



# Making the seven LEADER principles work

## Outputs from the LEADER Thematic Group

### Introduction

The following is based on the outputs from the CAP Implementation Contact Point Thematic Group, “Making the seven LEADER principles work in practice for all LAGs under the CAP Strategic Plans”. (January - June 2022). Thematic Group members also contributed to a review process of the first working draft version of this document.

This paper sets out key considerations (with brief examples from Members States) for enabling the successful implementation of the seven LEADER principles (as outlined under Articles 31 and 33 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060).

The document is divided into seven sections, one for each of the following LEADER principles:

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### 1. Bottom-up approach

Implementing the bottom-up approach remains an important element because local stakeholders that participate in the implementation of the local strategy, either as a project holder or as part of the decision-making body of the LAG, are then able to drive the development of their territory according to their needs.

Balanced representation of various local interests in LAG remains a tremendous opportunity for the bottom-up approach. Therefore, **conducting regular analyses of local networks by LAGs** can provide much needed feedback and information on how the functions of the LAG and the involvement of local stakeholders can be improved. See below an example of such analysis:

Country	Description
Bulgaria	In Bulgaria, the Managing Authority defined indicators such as: number of participants attending workshops/information meetings, number of trained persons, population covered by information events, number of settlements covered by the activities.

Top-down approaches and dominance in decision-making by the public sector may put limits on developing flexible approaches. Furthermore, due to limited resources, some LAGs cannot animate their territory and limit themselves to the provision of information only. Therefore, **LAGs should be provided with sufficient resources and flexibility** for how they use their animation budget.



Maintaining good local governance and the bottom-up approach can be strengthened by **inclusive animation activities** by the LAG. There is an opportunity for more private and third sector involvement. However, this should not focus only on the most active local stakeholders, but also hard-to-reach, marginalised, or vulnerable groups. **Digital meetings** could be a solution to enhance stakeholder involvement and inclusivity, allowing stakeholders with mobility and transport issues) engage with local development processes. See below some examples of inclusivity:

Country	Description
Italy	In the Laghi e Monti del Verbano Cusio Ossola Local Action Group (Italy), private shareholders have greater weight than public shareholders, and the Board of Directors is made up of nine members with a prevalent majority from the private sector.
Italy	The Laghi e Monti del Verbano Cusio Ossola Local Action Group (Italy) used digital technologies to maintain local stakeholder involvement in the LAG activities during the COVID crisis.

Finally, there are different regulatory procedures at different levels (EU, national, regional, subregional, LAG), which can limit the 'LAG ownership' and challenge the implementation of the bottom-up approach. Therefore, if **the legitimacy of the role of LAGs is recognised by the whole LEADER delivery chain**, this could improve the opportunities for LAG networks to work together, as partners with National Rural Networks, Managing Authorities, and Paying Agencies (vertical coordination in the LEADER delivery chain). See below an example of this recognition:

Country	Description
Finland	In Finland, the whole LEADER delivery chain recognises the role of LAGs. During weekly meetings with a member of the MA, a member of the PA, a LEADER groups' spokesperson, and a representative of the NSU, they go through the current issues in the LEADER delivery chain openly and solve problems together.

## 2. Cooperation

Cooperation, either, inter-territorial, or transnational, involves one or more cooperation partners with the main objective of sharing experiences, designing joint actions, and finding joint solutions to issues identified in the local development strategies of cooperating partners. Cooperation partners can come from EU or third countries.

If cooperation is imposed from top-down, it can become a formal exercise only, and may not bring about the intended results. Cooperation should be rooted in local needs and support the implementation of the local strategy. **Allowing the LAGs to define the priorities for cooperation themselves** can ensure that the needs of local stakeholders are met, and that the priorities remain rooted in the strategic objectives of the local development strategies.

What can make cooperation even more difficult are the differences in rules and procedures between regions and Member States. Therefore, **exchanging information among Member States is important** to improve the knowledge of relevant rules in different Member States and could help in preparing successful transnational cooperation projects.

Since there are inevitably language or cultural barriers between Member States, transnational cooperation with third countries, or **cross-border cooperation** can help to overcome cultural or language barriers. See below some examples of such cooperation:



Country	Description
Bulgaria	The role of the NRN in Bulgaria is to facilitate and stimulate the projects for inter-territorial or transnational cooperation, as well as the process of finding partners for cooperation.
Italy (Piedmont)	In Piedmont a guidance document was drawn up for LAGs and was dedicated to national and international cooperation projects.
Belgium	In Belgium, LAGs maximise the opportunities for and benefits from cooperation by building on existing cross-border networks that already operate in other programmes such as INTERREG. This simplifies cooperation with partners in border regions.

