



European Network for
Rural Development

7th Leader subcommittee meeting
Discussion groups on Better Local development
Strategies

DRAFT

23 November, 2011, Brussels, Belgium

Compiled by the ENRD Contact Point



Connecting Rural Europe

1. Discussion sessions

1.1. Discussion Session One (11.00 – 11.45)

Issues regarding the development of future Local Development Strategies (LDS) by Local Actions Groups

The meeting participants were asked to discuss the following four questions in 10 small groups:

- Q1.1) What preliminary information and guidance is needed to support the development of a high quality Local Development Strategy by a LAG in terms of both form and content?
- Q1.2) At what 'level' should decisions on the strategic themes and priorities of a Local Development Strategy be taken?
- Q1.3) What methods are most effective for the development of a high quality Local Development Strategy (e.g. participative methods, public meetings, consultancy, thematic discussion groups, validation by local community)?
- Q1.4) What should be the key considerations for a LAG when building the "evidence base" for its Local Development Strategy?

1.2. Discussion Session Two (11.45-12.30)

Requirements for the content and structure of future Local Development Strategies

The meeting participants discussed the following four questions in 10 small groups:

- Q2.1) What, if any, are the common thematic priorities which all Local Development Strategies to be selected under a programme should address?
- Q2.2) There is likely to be a requirement for future Local Development Strategies to take a broader perspective in order to strengthen complementarity with other funds. What should the priorities for this complementarity be?
- Q2.3) What is the most appropriate process for the approval of Local Development Strategies?
- Q2.4) There is an explicit requirement that LAGs address monitoring and evaluation in the next programming period, what are the priorities this indicates for strategy development in terms of both process and content?

1.3. Feedback from the discussion group chairs (12.30-13.00)

The chairs of the discussion groups provided immediate feedback on the questions and issues under discussion. The following summarise individual contributions, not the consensus of all the discussion groups.

- Regarding information and guidance: it is important that LAGs understand the whole of the 'policy chain' and that guidance be harmonised; clear information regarding the competencies (responsibilities) of each organisation must be provided. All of the above information should be provided in a timely manner. Consideration could be given to opening direct communications between the EC and LAGs; the possibility of incentivising LAGs financially for high quality LDS submissions could also be considered.
- Regarding the most appropriate degree of LAG autonomy; the process of deciding at what level (programme level or LAG level) to define themes should itself be participatory; a higher degree of financial autonomy for LAGs would also be beneficial.
- Regarding consultation methods: face-to-face meetings and the use of new media (social networking) are both important. At least 6 weeks should be allowed for any individual consultation.
- Regarding LDS preparation; consultants should be used with caution as there are examples of the submission of 'off-the-shelf' strategies.
- Regarding the LDS approval process: a two-step / iterative process is productive. It provides for an element of 'negotiation'. It should be recognised that new LAGs require more time to submit and revise a draft LDS.

- Regarding the evidence base: common interpretation of data is important (rather than just collection of statistics).
- Regarding M&E: this will be more important in the future programming process; more qualitative data should be collected and used. Quantitative information (SMART indicators) should nevertheless remain the backbone of the M&E information, but it must be geared to capture Leader specificities. Self-evaluation will also become more important and if possible this may involve LAG specific indicators. LAGs must be prepared and supported for this.
- The points were also made that in the preparatory phase (for the new programming period), support should be given to the creation of LAGs where they don't already exist and that sufficient animation resources must be made available (for implementation, this should not be less than two persons per LAG).

1.4. General discussion

The floor was opened to a short general discussion:

- The use of local resources in the development of LDS is paramount and outside consultants should not be relied upon.
- Consideration should be given to explicitly recognising the role that Leader plays in terms of lifelong learning for many of its protagonists.
- The new proposals beg the question of whether Leader should continue to be a 'laboratory'; should now be considered as a larger initiative, structured more as part of the overall EU funds delivery systems – or try and fulfil both of these roles.

