



Report of the 9th meeting of the Permanent Sub-group on LEADER and CLLD

Online meeting, 26 February 2021

Introduction

9.30 – 9.35

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

Welcome and
Introduction

Neda Skakelja, DG
AGRI

Neda Skakelja welcomed the participants to the 9th 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. Important milestones have been achieved with the adoption of the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the transitional regulation, which allow the current Rural Development Programmes to continue in the transitional period, including LEADER implementation.

The adaptation and resilience demonstrated by both the LSG and the wider LEADER community during the COVID pandemic is an important achievement, especially as 2021 marks the 30th anniversary of the LEADER approach. Ms Skakelja thanked the LEADER Community and participants of the LSG for making this approach successful.

The importance of planning for the next programming period was emphasised. The discussion of the regulation by the co-legislators is underway. The CAP Strategic Plans are expected to be functional and launched by 1 January 2023. To support this planning process by Member States (MS), the European Commission published MS-specific recommendations, based on the best available information, to enable them to meet the targets of the EU Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategy.

Ms Skakelja thanked LEADER stakeholders for their contributions to the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), including through participation in the public consultations on the LTVRA which took place in the second half of 2020. She encouraged LSG members to participate in the Rural Vision Week organised by the ENRD CP (22-26 March 2021), then continued to present the [agenda](#) of the day.

Introduction

Mario Milouchev,
DG AGRI

Mario Milouchev referred to the fundamental importance of the LEADER principles and their application at local, national and EU levels in LEADER implementation. In the context of the LTVRA, he referred to the timeline— looking ahead to 2040, by when LEADER will be 50 years' old. He also briefly informed on numerous activities as preparation for the LTVRA. Feedback from several national and EU organisations reinforces the fact that LEADER/CLLD is the best instrument to address local needs in rural areas. With regard to the funding of LEADER/CLLD strategies, at present three out of four CLLD strategies are mono-funded. There is evidence that putting multi-funded local strategies and Local Action Groups (LAGs) in place has proven to be challenging. Local people and soft skills – especially in local contexts with relatively weak community structures – are key, but matching these needs with accessible support is challenging. Clearly, the aim in the long-term is to have more multi-funded CLLD strategies for more integrated local development, stronger links to other development structures such as smart villages, specific strategies for remote areas or for areas closer to the cities, linking to urban strategies to create improved rural-urban linkages. Suggestions for the LTVRA on how the EU can better support LEADER and multi-funded CLLD were encouraged and welcome.

9.35-10.10
LEADER
implementation
progress and
Commission
initiatives relating
to LEADER -

Marina Brakalova,
Iwona Lisztwan,
DG AGRI

Marina Brakalova and Iwona Lisztwan presented an update on [LEADER implementation progress](#) and key considerations for planning LEADER in the coming period. Based on the transitional regulation, Member States can continue RDP – and LEADER – implementation in the next two years while making the necessary adaptation for extending the implementation of current Local Development Strategies (LDS) and using this period also for LDS preparation and the setting up of LAG partnerships to be funded under the future CAP Strategic plans. Member State’s authorities can decide to utilise part of EURI funds and allocate a certain proportion of these to LEADER, based on an RDP modification. Negotiations relating to the CAP reform proposals post 2023 are ongoing, and the approval of the CAP Plans is scheduled for 2022 to enable Member States to launch implementation from 1 January 2023.

The added value of the LEADER approach – in developing specific responses to local needs, social inclusion, specialist animation, and in general involving more people in the local development process – was emphasised as an element to maintain and strengthen in designing the future LEADER. In planning LEADER, the focus needs to be on the ‘essentials’ – what LEADER does best: its ability to ‘drive’ local development processes that increase social, cultural, human, environmental, and physical capital. At the same time the costs of this development process – administrative, time, energy, and opportunity cost – also need to be optimised for best added value. Focusing on the ‘essentials’ also relates to defining the tasks of the Local Action Groups and the local partnerships. Relevant decisions for future planned implementation can and should be made when considering the planned preparatory support and related eligibility, the selection criteria for LAGs and LDSs, or decisions about funding LEADER or the application of simplified cost options.