Getting people engaged in cooperation and creating trust-based partnerships takes a long time, considerable resources and capacities that may not be available for all LAGs. **Building on the capacities and experience of existing LEADER networks** (national LEADER networks, ELARD) could help to build on the trust-based partnerships that already exist. The **recognition of the multi-faceted benefits of cooperation** by all stakeholders in the LEADER delivery system, and strengthening local and European identity, could help to cooperation to work in practice.

Finally, a lack of financial resources for pre-financing and long-term reimbursement from PA may delay cooperation strategies. **Sufficient resources should be allocated** to preparatory and exploratory actions. This helps in the thorough preparation of cooperation projects and minimises the changes of failure.

### 3. Innovative elements in the local context

Regarding innovative elements (e.g. organisational, social, technological), it is **important to allow LAGs to define what is innovative in the local context**. The element of 'what is new' (novelty) is interpreted in the various local contexts of the LAGs. This means that any top-down definition or guidance by Managing Authorities needs to be broad. Top-down definitions of innovation in LEADER limit local innovation and result in a low number of innovative projects selected for implementation. Allowing broad definitions is considered a very positive change that brings added value locally and addresses local problems.



There can be several administrative and procedural blocking factors that negatively influence LAGs' and local stakeholders' capacities for innovation or delivering innovative LEADER projects. Therefore, the **simplification of administrative burdens** by, for example using simplified cost options (SCOs), can improve the innovation capacity of LAGs and should be actively supported by the LEADER delivery system.

Lack of local expertise for promoting and encouraging innovation may create challenges for the full implementation of innovative elements. There are often limited links between scientific research and real-life applications of innovation by knowledge actors. Therefore, **a common understanding of innovative elements in the local context** by all relevant stakeholders is essential. A common understanding is needed both within the LAG area (by all stakeholders) and within the LEADER delivery chain (by Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks, and Paying Agencies). This can be enhanced by the **LAGs working together with non-conventional partners** such as universities and research institutes.

Country	Description
Romania	Several LAGs are involved in an interterritorial cooperation project which includes actors from research and academia, to define innovation in the frame of Smart Villages approach and the role of LAGs.
Italy (Piedmont)	The selection criteria of the LAG calls include a score dedicated to the degree of innovation of the project presented. The evaluation of the level of innovation of the proposed intervention is made by an Evaluation Commission external to the LAG that knows the territory and the local reality well.

Other ways to support the implementation of innovative elements include **providing a supportive innovation ecosystem for LAGs** which includes procedures, coordination mechanisms, guidance, and relevant criteria through the LEADER delivery system. Disseminating examples of local innovation more widely and provide capacity-building (e.g., through training, networking events, peer to peer learning, etc.) can enable LAGs to support local innovation.

#### 4. Local strategies

Local development strategies relate to a specific subregional area and are multi-sectoral by definition – they aim to **build on, create and strengthen links between different sectors of the local economy and the diverse stakeholder groups within the area**. The **active and targeted involvement of the people who live and work in the area are critical in the successful development and implementation of the strategy** (and the successful implementation of this principle).



Local Development Strategies are developed in a bottom-up participatory process and so may cover a broad set of themes that are relevant to the territory covered and reflect the needs of the local population. Local Development Strategies need to be able to set out a **vision, aims and objectives based on careful assessment and prioritisation of such local development needs where LEADER can add most value locally**.

Local Development Strategies must also strike a balance between meeting local needs whilst also contributing to the realisation of any relevant higher-level policy objectives (e.g. National, EU policy). LAGs should also consider the synergies between LEADER and non-LEADER interventions locally when planning the Local Development Strategy (also relevant for targeting, prioritisation of objectives, effective use of limited LDS funding).

Being community-led, local development strategies are implemented for and with the local community. **Local stakeholders can get involved in various ways**, including as direct beneficiaries of a project, as project owners, as volunteers supporting the implementation of the strategy or as a member of the local action group board.

**Effective implementation of local development strategies** will rely on the **application of an open, fair and transparent regulatory framework** from the Member State level (Managing Authority and Paying Agency). This may include:

- › Adoption of selection criteria at the LDS level.
- › Enabling LAGs to review/adapt strategies or calls for applications based on local need.
- › Enabling LAGs to develop and implement own projects.
- › Ensuring the ‘LEADER delivery chain’ can process project applications quickly and efficiently.
- › Appropriate indicators for monitoring implementation of the LDS that are suited to local specificities, context.

Country	Description
Italy	Some Italian LAGs integrated the actions of their LDS with projects implemented as part of CLLD strategies within Interreg programmes. E.g. <a href="#">Dolomiti Live</a>
Finland	Managing Authority, Paying Agency, National Rural Network Support Unit, together with provincial authorities organised the Smart Countryside Road Show to present the draft CAP plan. Local stakeholders discussed what the CAP Strategic Plan would mean in practice for provinces and LAGs.