2. Results of Group discussions (14.00-15.00)

2.1. Feedback on Discussion Session One: Issues regarding the development of future Local Development Strategies (LDS) by Local Actions Groups

Michael Gregory (ENRD CP) presented a summary of the first session of group discussions. The specific questions discussed were defined in the light of the emerging issues of FG4.

Q1.1) What preliminary information and guidance is needed to support the development of a high quality Local Development Strategy by a LAG in terms of both form and content?

There was a consensus from the groups that: (i) clear common guidance to LAGs on the formal RDP rules is a necessary prerequisite, and; (ii) guidance on the process – including practical advice on how to develop a LDS is also necessary including information on what possibilities are allowed under the prevailing rules and regulations. It is important that the advice and guidance be given as soon as possible (ideally in 2013 not 2014) and that it remains constant. Repeated changes to the rules and guidance for Leader and LDS has been a frustration in a number of Member States during the current programming period. The need for clear guidance explaining the applicable programme rules was therefore also noted.

It was recognised that new LAGs will require more guidance than established ones. The guidance provided should take this into account and it was also suggested that peer mentoring should be provided for (established LAGs helping new ones).

The groups' responses also indicated a number of other individual points. These included: that there should be a clear and common set of quality criteria communicated, and that LAGs could be incentivised, possibly by a higher budget being available to high quality submissions.

Q1.2) At what 'level' should decisions on the strategic themes and priorities of a Local Development Strategy be taken?

There was no consensus about this point. Some groups argued for full LAG autonomy in defining themes and priorities; justified because this is necessary in order for LAGs to feel full ownership of 'their' LDS. Others recognised a need for LAG autonomy within a common framework.

Several of the Groups highlighted the importance of the process. Specifically that LAGs should themselves be involved in defining the level at which themes and priorities are set and that the process of priority and theme setting should be participatory and two way.

Application of the principle of subsidiarity is also important in this context, i.e. decisions on LDS objectives should be taken at the 'lowest' (most local) level possible. One group called for more financial autonomy for LDS (and LAGs) and another reflected that whatever the rules, a good level of trust between the participating parties is always important.

Q1.3) *What methods are most effective for the development of a high quality Local Development Strategy (e.g. participative methods, public meetings, consultancy, thematic discussion groups, validation by local community)?*

The methods for which there was strongest support among the groups were:

- Face-to-face meetings;
- Professionally supported animation of local actors (a benchmark of every LAG needing a minimum of two animation staff was proposed).

Interestingly, two of the discussion groups considered that rather than defining the most effective individual consultative methods, the key to the development of a high quality LDS is conducting an holistic participative diagnostic of the area.

Regarding the phasing of the different types of methods, the majority (though not unanimous) view that the process should start with the constitution of thematic groups. Other methods considered effective were: focus groups (specifically used to test hypotheses after the input of thematic groups); activation of the support of local community groups; distinct consultation with local authorities and; the use of social media.

Interaction with the wider population is best done after the use of more targeted methods. Communication is a vital element of the development (and implementation) of a bottom-up LDS and the campaigns aimed at the wider public also need to be targeted.

It was also noted that it is highly desirable for the same individuals to be involved both in strategy development and implementation.

Q1.4) *What should be the key considerations for a LAG when building the "evidence base" for its Local Development Strategy?*

The use of the best (most up to date and relevant) available statistical data is important and the use of a research institute can be considered for capturing it. An LDS should take into account territorial diversity, thus geographic and other data with a local territorial dimension is important. Several groups noted that statistics on the links between the LDS and neighbouring areas is key, as this facilitated the development of an understanding of the economic and demographic dynamics of the area.

Over and above the statistics required, the following points were also made:

- Local – informed – interpretation of the data is important;
- Consideration should be given to the use of tailor-made qualitative questionnaires;
- Development and use of local case studies can add important insights;
- The experience of previous projects and already conducted evaluations should be captured;
- It is useful to find out how the process of evidence collection is approached elsewhere.

2.2. Feedback on Discussion Session Two: Requirements for the content and structure of future Local Development Strategies

John Grieve (ENRD CP) presented a summary of the second session of group discussions.

