



**Report of the 8th meeting of the
Permanent Sub-group on
LEADER and CLLD**
Online meeting, 18 September 2020

Introduction

9.30 – 9.45
Welcome and
Introduction
Neda Skakelja, DG
AGRI

Note: Presentations can be directly accessed by clicking on the links provided.

Neda Skakelja welcomed the participants to the 8th meeting of the Permanent Sub-group on LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (LSG) and updated them on the progress and developments since the last LSG meeting. She mentioned progress on the new legal framework, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and an upcoming LEADER evaluation being launched by DG AGRI.

The COVID-19 situation has tested the rural networks (both at EU and national level), local action groups (LAGs) and LEADER delivery systems in terms of responsiveness, and LEADER has shown its ability to support and respond to local development needs in times of crisis. There has been a strong joint EU response to the pandemic and rural communities have demonstrated their resilience.

The utilisation of Measure 19 funds has increased from an EU average of 28% in February to 34% in June 2020, with the figures ranging between 5% and 90% across Member States.

LSG members were encouraged to participate in the European Commission's newly launched consultation on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA).

Neda Skakelja introduced the agenda of the day, encouraging a wide exchange of experiences throughout the day.

Introduction
John Grieve,
ENRD CP

John Grieve explained that the various current challenges, including COVID-19 that both tested and made LAGs demonstrate local resilience have been considered when defining the main themes of the ENRD's LEADER work for this year. He encouraged LEADER Sub-group Members to take ownership and rely on internal resources and networking within the ENRD to continue to make progress.

9.45-10.30
Update on recent
Commission
initiatives
relevant for
LEADER
Gaëlle MARION,
DG AGRI

Gaëlle Marion highlighted several developments in LEADER and rural development since the last LSG meeting. As a part of the emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis, the European Commission (EC) introduced several adjustments to some areas of CAP implementation to enable Member States to respond more flexibly. Changes in the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) enable RDP re-programming for more flexible responses.

Gaëlle Marion emphasised that LEADER can be supported until the end of the implementation period of the RDPs, in the case of a two-year transition until 2025. In principle, there will be the possibility to support capacity building of future partnerships and preparation of new mono- and multi-funded strategies during the transition period. Selection and support to multi-funded strategies with participation of EAFRD should also be enabled. However, depending on the timing of adoption of the future Common Provision Regulation regulating these future strategies and their selection, these provisions may not appear in the transition regulation itself, but in other appropriate legal acts.

Discussion

The EC confirmed its intention to enable funding for preparatory support for local development strategies (LDS) relating to the next programming period during the transition period. The intention is to avoid delays in the preparation of EAFRD-funded LAGs, either mono- or multi-funded, and to allow EAFRD Managing

Authorities (MAs) to participate in selection of multi-funded LAGs during the CAP transition period.

According to the CPR proposal, for multi-funded LDS, all MAs managing the funds involved should organise a common call and the relating funds need to be allocated at the same time, with the selection of the LDS carried out jointly. Hence, it will not be possible to approve a multi-funded strategy and then add EAFRD to this at a later date. There is no legal provision forbidding changing the lead fund.; However, this will need to be decided at Member State level and, in practice, may prove burdensome. It is not clear what would be the reasons for such change.

The transition regulation is built on the idea of continuity of rules. Therefore, the 5% ring-fencing for LEADER funding within the EAFRD will still apply, with the exception of funds transferred from direct payments. The 8 bln Euro allocated to rural development under Next Generation EU are not subject to the 5% rule at the moment. While the current LDSs can continue to be implemented in the transition period, provision of funding for preparatory support and selection of new LDSs will also be possible. The additional funding for LEADER allocated under the extended RDP can be used to support LAG running costs and animation, preparatory support, implementation of LDSs and cooperation – there are no restrictions in this respect compared to the current scope of M. 19.

