

LEADER APPROACH AFTER 2013 and NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS OF EUROPE

Draft Conference Summary
3-5 October 2011 / Koszęcin, Poland



photo: Courtesy of Luís Chaves

Background:

The international conference ‘Leader Approach after 2013 and New Challenges for the Development of Rural Areas of Europe’ was held on 3-5th October in Koszęcin, Poland. This event gathered ca. 150 participants: representatives of the EU and Member States institutions, Leader networks, LAGs, scientists and other stakeholders involved in Leader (including candidate country representatives from Croatia). The organisers of the conference were the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Regional Government of Śląskie Voivodship, and the Silesian Union of Districts and Municipalities. The ENRD Contact Point provided technical support for the event (including a project Cooperation Corner). The conference also provided an opportunity to present the new ENRD video about the Leader approach. A number of partners were involved in preparing and delivering the interesting conference programme: The European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD), the Polish National Rural Network, the Polish Rural Forum, the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Regional Office of Silesia in Brussels, the Stanisław Hadyna “Śląsk” Song and Dance Ensemble, and the Silesian Leader Network.

Programme Overview:

The event offered an excellent opportunity to discuss the Leader approach and lessons learnt from the results achieved to date, with a view to addressing future challenges in rural areas. As part of the official programme a field visit was organised. The participants had the opportunity to explore Polish rural areas in the Silesia Region and the recent rural development activities which had taken place. Among others, conference guests visited Koszęcin Municipality, where they experienced rural development projects, such as woodland adventure trails, story-telling and traditional craft demonstrations. There was also a presentation from the Spichlerz Górnego Śląska LAG covering its experiences so far.



Conference Participants during the study trip, photo: D. Misiak

The conference was opened with a welcoming address from the organisers and a representative from the European Commission (DG AGRI), Director Mihail Dumitru. In his presentation, he emphasised the need for strengthening the Leader approach in the future. This is especially important when considering the huge diversity of rural areas across Europe and the development methods offered by the Leader approach: its so called 7 key features. With regard to the future, more attention should be paid to Local Development Strategies as an instrument to implement the EU priorities for rural development. He also identified the importance of strengthening the Leader approach in relation to the new multi-funding opportunities that are developing.

Following the speech of the EC representative, the keynote address of prof. Michael Dower (University of Gloucestershire, ARC 2020) identified a comprehensive picture of rural development and the evolution of Leader over the past 25 years. Particularly, he stressed the changes that Europe has undergone during the last few decades including the collapse of the Soviet Union, accession of new Member States and transformation processes in the 'West'. In conclusion he interlinked the current rural development policy and the future challenges for rural areas (such as: climate change, low carbon economy, energy security, food security/safety, farm viability, protection of ecosystems, social exclusion and poverty). Prof. Dower emphasised the advantages of applying the Leader approach in this challenging context.

The first plenary session portrayed the Leader approach from a local perspective. The speakers invited represented Local Action Groups from Finland (Liisa Häme, LAG Paijanne-Leader), Ireland (Ryan Howard, South & East Cork Area Development Ltd), Greece (Anastasios M. Perimenis, Lesvos Local Development Company S.A.) and Austria (Thomas Müller, LAG Sauwald). As the conference was hosted in Poland there were also three presentations from Polish LAG practitioners: Tomasz Pietrek (LAG Spichlerz Górnego Śląska), Grażyna Wera-Malatyńska (LAG Sandry Brdy) and Jarosław Kuba (LAG Krzemieny Krag). This session enabled participants to develop a strong understanding of how the Leader approach was implemented in practice across a range of different LAGs.



Director Mihail Dumitru, DG AGRI, photo: D. Misiak

In the second session the invited foreign experts presented their experiences of the “Added value of the Leader approach: What worked well, what did not work? What could be done better?” The main focus of the presentations was on the impacts of Leader in the light of recent evaluations and analyses. The following speakers were invited to contribute to this session: Carlo Ricci (independent expert), François Osete (European Court of Auditors), Panagiotis Patras (ELARD/Trikala Development Company SA – KENAKAP), Marieke Koot (Dutch National Rural Network) and Juha-Matti Markkola (Finnish National Rural Network). There was also a parallel event organised which showcased projects implemented by LAGs in the Silesia Region and an ENRD prepared LAG’s Cooperation Corner which was opened by Witold Magryś representing the conference organisers, Silesian Union of Districts and Municipalities.

The next plenary session attempted to answer some of the questions raised in the evaluation and analyses of the Leader programme including “How can we make the Leader approach better in this and the next period?” This discussion, moderated by Ryszard Kamiński (Polish Rural Forum), invited the following panelists: Pedro Brosei (DG AGRI), Christine Falter (DG MARE), Sanna Sihvola (Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) and Joanna Gierulska (Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development). Speakers discussed the possible future improvements of Leader including integration of different EU funding streams; ensuring an appropriate balance between the bottom-up approach, bureaucracy and proper controls for the distribution of public funds; and the need to change the increasingly bureaucratic perception of Leader.



Participants of the panel discussion, photo: D. Misiak

This panel was followed by a discussion on “How can various stakeholders contribute to a more effective implementation of Leader?” The experts presenting represented a wide variety of institutions and stakeholders: Urszula Budzich-Szukała (Polish Rural Forum), Peter Pascher (COPA-COGECA), Roman Haken (European Economic and Social Committee) and Goran Šoster (PREPARE). The moderator (Petri Rinne, ELARD) emphasised the need for local policy delivery of the EU 2020 Strategy, taking into account regional diversity across the EU.