Although linked to the previous session the answers to all four of these questions were more forward, the questions derived from the FG 4 survey findings and the Lisbon meeting.

Q2.1) *What, if any, are the common thematic priorities which all Local Development Strategies to be selected under a programme should address?*

This question was given wider consideration than merely the identification of specific themes, in fact there was little direct feedback on specific topics. In some cases their necessity was even questioned. In general the view was that there should be a core set of priorities given from the top down. These should not be too restrictive or prescriptive, there should be some flexibility in their interpretation and in the rules governing their application.

There was a strong view expressed that the Leader approach needs to widen from being exclusively rural and that it should move forward from acting as a laboratory to seeing its actions further mainstreamed (rolled out more generally).

There is a need to strengthen the local specific elements within the approach, to reinforce the link with local needs, being participative is a central component of this and this has to be actively pursued and strengthened. For example, there could be greater consultation in the identification of common strategic themes.

Where there was mention of specific thematic priorities there was considerable agreement; those mentioned were the economy, civic society and the quality of life, this latter element included aspects such as lifelong learning and local services.

It was evident from the discussions that the identified priorities had a strong fit with multi-fund approaches from which they were likely to benefit significantly if implemented.

Q2.2) *There is likely to be a requirement for future Local Development Strategies to take a broader perspective in order to strengthen complementarity with other funds. What should the priorities for this complementarity be?*

It was recognised that historically, and by its very nature, Leader is integrative and that this is an area in which people have experience, but equally that it now faces new challenges in the new programming scenario.

The common view was that strategies should be holistic in nature, complementarity should be built in. This should enable strategies to target different funds for the different priorities but also to use different local resources and involve different sectors of the community.

On the other hand, whilst holistic is ideal, it is also important to recognise that there may be gaps in the situation locally, for example in the coverage or availability of the different funds vs the development priorities identified. This implies that the LDS will have to be flexible in how it addresses such needs, mismatches or gaps.

Monitoring and evaluation can be actively targeted at reinforcing the complementarity of the LDS, assessing how well this works and also assisting sharing experience between funds thus strengthening the overall approach.

It was highlighted that complementarity should be fundamental to the approach in the forthcoming period as the CSF is focused on the 2020 objectives. These objectives are common and therefore provide a common framework through which the local priorities can be identified in the context of the SWOT analysis and then translated into the local application of the funds.

Common systems and rules are a priority if complementarity is to be achieved in practice, and one group even went so far as to suggest delivery through a single common entity was the main consideration.

Q2.3) *What is the most appropriate process for the approval of Local Development Strategies?*

The groups relayed strong messages regarding the LDS approval process. The principal ones were that multiple steps (at least 2) were definitely preferable and that whatever the basis this process should be made very clear from the outset.

One of the most important aspects of the multi-step approach is that it necessarily involves feedback and dialogue between the different stakeholders, the local community, the LAG, and the managing authorities. This feedback is highly valued and has to be effective. This approach recognises that strategy development is a process - a 'construction project', it takes time and there is a real need for all the partners in both the partnership and multi-level governance structures to work together in pursuit of the goal of a quality strategy.

The multi-step approach suggests an approach which allows iteration, taking into account of the specificities of LAGs and need to allow new LAGs/areas to catch up, and to proceed in smaller steps. This should improve the final result as well as strengthening ownership, involvement and commitment.

LDS selection should be objective first and foremost and based on both quantitative and qualitative criteria. There should be a core set of common criteria.

There were two schools of thought on competitive processes: a large majority thought it good, others bad. This then begged the question 'on what basis should budget be allocated?' The majority view here was that it should be linked to and based on the assessment of the quality of the strategy, either relatively between LAGs or against a common standard. One dissenting voice suggested that the basis of this should be a per capita allocation.

Q2.4) *There is an explicit requirement that LAGs address monitoring and evaluation in the next programming period, what are the priorities this indicates for strategy development in terms of both process and content?*

The strong consensus among the groups was that all objectives should have quantified monitoring and evaluation (M&E) indicators, these can include what are generally considered to be qualitative aspects as quantification of these is also often possible.