Overview of ENRD Contact Point LEADER support activities and lessons learnt

10.45 - 11.30
Update on
LEADER related
activities and
lessons learnt
Peter Toth,
ENRD CP

Peter Toth presented key ENRD CP support activities for LEADER including a summary of TNC work, information sources and an overview of lessons learnt from LEADER Thematic Labs and other LEADER activities throughout the previous years. He summed up the main findings from the questionnaire, circulated during the summer by the ENRD CP, to gather feedback on the proposed thematic activities for LEADER in the forthcoming annual work plan. Resilience is proposed as an overarching theme for LEADER work due to the COVID-19 crisis. The EU Green Deal/Farm to Fork Strategy; Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas; LEADER design for resilience and sustainability; and simplified cost options all gained widespread support as possible themes for LEADER meetings in the coming year.

Discussion

Discussion focused on the planning of the coming year's LEADER activities, combining inputs from the questionnaire and comments from LSG Members. There was broad agreement on the six main topics proposed for LEADER activities.

Members were reminded that, in addition to the four planned thematic labs, there is also the possibility to produce materials such as case studies and factsheets to develop the topics further. Other potential themes and sub-themes suggested included smart villages, social innovation, rural tourism, rural depopulation, circular economy and multi-localism or telework. Members were reassured that many of the topics highlighted would be addressed under other ENRD priorities due to the linked and integrated nature of the CP's work. The need to increase the visibility of LEADER and its achievements to wider audience was mentioned.. Regarding the future of the ENRD, DG AGRI emphasised that support for networking activities at an EU level will continue.

Overview of current LEADER achievements and how these are incorporated in the planning for LEADER in the next period – various EU MS perspectives

<p>11.30 – 12.30 Overview of recent LEADER activities, responses to the COVID-19 situation, and lessons learnt for the planning for LEADER in the next period Stefan Niedermoser, LEADER-forum Österreich, Austria</p>	<p>This session provided some insight into experiences of how LAGs and MAs have adapted during the COVID-19 situation. LAGs from Austria and Sweden gave the presentations followed by discussion. After this session, MA representatives from Ireland, Finland and Slovenia gave further presentations.</p> <p>Stefan Niedermoser described the LEADER method as a tool to find solutions to crisis situations, through involving stakeholders in developing their own solutions. The most important solutions to the crisis were some of the core topics of LEADER: area-based supply chains, networking and regional products. Stefan Niedermoser shared three projects developed as responses to the COVID-19 crisis: the promotion of local and regional products to local consumers; digital education and online marketing; and a digital registration system for outdoor events. He suggested that, to successfully deliver such solutions, LAGs need to move beyond being funding agencies and become regional development networks and innovation brokers instead. They need access to secure funding and deliver solutions through a fast and simple system. For LEADER to deliver to its maximum potential, local stakeholders need to ask themselves not what LEADER can do for them, but what they can do for/with LEADER.</p>
<p>Marion Eckardt, LUS (Local Utveckling Sverige), ELARD association</p>	<p>Marion Eckardt explained that the Swedish strategy in responding to COVID-19 had a strong voluntary approach and safety recommendations at its core. The first months of the pandemic impacted businesses in rural areas and many organisations switched to home working. Strong local solidarity has been demonstrated. Due to international travel restrictions, summer has seen an increase in national and rural tourism in Sweden. Non-governmental organisations in rural areas continue to need support through LEADER and other instruments. The well-established digital application system has ensured the continuation of LEADER delivery with only slight delays and adaptations due to the cancellation of big events and an increase in online meetings.</p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>When asked about the most significant changes that LEADER/LAGs have implemented as a result of the COVID-19 situation, both presenters referred to the increase in digital meetings and the need for LAGs to educate local stakeholders in how to organise them. In Austria, LAGs have not experienced substantial changes to their ways of working as they are used to providing solutions to emerging local needs. Responses have been provided quickly and the LEADER delivery system has adapted well to the challenges.</p>
<p>Dympna Harney, Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs (on behalf of Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine), Ireland</p>	<p>Dympna Harney reported that, from early in the pandemic, the Irish MA put the community at the centre of its response, with initiatives set up to ensure a coordinated approach. LAGs and Implementing Partners adapted their working practices, continuing working throughout, thanks to a number of administrative flexibilities adopted by the MA. Rural communities have been affected in terms of reduced fund-raising, slower procurement processes and match funding challenges, however nearly 600 projects were approved and over € 17m were paid to promoters between March and August. Community engagement is crucial and there is a desire to foster greater cooperation between them and the</p>