Cooperation Corner of the ENRD CP, photo: ENRD CP

The last day of the event started with the parallel working group sessions. A number of issues were explored by the participants and discussed during the panel sessions that followed:

WG 1: „Present and future shape of Leader: best practices to be followed – improvements to be made” (moderators: Valdis Kudins, Latvian Rural Forum; Jela Tvrdonova, Helpdesk of the Evaluation Expert Network for Rural Development; rapporteur: Halina Siemaszko, Center for Business Promotion and Entrepreneurship in Sandomierz)

The WG participants identified key issues involved in Leader implementation including financing projects, a need for capacity building, and working within the limited resources available. The challenge of attracting and retaining skilled staff in LAGs was discussed, as was the need for reinforcing how the partnerships operate. In order to achieve this it was suggested that actions were required which built partnerships within existing resources and developed robust local strategies that integrated partners’ activities, all with a view to capturing the multiple funding opportunities. Recommendations were also made to improve

networking at all levels and build on the sharing of good practice. A need was also identified to enhance participatory self-evaluation mechanisms which should be made mandatory for LAGs and help to demonstrate the broader benefits of the Leader approach.

The panellist's response to this workshop focused on the issue of multi-funding (Director Dumitru) identifying that its application will be optional in Member States, however better coordination between EU authorities through the Common Strategic Framework will support implementation of this approach. Another panelist, Jiří Krist (National LAG Network of Czech Republic), highlighted the unique role of Leader in addressing new challenges in rural areas, asserting that there is no other example of an approach that better deals with those issues

WG 2: „How should the transition period be managed/ delivered?“ (moderators: João Carlos Pinho, LAG ADRIMAG; Irena Krukowska-Szopa, The Lower Silesia Network of LAGs; rapporteur: Carlo Ricci, independent expert)

This workshop revealed that the transition period will not simply be a continuance from the current to the next round of Leader, but will move LAGs into a new context. Consequently LAGs will need to know more about the tools available to them and how to adapt to the changing environment. There is an expectation that support will be provided during the transition period to both the LAGs and the Managing Authorities who will be designing the policy delivery. To ease the transition period it was suggested that the Managing Authorities should be allowed to assess LAG applications more quickly and to facilitate this, the selection procedures for future LAGs should make use of results of the current programming period. Special attention has to be paid to each LAG's capacity to address local needs which may require strengthening horizontal governance at all levels.

In response to the workshop findings, Luís Chaves (Minha Terra) discussed experiences of Leader in Portugal over the past 20 years. He emphasized that even after such a long time there is still a lack

of understanding of the nature of the Leader approach. Although it is very well known in Brussels and amongst local communities, it has not been fully understood by the central public administration in Portugal. This is mainly due to the aspect of the Leader approach that requires the decision makers to be autonomous and responsible. Consequently, Leader means sharing the power to decide, however many of those involved are concerned about the potential loss of their decision making influence. For the future it is recommended to reinforce the partnerships and ensure the link between them and the strategy is made more explicit: taking into account the LDS scope as well as participation of local actors in its design and delivery. There was also a call for rural development networks to help facilitate the transition period.



Participants of the panel discussion, photo: ENRD CP

The representative of DG AGRI (Director Dumitru) stressed the need to remain flexible and adapt rural development tools to achieve the future EU objectives. Financial discipline will also remain very important when managing public funds and Member States should adopt an implementation system that best suits their particular areas. The ENRD was identified as having a key role in developing this guidance and NRNs should play a greater role in dissemination and supporting communication in this process. Following these remarks, Els Soenen (Flemish Government, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries) pointed out the potential difficulties for managing authorities that may occur when applying the multiple funding approach.

WG 3: “Better Local Development Strategies after 2013” (moderators: Panagiotis Patras, ELARD; Krzysztof Kwatera, LAG Dolina Raby; rapporteur: Petr Kulišek, National LAG Network of Czech Republic)



Participants of the workshop, photo: D. Misiak

The discussion within this WG was stimulated by two presentations; the first identified the main factors that affect the quality of LDS (Panagiotis Patras) and the second highlighted linkages between the objectives of LDS and the objectives of Leader (Krzysztof Kwatera). The question and answer session focused on specific issues that should be taken into account when improving the LDS including the process of developing a LDS versus the regulatory framework, adjusting LDS to individual territorial dynamics, mainstreaming, coordination between authorities, and the responsibility of the Managing Authority for selecting LAGs with the best LDS.

In response to these findings, Deirdre Kelly (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, Ireland) revealed the challenges for the MA in the new framework, reiterating their responsibility to ensure sound financial management, ensuring the added value and maximising the impacts of the Leader approach. The so called 3rd model of Leader implementation confers a level of responsibility on LAGs that can be difficult to manage. However it is hoped that implementation of the current programme will increase LAG capacity to deliver the next round.

WG 4: “Future of the Transnational Cooperation: What is a good TNC project and its impact on the local area in future” (moderators: Sarah Watson, Rural Works; Ave Bremse, Estonian National Rural Network; rapporteur: Tom Burston, Northumberland Uplands LAG)

The workshop focused on enthusing participants about TNC’s, understanding their value, detailing the elements that make a good cooperation project, and exploring the long-term impacts of TNC projects. The participants worked in small discussion groups to discuss their local experience and formulate key questions. Rapporteurs from each of the groups highlighted key aspects raised during discussion as well as questions seeking answers from the rest of participants.

All participants attempted to reply to the crucial question: “What makes a good project locally and in the long-term”. The discussion focused on the small steps required to implement a good project which resulted in measurable results in the local area including the best way to develop the project from the stage of visits and exchanges to the more advanced stage of concrete results, and on identifying optimal indicators to measure them.

In conclusion all the workshops regardless of their particular topic stressed the need for more networking and improving communication between stakeholders involved in Leader.

LEADER AFTER 2013
will need
MORE NETWORKING

In addition, the conference final paper was adopted highlighting the main directions for development of Leader in the future. For more information about the event, click [here](#).