With regard to monitoring and evaluation there was a strong demand for proper and clearer communication of what is expected from the outset, this should be accompanied by clear guidance.

There is scope for both common indicators and for LAG specific approaches, this should allow some of the specificities of Leader to be addressed. There is however a need to be able to balance such specificity with the ability to aggregate these indicators at LAG, regional, national and EU levels. A common suggestion was that there should be a common core of EU indicators, these could be structured in such a way as to allow them to be further developed at the local level to shed a more acute light on local effects.

There were a number of points raised discussing the relative benefits and difficulties associated with qualitative and quantitative approaches in evaluation, some also raised the issues of the evaluation linking to the Leader method elements. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are required, measurable qualitative approaches are possible and should be employed. The effects of the Leader method can and should be evaluated, but in terms of what it achieves e.g. in relation to the development of governance, again this may be measured. The critical point is that effective baselines are required, this is vital for all approaches to change measurement. This links back to the need for early clarity and guidance.

Two associated points were raised, (i) the need for external objectivity was highlighted and (ii) self-evaluation is important but is not sufficient overall. An important element of this and all evaluation activity is the feedback it can provide, local feedback is essential to the process and tools and approaches need to address this as part of the whole group of evaluation stakeholders. It was noted that where LAGs have a high degree of autonomy, then the importance of effective M&E increases.

Other written feedback received from the group discussions

In their responses, the groups also made a number of comments on and suggestions relating to other aspects of LDS. These included:

- A suggestion to involve at least a limited number of LAG managers in the design process for the RDP as a whole (in order to better 'Leader proof' the resulting programme).
- Flexibility and the ability to make changes should be built into the design phase and subsequent implementation. There should be recognition that a LDS is a living document and needs to change often. This is particularly important when the macro environment changes.

2.3. General discussion

The floor was opened to a general discussion. The following main discussion points, in addition to those made in written submissions of the small groups, were raised:

- Guidance for LDS preparation: is important but must not be overwhelming.
- Perspective on the future challenges: Leader mainstreaming in the current 2007-2013 period has proved difficult. Every indication is that the 2014-2020 period will be even more challenging and complicated, even for established LAGs and particularly considering the multi-fund dimension. The provision of clear and complete information is therefore extremely important and none is available yet.
- Monitoring and evaluation: it is recognised that M&E is important but no additional 'levels' of M&E should be introduced. Local (LAG / LDS specific) indicators can be a good measure for Leader. Can FG4 examine this issue?
- Coordination: the multi-fund dimension of LDS / Leader in the next programming period makes local coordination (explicit in the LDS) very important.
- Lessons learnt: Leader has a long history and a largely successful one. Particularly in the light of the substantive changes being proposed for the next programming period, the identification of 'best practices' in terms of process is very important. FG4 is and must play a major role in this respect.
- Importance of the multi-fund approach: The multi-fund approach is logical and makes sound programming sense. The view was therefore expressed that its implementation should not be optional (dependent on the MA). Lack of clarity on whether or not the multi-fund approach is being applied would also make it problematic for LAGs to plan. However the view was also expressed that it is important for MAs to consider the benefits (or lack of them) of the multi-fund approach and its operability prior to deciding whether or not to use it.
- Ensuring complementarity between funds will be important. But complementarity needs to reflect the needs (and be adapted to) the LDS. At the operational level the LDS must be flexible and LDS and LAG contracts must not be overly rigid or complicated. The Commission noted that the proposals provide for specific approaches in MS to facilitate complementarity within the framework of the proposed Partnership contracts.
- The role of Leader: many things are asked of Leader including: good management of financial resources; improving governance; supporting the other axes of the EAFRD. Given the further changes being proposed for the next programming period, it is a valid question to reflect on what is – now – being asked of Leader. This is not only a conceptual question, but will also have practical implications, for example regarding the necessary monitoring and evaluation.