	<p>Government. The flexible administrative approach for LEADER delivery should be built into future programmes, whilst respecting the need for good governance.</p>
<p>Laura Janis, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland</p>	<p>Laura Janis explained that Finnish LAGs took a 'digi-leap' and the LEADER delivery system adapted well, with 27 LAGs reporting increases in applications due to the crisis. A national campaign between the National LEADER association, Farmers Union and Advisory Organisations was launched to address the shortage of seasonal workers. Networking and its added value will be a focus for the 2021-2027 CAP Strategic Plan. Working together and communicating between all parts of the LEADER delivery system, building trust and strengthening networking between LAGs, MA and Paying Agency at local, regional and national level have all been crucial for successful adaptation to the crisis.</p>
<p>Marjeta Jerič, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food - LEADER Office, Slovenia</p>	<p>Marjeta Jerič presented the situation in Slovenia, where online communications and operational procedures quickly became the norm from March this year. Fast amendments to legislation allowed changes to regulations, providing flexibility. Simplification, harmonisation, good IT systems, the valuable role of LAGs as local information hubs, the importance of resolving local needs and a cooperative approach are lessons to take forward. Preparations for LEADER's role in the Slovenian CAP Strategic Plan are underway, with a range of working groups, including the four authorities included in CLLD, feeding in their previous experiences. The main issue being faced in this planning is where LEADER will sit in the transitional period in relation to the other ESI funds.</p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>Many of the experiences of responses to the pandemic have been surprisingly positive. The Slovenian MA expressed pride over how LAGs adapted to the situation and continued to support local communities and businesses, with LEADER-related tasks being performed remotely, using digital tools. In Ireland, the system adapted quickly, with individual colleagues leading the way in switching to home office working and showing a high level of commitment to maintaining the continuity of LEADER implementation. The Finns had also adapted quickly and report in some cases being able to reach more people than before, thanks to online engagement.</p> <p>In summary, John Grieve reflected on the remarkable flexibility and responsiveness with which LEADER delivery systems and stakeholders have responded to the crisis and the flexibility MAs have introduced to their procedures. These experiences point to some of the fundamental aspects of LEADER: that LAGs have responded to emerging challenges positively and are learning from them; that a key role for networks and LAGs is in sharing these experiences; and that we need to think about how the need to deal with obstacles can be adapted to create opportunities in the future.</p>
<p>Summary and next steps</p>	
<p>12.30-12.45 Summary and next steps Neda Skakelja, DG AGRI</p>	<p>Eduardo Serrano Padial from DG AGRI informed the participants about the upcoming Evaluation of the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development and encouraged LSG Members to participate in two related public consultations.</p> <p>Neda Skakelja emphasised that a lot can still be achieved under the current RDPs and during the transition period. LSG members broadly agreed with the themes</p>

proposed for the ENRD CP's LEADER work. LSG members' comments and suggestions have been noted and will be taken into account in the planning of future activities. Further suggestions could be emailed to the ENRD CP. Publicising the benefits of LEADER and making LEADER visible should be a horizontal aspect included in all of the thematic work.

Neda Skakelja concluded that several lessons have been learnt about the resilience and adaptability of LEADER systems and these lessons demonstrate LEADER's ability to flexibly respond to emerging challenges. Key themes, challenges and ways of working may change, but LEADER can and will be part of the way forward. Crucial for this are delivery systems that enable LAGs to adapt to situations that cannot always be foreseen and planned ahead.

Neda Skakelja informed the LEADER Sub-group that DG AGRI would consult LSG members on experiences from the current governance arrangements and ideas for future CAP network ones before the next LSG meeting.