It was also noted that the General Block Exemption Regulation for state aid rules would likely be extended to LEADER for projects up to 50,000 Euro (for CLLD). Further guidance will be prepared and communicated by the Commission in this respect.

Discussion

Following questions and remarks by the participants, it was clarified that LEADER does not need to be limited to addressing only one particular priority of the CAP Plans – local and national levels are best placed to decide on the most important objectives. LEADER can possibly contribute to more than one CAP specific objective and CAP Plans can be modified to reflect such objectives and targets as set out in the approved LDS. The transitional regulation allows for the utilisation of M19.1 to fund preparatory actions, to enable an open process for the involvement of all potential LEADER areas. Re-definition of criteria for eligible areas might be needed. For the utilisation of EURI funds to support LEADER, an RDP modification is required and in principle EURI funding can be allocated to the whole LEADER measure when justified, not only to cooperation activities (sub-measure) and utilised after the date of the presentation of the relevant RDP modification.

Overview of ENRD Contact Point LEADER support activities and lessons learnt

10.10 - 10.30

Peter Toth presented [key ENRD CP support activities for LEADER](#), including a summary of the state of play of transnational cooperation, ENRD information sources and an overview of lessons learnt from LEADER Thematic Labs. He noted

ENRD activities related to LEADER
Peter Toth,
ENRD CP

that the considerable decrease in the number of TNC projects (for one-year periods compared between October 2018-2019 and October 2019-2020) is partly attributable to the COVID-19 situation. Key lessons learnt from LEADER Thematic Labs - on addressing green issues and on resilience – include: the importance of ensuring local ‘embeddedness’ (i.e. projects’ relevance to the local community), the need to ‘build back better’, ‘re-learn’ the local territory in the aftermath of the crisis, re-design and upgrade local partnerships to enable effective recovery and a strong role for local animation to support this.

Overview of planned LEADER activities in the transition period and for recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic – various EU Member States

10.30 – 11.30
Laura Janis,
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland

Laura Janis [explained](#) that all of Finland’s rural territories will continue to be able to access LEADER support during the transition period. She noted that there is “no need to slow down in LEADER” and that demand remains high for LEADER support. LAGs will be updating the goals of their LDS to match the additional funds and all of the current RDP LEADER measures will continue to be available. A new Sub-measure 19.1 has been added to cover preparatory support for new LAGs, but this is not expected to be needed until the process starts for updating the country’s LAG territories. Proposals for LAGs covering the 2023-2027 period are in preparation and this may result in fewer and larger LAG territories.

During the transition period (and beyond), LAGs are being encouraged to focus on job support through business services and investments. Finnish LAGs are also providing support to face issues generated by the pandemic, using both the RDP funds and a separate regional budget that facilitates rapid reaction support. Finnish LAGs may also be involved in the Just Transition Fund via action in the peat production sector.

Daniel Curran,
Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs (on behalf of Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine), Ireland

Daniel Curran in [his presentation](#) emphasised how useful LEADER has been during the pandemic to date. LEADER success has been aided by new administrative flexibilities including accepting electronic signatures and other digital solutions.

The transition period will be used to build capacity that aligns LEADER with the performance model under the new CAP and the European Green Deal. LAGs can use the additional transition funds for projects as well as administration. Their existing LDS content can be updated to address emerging challenges. Higher intervention support rates are being implemented for private enterprises and community services. Unused funds are to be re-committed by December 2022.

Preparatory work for the transition period has involved stakeholder consultations on key themes such as LEADER responses to the pandemic, addressing Brexit impacts (particularly on food businesses), encouraging new recipients, climate action, digital transformation and Smart Villages.

Hartmut Berndt,
BAG LAG – German LEADER network

Hartmut Berndt [outlined](#) the LAG framework in Germany. LEADER’s bottom-up principle is useful for identifying how to use transition funds to tackle the pandemic effects. The LEADER method can be used to clarify what rural communities need to become more resilient and how to meet such needs. Resilience projects should aim to engage citizens in local development processes focused on employment, robust supply chains, social infrastructure and climate-friendly activities.

