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## **Leading lights: fostering local success in rural development**

*Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Opening speech at conference "Villages of Traditions", European Parliament

**Brussels, 5 July 2007**

It's a great pleasure to open this conference.

Today's event is a moment for congratulation. Villages of Tradition is clearly one of the success stories of the Leader method. It's a survivor from the days of Leader II; it has already been cited as an example of "best practice" at two conferences; and it has appeared in the European Commission's Leader Magazine. Could anyone wish for more?!

This is all with good reason. Villages of Tradition is an excellent example of an integrated approach to rural tourism. And it has grown impressively from its origins, in terms of both membership and objectives.

So today, I add my own congratulations to those which the project has already received in the past.

It was Leader that gave Villages of Tradition its start, and Leader is my main topic for this morning. But first, I would like to place it within the wider context of agricultural and rural policy.

A strong rural development policy is not an optional extra for the future. In terms of policy, it's part of our bread and butter. It's essential because rural areas cover 57 per cent of our territory and are home to 90 per cent of our population. It's essential because these areas have natural resources that we must care for – and because they sometimes need help in raising competitiveness, creating jobs, improving quality of life – just like urban areas.

This is why we call rural development policy the "second pillar" of the Common Agricultural Policy, and why I am constantly working to make sure that it deserves the name.

Within our rural development policy, I'm tempted to say that Leader used to be something of a "secret garden". It had to be applied on a small scale initially, because the approach involved was so new. But the garden quickly drew a lot of visitors, because there are so many things about it to admire.

First, Leader projects are **tailor-made** and **innovative**. People are invited to state their needs and come up with their own solutions. This is a highly desirable approach where it's possible, given the enormous variety that we see in Europe. In some Member States, one could even find almost completely different challenges just by driving 4 kilometres to the next village.

Secondly, Leader-type solutions often work particularly well because they **cut across sectoral boundaries**. They gather together the range of resources in a particular area – perhaps buildings, landscapes, and especially people – and mix them up into a recipe which creates opportunities and solves problems.

Thirdly, the Leader approach **draws in private money**. 30 per cent of the spending on Leader + came from private sources.

Fourthly, Leader **builds valuable networks** in which people can learn from each other's experiences, and in which one idea sparks off another – at local, regional, national and European level.

But Leader does not have a good profile only in terms of theory: it has also been strong in practice.

Overall, Leader II created and sustained about 100 000 jobs during its period of operation, which was of course 1994 to 1999. On top of that, those involved gained valuable experience of working together at local level, of creating national and trans-European networks, and of building public-private partnerships.

And of course, the variety of successful projects is impressive.

Some projects carried out under Leader + were very "agricultural". For example, in a region of Ireland, the Leader method helped develop a chain of supply and use of biofuels – by developing a processing plant for material from local growers, and converting a number of vehicles.

Other projects were based on agriculture and food production but also had a strong social aspect. In Greece, a "social co-operative" was set up at a psychiatric hospital. The co-operative began to offer therapeutic activities in agriculture and catering. In time, it went into partnership with nearby honey-producers. The honey-producers had a high-quality product, but did not have the resources to standardise, package and distribute it. So the co-operative began doing it for them – buying the honey at a certain price, processing it according to European Union standards, and bringing it to market.

And of course, many projects had nothing to do with agriculture. A Leader group was formed in Austria to design attractive meeting places and open spaces for teenagers. Perhaps some of us remember what it was like to "hang around" as a teenager, all dressed up with nowhere to go. What was particularly novel in this project was that it actually involved young people in the design process – very successfully.

As I said earlier, Leader began life as a secret garden – but the garden has grown past its original boundaries, and rightly so.

Many evaluations of rural development policy state that, as far as possible, policy measures should work on a territorial rather than sectoral basis, and should be closely targeted at specific needs. These, of course, are clear characteristics of the Leader approach.

A report compiled for the Commission in 2004 identified that it would be feasible to bring the Leader method into the "mainstream" of rural development policy – and beneficial to local development in rural areas. This was true regardless of the type of area to be assisted, the report said.

And this is where we are now. Leader has indeed become part of the mainstream of rural development policy, since every Member State must spend a minimum proportion of its funding on Leader-type projects: 5 per cent for the EU-15, and 2.5 per cent for EU 12.

Some were worried by this transition when it was first proposed, but I firmly believe it's a good thing. At first glance, it may seem a paradox that the political centre (the European Union, I mean) should lay down a condition that local people must come up with original ideas! But in fact it makes sense.

Where an approach has been successful in the past, we should try to spread that success. In some Member States, the tradition of encouraging local action is strong; in others, it's less strong. So it's right to send a message from the political centre, so that a culture of local solutions to local problems can take root everywhere.

This is what the minimum spending thresholds are about. And from what the Commission has seen so far, at least 12 Member States intend to spend more than these levels – which is encouraging. I look forward to seeing some creative projects emerge from the planning process.

What does the future hold for Leader?

We won't be able to answer this question before we see how well the Leader approach works within the mainstream of rural development policy in the new programming period of 2007 to 2013.

However, my gut feeling is that its role will grow over time rather than diminish. As I explained earlier, Leader has so many points in its favour in theory. It's the ultimate flexible tool. So in general terms, we must keep translating theory into practice – which may take time in parts of the Union that have little experience of Leader.

For the time being, an important task is to establish the right conditions for Leader-type projects to work well – throughout the European Union.

One of these conditions is a culture in which national and regional authorities are prepared to delegate genuine responsibility to the local level. As I said a moment ago, this is more common in some parts of the Union than others.

Also, we should make appropriate training more widely available for those involved in Leader stuff. In some Member States, it's possible to take formal qualifications in "local development". This and other opportunities should be spread more widely.

Overall, we must not push too hard, but encourage. Leader is growing. We can't force that growth. If we try to drive everything from the centre, Leader will lose the very characteristics which give it its strength. However, we can do our very best to create the right conditions for that growth.

We will be reflecting on this and other questions in a conference to be held in Portugal towards the end of this year. The conference will both look back on experiences with Leader in 2000 to 2006, and look forwards.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Once again, I offer my congratulations to Villages of Tradition. I look forward to seeing it and other Leader projects go from strength to strength in the future.

Thank you.