there should be a clear purpose and benefit in working with others. Cooperation with other regions can be an excellent source of innovation and knowledge transfer for local people. LEADER cooperation allows rural areas to address and take advantage of their diversity introducing new perspectives and insights from other areas, importing and exporting successful approaches and good practices.

Although the benefits of cooperation can be considerable, so too can be the implementation challenges. It is therefore important to plan carefully, choose the right topics and the right partners and take advantage of the support offered through National Rural Networks and the ENRD.

- [Networking and Cooperation Between Areas](#)
- [LEADER Cooperation Resources](#)

LEADER Renewed

Does LEADER really need to be renewed or re-energised? Why is it important that we all continue to ask ourselves that question?

During the 2007 – 2013 RDP period concerns emerged that the LEADER approach was being compromised by mainstreaming. The strong focus which emerged for LEADER on the defined measures under the Rural Development Programme limited the LAGs possibilities to implement integrated and innovative projects. Elements of what made LEADER so different were being constrained or lost. There were particular constraints on innovation and small-scale interventions, both key aspects of LEADER's added value.

Many experienced LAGs found these changes difficult to manage and demanding of time and resources, some found it difficult to adapt their experience; the large proportion of new LAGs had no previous experience to compare. The economic crisis from 2008 and subsequent austerity policies may have made people more risk averse, match funding harder to secure and involvement more difficult to justify.

LEADER as an approach is adaptable, it is dynamic, a process seeking constant improvement, it is designed to deal with challenges. By refreshing and reinforcing the approach, looking forward at making the method work for change LEADER can tackle these challenges, optimise the bottom-up involvement and those things which help deliver the added value. This won't happen of its own accord, if we want LEADER to be stronger we have to work at it, just being a LAG and going through the motions isn't enough. Managing Authorities cannot just rely on LAGs alone; they too need to help enable this renewal.

If LEADER is to play the catalytic role that many identify as its core strength then clearly those involved need to consider how it engages and works with the other actors. LAGs therefore need to ask themselves questions, do the maintenance checks, take stock of their situation, analyse where they are, identify the issues, the possible solutions and plan. Whilst most of the actions suggested here are for LAGs, Managing Authorities also need to be prepared to listen and review how they contribute to the process. A planned approach is essential, it won't just happen.

Here are some key points or issues you may wish to consider in looking at your LEADER approach and how it can be re-energised or renewed.

The LAG lifecycle

A LAG is a dynamic partnership and all partnerships have their own life cycle. In LEADER the partnership not only evolves over time in how it functions but also in relation to the tasks at different stages in the programme. Thinking about how to plan for and support these changes will help ensure that the LAG remains involved and committed. The long established ['Tuckman'](#) - 'Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing'- partnership development model is worth considering here.

New LAG or refreshed LAG

That continuity between programming periods is highly important has come to be regarded as a truism but in looking at the LAG as an entity perhaps this should be challenged? No LAG is guaranteed continuity as a LEADER LAG, in looking ahead why not look at the opportunity to refresh or renew the LAG? How does the LAG optimise the essential local experience, knowledge and analytical insight its members bring? An influx of new blood or a change of focus may provide vital new energy and momentum, a more representative and inclusive LAG will not only involve new people but may open new opportunities, bring new resources, ideas and innovations and by strengthening local connections may encourage others to become involved.

Renewing or reinforcing the application of the principles

What does this mean in practice? Put simply this means looking at the seven features of the LEADER approach and the way in which the LAG is implementing them. Conduct a review, what is each feature meant to achieve, is the approach being implemented as was intended? What is the added value you are seeking to achieve through LEADER? Are you using all the features? How are you implementing them? In the way the LAG works as a group, with others, with projects? Are you doing so consistently? Are you cherry picking? Are some aspects more difficult than others, if so why? What is working well or less well and why? Are you able to respond locally and flexibly? Are you monitoring this?

Once you have reviewed what you are doing you can identify where things may be improved, where the added value can be strengthened and develop your plan accordingly.