11.15-11.45 Discussion	<p>Capacity building, networking, partnerships and regional identity were highlighted for their importance in helping to make rural areas more resilient. A number of requirements for this were proposed by the German LEADER network, including extending LAG budgets from the EURI funds and further simplification of implementation mechanisms. Conclusions reiterated LEADER's aptitude in Germany for helping address short- and long-term effects of the climate and COVID crises.</p> <p>Peter Toth introduced the two discussion questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the RDP and/or the recovery funding during the transition period planned to support LEADER (in your MS) and enhance its added value? • Are there any changes needed or planned on national or local level regarding how LEADER is implemented in your MS to enable a strong LEADER role in post-COVID recovery?
Finland	<p>In Finland the NRN is supporting capacity building for LAGs because "LEADER is more important in the future than now". Special training is being organised for LAGs that are expanding, changing or merging their territories. The Finnish NRN advocated increasing Managing Authority and LSG awareness about the recommendations regarding transnational cooperation developed by the ENRD's practitioner-led working group on transnational cooperation. The role of the Finnish NSU in providing capacity building support for LAGs for secure transition was also emphasised.</p>
Greece	<p>In Greece, the continuation of EU networking activities during the pandemic was a "confidence booster" and can help maintain LEADER momentum at national and local levels. LAGs are "entering a new world" and the current situation provides an opportunity for Greek LAG territories to reflect on how they can become more resilient. Such visioning should extend beyond pandemic risks and take account of other influences. Within this context, LAGs will need to be able to demonstrate their added value as well as their ability to target the most essential projects that can contribute to safeguarding long-term resilience whilst reinforcing local identity benefits. LAGs need to continue to recognise and strengthen the role of small communities, contribute to the feeling of safety and operate with more freedom in their local territories.</p>
Hungary	<p>In Hungary, the national co-financing rates have been increased up to 80% for LEADER and other RDP measures. LAGs have used dedicated funding to address pandemic impacts and efforts will continue to ensure that LEADER expenditure is achieved for existing or new commitments during the transition period.</p>
Germany	<p>German colleagues commented on the importance of maintaining efficiency during the transition period and cautioned against "re-inventing the wheel". The existing LEADER framework was considered suitably robust and streamlining selection criteria could help target/encourage projects that strengthen resilience and contribute to recovery. No need was foreseen for LAGs to produce a new LDS for transition - goals could be achieved by fine-tuning existing intervention measures.</p>
Austria	<p>In Austria, a new impact-oriented monitoring system has been developed for LAGs and LDS - in cooperation between the LAGs, the Managing Authority, and</p>

Estonia	<p>the National Rural Network (NRN). This new monitoring system is aimed to contribute to a target-oriented implementation process and successfully communicate the added value of LEADER. The focus of NRN's activities in 2021 is the EU Green Deal, which can contribute to recovery and resilience of rural areas.</p> <p>In Estonia, the transition period is being used to strengthen the role of LAGs as effective channels for local development. This includes furthering connections with the country's Smart Village network. Other LAG support is expected to involve assistance with using multi-funding. LAGs will be using cohesion policy co-finance for long-term care activity and circular economy projects in the new funding period.</p>
Wallonia, Belgium	<p>Walloon LAGs can use the transition period to explore how best to define their added value, e.g., by adopting performance indicators to accurately measure LEADER projects' effects on employment and their contributions to resilience. LAG's priorities should include defining the added value of LEADER for resilience and improving communities' ability to manage crises and react quickly.</p>