## 5. Networking

**Networking is the essence of LEADER, with the local action groups** creating the conditions to drive innovation, build capacities, promote peer working and knowledge exchange between peoples at different scales and in different places.

**Networking is about breaking down the ‘silos’ and crossing boundaries**, not only between different sections of the local economy or local society, but also between policy, research and practice. This enables local action groups to develop new forms of cooperation (including cooperation projects) that bring in new knowledge with scope to develop new solutions to local challenges and new opportunities.

Managing Authorities should ensure that LAGs have the **capacity and sufficient resources** (e.g., dedicated funding) to engage in networking. Whatever their networking capacities, LAGs should look to **build on complementarity with others**. Such capacities can be enhanced locally through reaching out to local volunteers/ organisations.



Capacity building can also be **supported by National Networks** (meetings, visits, working groups, etc.), **existing networks of local action groups or other organisations** (national LEADER Networks, ELARD). At EU level a host of EU organisations (e.g. ELARD, European Rural Parliament, EU CAP Network) may also be able to support regional, national, and EU networking. It is vital that there is **sufficient capacity and effective support to networking activities of LAGs from the National Networks**.

Country	Description
Italy (Piedmont)	14 LAGs came together to form the “Assopiemonte Leader” association which carries out careful coordination and support by sharing initiatives and problems common to all.
Latvia	The Latvian Rural Forum organises weekly online meetings for LAGs to facilitate networking and exchange of experiences.
Spain	The Spanish NRN facilitates networking between LAGs through the Spanish <b>sub-group on LEADER</b>
Croatia	The Croatian LEADER Network developed tools for monitoring bottom-up and multi-stakeholder involvement work for LAGs and FLAGS. These include guidelines, workshops, good practice examples for LAGs and FLAGS to develop commitment to implement the seven principles.

**Recognising and understanding the added value of networking, its dynamic nature, and the diversity of contexts in which it is applied is key.** In some contexts, support may be needed to establish links between LAGs, while in other contexts, well-developed LAG networks may be engaged in policy dialogue to improve implementation and introduce new themes to LEADER/CLLD.

## 6. Public-private partnerships

Public-private partnerships/Local Action Groups should **bring together representatives of a broad range of socio-economic interests** (particularly young people) from the subregional area covered by the local development strategy. These socioeconomic interests should feature local municipalities, other public sector organisations, local businesses (agricultural and non-agricultural), non-governmental organisations, and private individuals.

Whilst the composition of each partnership will be driven by the local circumstances, it is important that there is **a balanced representation of various interests** with no single interest group controlling the decision-making by the local action group. Balancing those various interests should also be concerned with ensuring gender balance, including a diversity of ages (old and young) as well as disadvantaged or



minority groups in the partnership. For LAGs the breadth of such partnerships can be challenging, however the benefits of having a diversity of partners can significantly strengthen the development potential of the local territory by creating links between different stakeholders that may not have existed before the LAG started working.

Country	Description
Austria	In the programming period 2014-2020 Austria established a quota to improve gender balance in the project selection board of LAGs (at least 1/3 of members should be women). Based on the good experience this will be adjusted for the 2023-2027 programming period to 40%.

Having a **good understanding of the local stakeholders** (underpinned by stakeholder mapping and analysis) is fundamental. Having **sufficient resources allocated to animation of the Local Action Group** to maintain the ‘momentum’ of local development strategy implementation and increase the involvement of a diversity of local stakeholders (organisations and individuals) will be key to building ownership of the process.

**LAGs should be open and transparent about governance arrangements** e.g. how decisions are made, how members are elected etc. They should also be clear about application of both formal LAG structures (decision-making body, assembly, other formal committees) and use of informal connections such as local networks. LAG members themselves should have clearly outlined mandates so that they can fully understand their roles in decision-making be able to actively participate in the implementation of the LDS. Their active participation, including understanding how they will work with LAG staff.

Country	Description
Denmark	The general assemblies of the LAGs vote on all LAG Board members in every second year (LAGs are voluntary associations).
Finland	LAGs are registered associations (NGOs). The composition of the board of LAG must comply with the tripartite principle: 1/3 representatives of local public bodies (mainly municipalities), 1/3 representatives of local associations and enterprises, 1/3 local people. There needs to be a regular turnover of board members, and the maximum time in the board is six years in a row. These requirements must be reflected in LAG statutes (rules of the association).

Having a **highly skilled and well-resourced staff team** will be crucial if LAGs are to work effectively, including in supporting the strengthening of local networks and supporting existing LAG members and attracting new members to the partnership.