Designing it in

If you are to optimise the LEADER approach it needs to be well integrated into how the LAG works, in its actions and in how it works with other actors locally and within the delivery system. A fundamental consideration here is to think from the beneficiary perspective, how are they engaged, consulted, involved, supported in helping to deliver the outcomes sought? Planning on this basis puts the LEADER approach at the heart of the LAG's Local Development Strategy and reinforces it through the implementation method and the operating plan. It is vital that this is used as a real and dynamic tool in enabling and extending local participation, community endorsement and ownership and in doing so strengthening the on-going relevance of the Local Development Strategy, the approach and the outcomes achieved.

Widening involvement

One important way of refreshing LEADER is to get new people and new ideas involved. A common criticism of the approach is that it can be a bit of a closed shop, that it is a club of those in the know, it is not sufficiently inclusive. As a bottom-up and participative development approach LEADER should be open to wider involvement, be that through introducing new blood on the LAG or by finding new ways of doing things to enable people to get involved.

An effective communications approach is a key element of this, perhaps new ways of presenting information such as local road shows or other ways of sharing real lessons and the benefits of the LEADER way of doing things. Find ways to involve potential beneficiaries who would not normally access public funding, 'the **unusual suspects**' – to come forward with their ideas. The stronger focus on animation in the 2014 – 2020 programme provides LAGs with the mandate and resources to extend LEADER's reach with new people, ideas and resources. How is this going to be done? how can it be strengthened? maybe through an animation plan or an NRN animation support group? Don't leave this to chance, it is too important and doing it well can improve the process so much in supporting the development of successful and strategic projects.

LAGs also have the opportunity to use specific tools such as specific eligibility criteria e.g. to encourage small scale, innovative, complex or integrated projects. This applies not just to the EAFRD but also to the CLLD possibilities. Quotas and criteria may be used to secure the involvement of specific groups, women, young people, the private sector etc.

Inclusive consultation

The consultation process in Local Development Strategy preparation and review provides LAGs with an ideal opportunity to reach and engage new people and organisations. It allows the exploration not only of what the development needs and opportunities are but also how people can contribute, how they can participate. If LAGs are to reach new constituencies, they have to think about the way in which they reach them and animate involvement. An open-door approach is not enough, there can be many barriers, distance, transport, timing, childcare, school hours, even language can discourage people. People need to be invited in, to have permission to contribute. Think it through, how can you help people to contribute, what tools, methods and mediums can you use?

These are just some of the approaches LAGs can use to help them to be as fresh and relevant as possible, seeking out and delivering added value, generating real bottom-up involvement. These are not one-off approaches however but, as with the Local Development Strategy they are dynamic approaches and tools which if properly managed feed the process of ongoing renewal.

LEADER and CLLD

The success of LEADER in rural areas led other ESI Funds to open up the possibility of applying this approach in other types of areas. In the 2007-2013 period it was successfully transferred to the European Fisheries Fund (from 2014 the [European Maritime and Fisheries Fund](#) EMFF). From 2014 it also became available in the [European Regional Development Fund](#) (ERDF) and the [European Social Fund](#) (ESF). However, the application of this approach is mandatory only in the EAFRD.

For this wider application the term “**Community-Led Local Development**” (CLLD) is now used. LEADER, with its clear reference to rural areas continues to be used for CLLD under the EAFRD. Since 2014 it has been possible for a single Local Development Strategy (LDS) to be supported by several EU Funds (known as multi-funded CLLD). Where Member States have adopted this, it enables LAGs (rural, fisheries and urban) to explore the potential of the CLLD approach to comprehensively integrate local needs and solutions. It also allows LEADER support to be better coordinated with local development support from other EU funds and thus reinforce the links between rural, urban and fisheries areas.

In order to ensure coherence of LDS and actions across the EU Funds, a minimum framework of common rules has been developed and set out in the [Common Provisions Regulation](#). The European Commission has also developed two sets of non binding guidance for the application of CLLD:

European Structural and Investment Funds - Guidance for Member States and Programme Authorities on Community-Led Local Development in European Structural and Investment Funds (September 2018) [\[PDF\]](#)

European Structural and Investment Funds - Guidance for Local Actors on Community-Led Local Development (September 2018) [\[PDF\]](#)