LEADER/CLLD Sub-group survey

<p>11.45-12.25</p> <p>LEADER/CLLD Sub-group survey: sharing members' experience on the achievement and challenges of the Sub-group, in view of its current role and possible future needs</p> <p>Susan Grieve, ENRD CP</p>	<p>Susan Grieve presented the results of the LEADER/CLLD Sub-group survey, which aimed at finding out from Sub-group members what should be changed, improved or strengthened from the current practices and ways of working of the LSG. Based on the survey results, overall, the LSG has fulfilled its mandate, the exchanges on policy and implementation have been positively valued. A clear need was expressed for a similar structure in the future. Another positive aspect emphasised by the survey results relates to the benefits of bringing the local and EU levels together during the meetings. Among the organisations that respondents considered important to add to the Sub-group, representatives of other DGs were mentioned. The inputs from DG AGRI and the opportunities to learn about different implementation models were also very highly valued.</p>
<p>Discussion</p>	<p>The discussion – facilitated by John Grieve and Susan Grieve, ENRD CP – was based on the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have been your experiences of the LSG? • Do you see a need for a dedicated group on LEADER/CLLD in the future governance of the EU CAP Network? If yes, what are your views on its future scope, tasks and membership? <p>Participants discussed a number of suggestions. While the effectiveness of providing up to date information was recognised, one of the challenges identified was how to find better ways to encourage more in-depth discussions of implementation issues. Participants agreed that knowledge exchange works well within the LSG, however, a more practical, hands-on perspective would be welcome. The discussion emphasised the need to involve local representatives and provide the opportunity for exchanging directly with the Commission and members of the LSG. The role and importance of physical meetings – and possibly</p>

	<p>considering meetings that are longer than one day - was also voiced by several participants. At the same time, participants agreed that virtual meetings should be retained as part of the 'mix'. Participants suggested that discussions within the governance body could also be grouped according to thematic interest and similarity of delivery systems between MS.</p> <p>Summarising the discussion, Neda Skakeljja (DG AGRI) emphasised that the role of this governance group is to provide a means of exchange between members as well as identify and suggest themes for more in-depth discussion at dedicated LEADER/CLLD events and meetings.</p>
12.25-12.45 Update on the LEADER evaluation	<p>DG AGRI has commissioned an external evaluation of LEADER led by the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI). Its aim is to assess the impact of LEADER on the CAP objective of balanced territorial development, focusing on the current period.</p>
DG AGRI and CCRI (Countryside and Community Research Institute)	<p>Eduardo Serrano (DG AGRI) introduced the session and provided a short summary. The presentation by CCRI highlighted the evaluation as the first exercise of this kind relating to LEADER at the EU level in the past 10 years. This could provide useful inputs for designing LEADER under the new delivery model. LAGs and Managing Authorities were encouraged to participate before the end of March 2021. The survey covers relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and coherence and includes two questionnaires – one for LAGs, one for MAs.</p> <p>CCRI is also preparing an evaluation study focusing on the impact of the CAP on balanced territorial development including the role of LEADER in this, regarding components such as social and economic development, environmental needs, catching up of areas lagging behind.</p>

Summary and next steps

12.45-13.00 Neda Skakeljja, DG AGRI	<p>Neda Skakeljja thanked everyone for their participation in the meeting. Information on a new study launched by DG EMPL on the place and role of CLLD using ESF (with results expected during the summer of 2021) was shared with the Sub-group.</p> <p>John Grieve (ENRD CP) reflected on the discussion points of the day and thanked all contributors for the points they raised. These related to the key importance of local level, support for soft skills, advice, facilitation and animation, the increased role of networking and networks, as well as focusing on what is essential for maximising added value. He noted the strong ongoing MS-level support to LEADER, as demonstrated by the presentations from Finland, Ireland and Germany. He stressed the need to be very integrated in terms of 'how' LEADER is delivered and 'what' is delivered with focus on added value in a time of changes and recovery from the current crisis. LEADER should be about what is essential and realising 'ideas on a human scale'.</p> <p>Adapting the Local Development Strategies, extending/innovating/diversifying for strengthening resilience in the future will be unavoidable. Resilience is not something static, it requires adaptation and preparedness. LEADER can be used to strengthen and develop resilience if strong networking and local animation are in place, further administrative complexity is avoided and simplified cost options are also used extensively.</p>
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In her closing address, **Neda Skakelja** called on participants to send their comments on the ideas to the LTVRA. She also mentioned that resilience should, and will, not be only a 'buzzword', but will stay with us as an important consideration guiding future policies in the longer term. Adaptation to a new way of living will be of key importance in the future and the LEADER approach can make a big difference in this through the engagement of local people and communities. She also thanked participants for their inputs to the discussion on the future role of the LEADER/CLLD governance body and called for contributions to the evaluation of LEADER as presented during the meeting.