

Commissioner Cioloş: LEADER has a central role in the rural policy of the next funding period

The "LEADER as a Driver for Rural Europe" seminar organized by the ENDR, gathered 300 Local Action Groups to Brussels on 19.-20.01. In his short opening speech, the Romanian Commissioner of Agriculture Dacian Cioloş had time to mention in three different context that LEADER will preserve its position in the core of the rural policy in the next funding period. Touchingly unanimous with him was the Spanish José Manuel Silva Rodríguez who returned to the position of Director General of Agriculture. Silva Rodríguez praised LEADER for its capacity to answer to the real needs of the rural communities. So is all well in the EU?

The hardest criticism towards LEADER has recently been raised in the European Court of Auditors report. According to its audit observations, the Local Action Groups have not been able to show the value added that the method is supposed to create for the rural development. Once again, the discussion has returned to the question of indicators – for example the Slovakian Ministry of Agriculture has demanded that all the groups should include to their programmes indicators measuring the development objectives set. The auditors criticized the groups for having small inner circles, for suffering from lack of transparency in administration, for ignoring the rules of disqualification and for lack of cost-effectiveness. The heaviest accusation made states that these problems were discovered already in the previous audition conducted ten years ago, and that nothing has been done to solve them.

In its response the Commission strongly advocates for LEADER. The observations of the audit report cover only few EU countries, and also from the Finnish point of view they are difficult to understand: For example, a Portuguese group got a remark for bad functioning of the tripartite division of powers in a situation where not all the members had been able to participate in the board meeting and decisions had still been taken. Nevertheless, to avoid the degenerative sense of feeling good, it is necessary to look in the mirror every now and then. What could be done even better?

As an easy rule of thumb, it can be claimed that if there are problems in the implementation of LEADER, the cause can probably be found in some of its eight specific features. The "code" of the LEADER method is to be bottom-up, area based, innovative approach based on partnerships. As in case of coding software, if the code, or just one character of it, is wrongly written, the system does not work.

The Finnish Presidency of ELARD was achieved with "Sisu"

In the evening reception of the seminar, the umbrella organisation of EUs LEADER groups, ELARD, got the opportunity to announce the Presidency handover of the association. The floor was given first to the aside stepping new vice president, Mr Panagiotis Patras from Greece, who gave the Commission and the European Rural Development Network (ENRD) thanks for good cooperation. During the Greek Presidency ELARD was for the first time included within the operational bodies of the Commission and of the ENRD. The undersigned presented the objectives of the Finnish presidency: strengthening the method and disseminating it into new policy fields; developing the operational environment to be more animating and less bureaucratic; and expanding of ELARD's membership base especially in the northern member states of the EU. The second Vice-President of Pirkanmaa Provincial Government, Mr. Ari Lamminmäki, thanked the Local Action Groups for their valuable input in regional development and expressed his wish that the

Regional Development Fund would also have a method as good as LEADER. Finally, to make the closing of the ceremony “fresh”, the expert Reijo Kahelin from the Council of Tampere Region gave out 300 packages of Finnish Sisu (“courage”) pastilles.

The spring season of ELARD will be filled with preparations of statements (i.e. response to the European Court of Auditors report and to 11 consultation questions on the CAP reform, aiming to bring more balance to the allocation of resources for the agriculture on the one hand for the rural development on the other), as well as, with national LEADER seminars and meetings of the operational bodies in Brussels. In addition, the office of ELARD will be moving to the same building with the European Fisheries Areas Network, FARNET, located close to the Gare Central in Brussels. The Greek Communication Officer Stefanos Loukopoulos was joined in January with the new Policy Officer Anna Simola. On 15th –16th June, ELARD, in cooperation with the Village Action Association of Finland, will organise “LAGs’ Global Networks” seminar in Sastamala, Finland. The seminar will present the cooperation done between the LAGs as well as give information about the dissemination of the model on three continents outside of Europe.

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