A culture of continuous improvement through **ongoing evaluation** (e.g. regular self-assessment, surveys, public meetings) can contribute to keeping the partnership ‘healthy’ and help demonstrate the LAG’s added value.

## 7. Subregional areas

Subregional areas that are defined by the knowledge and expertise of local stakeholders are fundamental to the effective application of this principle, with the Local Action Group area (LAG area) based on the needs and aspirations of all those living and working in the locale.

Such areas **should be characterised by a shared coherent identity**. Aspects to consider may include:

- › Economic (key sectors, transport connections, services etc.).
- › Environmental and natural (resources, landscapes, etc.).
- › Social (population, demography, etc.).
- › Cultural and historical (common history and cultural characteristics).

The **subregional area should be the “right” size and represent sufficient “critical mass” with** LAG areas neither “too large” (so challenging resourcing, animation, engagement, and development actions, nor “too small” (this may reduce the critical mass in terms of economic



and social linkages and as a strategic approach to territorial development). A certain “critical mass”- in terms of population, number of settlements, types of settlements, area covered, number of active businesses, civil society organisations, public sector, etc. may be necessary to enable an effective and functional LAG.

Country	Description
Italy (Piedmont)	For 2014-2020 the minimum population threshold was defined at 30 000, the maximum threshold 100 000 for a LAG area. In the call for the selection of LAGs there were specific selection criteria dedicated to evaluating both the proposed strategy and the economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects of the intervention area.

**If Managing Authorities are to define specific area selection criteria, these should be flexible enough to consider exceptional circumstances** (e.g., areas suffering from depopulation) and should not unduly limit the role of local stakeholders in defining the LAG area.

Managing Authorities should support the defining of LAG areas through **the provision of relevant socio-economic, environmental, other data and information as required** to support the preparation of the local development strategy. Managing authorities also have a role to play in supporting the processes (including the provision of relevant external expertise) in which local stakeholders from subregional areas can identify their common interests, common objectives as they move to define the potential area for the local development strategy.

The size and socio-economic profile of a sub-regional area may have a bearing on financial allocations to LAGs. Whatever criteria are applied, **a certain minimum level of financial allocation to cover for animation of the territory and running the LAG should be set irrespective of the territorial size.**

Country	Description
Austria	In this programming period a basic fixed amount will be allocated to each LAG, using about 25% of the LEADER funds, to ensure sufficient capacity in the LAG management.
Belgium (Flanders)	Each LAG, regardless of its size, is guaranteed of funding for 1.1 Full Time Equivalent. This is the minimum awarded to each LAG, regardless of size or population, to ensure that even the smaller LAGs have the required capacity to fully implement the LEADER methodology.



## Annex: Useful Resources

- › **LEADER Thematic Group** (presentations and other information related to the two meetings of the LEADER Thematic Group “Making the seven LEADER principles work in practice for all LAGs under the CAP Strategic Plans”)
- › COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT. **EVALUATION of the impact of the Common Agricultural Policy on territorial development of rural areas. SWD/2021/0394 final**
- › **LEADER LAG implementation survey 2017** (EU-level and MS-level results reports)
- › **46 case studies on LEADER implementation**
- › **EU Rural Review 29 – on LEADER achievements**
- › **LEADER Toolkit – Working on the LEADER delivery system**
- › **LEADER Toolkit – Implementing LAGs and local strategies**
- › **LEADER Toolkit – Improving communication across the CLLD delivery chain**
- › **LEADER Cooperation page** including the ‘**Summary of proposals of the LEADER Cooperation PWG**’
- › **LEADER Innovation page** including practical examples of LEADER innovation and the summary document of LEADER Innovation PWG discussions ‘**Innovation in the LEADER delivery chain**’
- › A collection of **LEADER/CLLD evaluation publications** on the ENRD website
- › **LEADER - 30 years and preparing for the future: Delivering LEADER’s unique added value** (notes of the discussion on local development strategies and local partnerships)
- › **A selection of LEADER evaluation publications from the ENRD Website**
- › Guidance on Community-Led Local Development for Local Actors (August 2014) – available in 23 EU languages from [https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld\\_en](https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld_en) under the heading “EU Guidance and legislation”
- › Focus groups on the implementation of LEADER (2007-2013 programming period):
  - › **FG1 - Implementation of the bottom-up approach of LEADER**
  - › **FG2 - Preserving the innovative/experimental character of LEADER**
  - › **FG3 - Implementation of the “cooperation measure” in LEADER**
  - › **FG4 - Better Local Development Strategies**
- › **Evaluation support study** on the impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development
- › **Evaluation Study of LEADER/CLLD** by the EU CAP Network Evaluation Helpdesk

The information and views set out in this document do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission.



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