



## Making rural areas the engines of a sustainable Europe

A Joint event of the European Economic and Social Committee and European Rural Parliament

14 March 2019, Brussels, EESC

Dear **president** of the **European Economic and Social Committee**,

Dear **partners** in **European Rural Parliament**,

My first words are to thank the European Economic and Social Committee for organising this event together with the European Rural Parliament.

The European Economic and Social Committee has been a long-standing partner and supporter of integrated approaches to rural development. Amongst several opinions, I have to mention the **Exploratory opinion on the advantages of the CLLD approach for 2021-2027** proposed by Roman Haken and approved the European Economic and Social Committee in December 2017, with a strong cooperation of ELARD's vice-president Kristiina Tammets.

As some of you may know, ELARD is a **European umbrella organisation** of national networks of Local Action Groups. Today, we bring together **organisations from 25 European countries**, which represent **around 2.500 (two thousand and five hundred) LAGs in rural, coastal and urban areas**.

Many of these LAGs have been **working with LEADER** for many years and many other are deploying funding from different major EU funds, through the **Community Led Local Development** instrument introduced in the current programme period.

This represents a **long experience and knowledge** that can not be wasted in the preparation of future policies.

What I bring here today is not my personal opinion, but the feeling of a **wide range of local partnerships represented by Local Action Groups** and share with you, our reflections, proposals, questions and challenges regarding the role of LEADER and CLLD beyond 2020, not just **contributing to integrated and sustainable development** of rural, coastal and urban areas, but also helping **reconnecting citizens to European policies and European mission**.

We recognise the challenges facing the European Union, and in particular the need to support smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

**All territories**, with their natural and human resources or specific activities, can make a **large contribution to this essential growth**. This contribution depends upon continued efforts to diversify the economies, to



sustain and strengthen services, to manage the resources in a sustainable way and to improve the qualifications of people and empower the communities.

We believe that **sub-regional partnerships, built on the LEADER and CLLD** approach, can make a **powerful contribution to the integrated and sustainable development of each territory and community** in the programme period beyond 2020, and could also assist greatly in connecting dissatisfied and sceptic citizens to the European mission.

We in ELARD are also convinced that LEADER/CLLD and LAGs are **the right instrument to localize, implement, follow-up and review the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda** in rural areas.

Local development can be a **game changer** made of the sum of several small projects and initiatives.

These implies that formal processes of **community-led local development must continue in the years beyond 2020**. These processes must combine and harmonise the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development; and they must be related to the individual character and **developmental needs of each territory**, but also rely on cooperation and networking among territories.

The LEADER approach, which has been extended into CLLD, is a key instrument in these development processes. It is a unique bottom-up instrument for sustainable, integrated, and multi-sectoral local development. It enables public, private and civil stakeholders in each territory to come together, to work in partnerships, and to involve the local people in each area in shaping and implementing a local development strategy.

The local and participative character of the LEADER/CLLD approach also comprises a high potential for connecting citizens to the European mission. Local Action Groups, managing European funds in a spirit of public participation, can enable local people and organisations to have **ownership of their local development strategies and to share decision-making**. In the territories supported by LEADER/CLLD, citizens feel that the EU has been present and caring for them. Not patronising, but supporting and empowering.

The LEADER Local Action Groups and ELARD are actively participating in the ongoing discussions on the future of the European rural development and cohesion policy.

At the end of 2016, ELARD agreed and issued the [Tartu declaration](#), on the future of LEADER. This was followed late 2017 with the [position paper for LEADER post-2020](#). In September 2018, we organised the ["Conference "LEADER Reloaded"](#) in Évora, Portugal with more than 280 participants from 28 countries to take stock on the achievements of LEADER/CLLD in the light of the legal proposals for the ESI Funds and the CAP.



And we are not alone. The European Rural Parliament, the Cork 2.0 Declaration, the OECD Rural Paradigm, the European Economic and Social Committee Opinion on CLLD... all these are promoting the involvement of stakeholders and defending the need of more trust between all participants in policy delivery.

As I was saying, this is an important moment to discuss the future of LEADER and CLLD, after all the Commission's legislative proposals that were unveiled in mid-2018, namely the Regional and Cohesion Policy, and the CAP.

But all these policies had severe cuts, due to new or reinforced priorities under the EU Multiannual Financial Framework and a reduction of the EU budget. These cuts, in our opinion, are not sending the right signals to European citizens.

That's why we ask that the framework for future EU development programmes should include **rethinking and expansion of the role of LEADER and Community Led Local Development**. Local Action Groups should be a vehicle for social innovation and capacity building, empowering citizens to take ownership of development of their area through the design and implementation of strategy and projects, embracing and implementing the **Smart Villages approach**.

Regarding the Commission proposals to the future CAP, the new delivery model outlined, giving member states more flexibility to tailor-make the policy and adapt it to local circumstances, shouldn't stop at Member State level. **Real subsidiarity requires a strong involvement of local stakeholders** in designing and implementing measures, and not just local authorities, but also Civil Society.

There should be an **increase of freedom and delegated authority for Local Action Groups**, with simplified rules and procedures and a truly integrated approach to local development, mobilizing diverse source of funding and also multiple EU funds.

ELARD and Local Action Groups expressed **concerns about the cuts** proposed by the Commission to the CAP budget in general and Rural Development in particular, and we are also sceptical regarding the capacity of the new CAP to present **genuine simplification all along the delivery chain** and specially to the beneficiaries.

Regarding the legal proposals of the Commission for post 2020, we are pleased that **DG AGRI has again made LEADER mandatory in the Rural Development Fund with a minimum of 5%** and we are, at the same time, disappointed that no ring-fencing is proposed for the other Funds. That's why **we ask for a minimum earmarking across the different funds for CLLD**, to ensure continuation and possible extension of the LEADER/CLLD in the upcoming programming.

We call for the **reintegration of the Rural Development Fund into the Common Provision Regulations** and we support the European Parliament and many other rural stakeholder organisations in the wish to keep



Rural Development within the “ESI Funds family”. A greater inter-relationship between these funds is vital for the financing of territorial instruments, in particular CLLD/LEADER Development Strategies.

In the current programming period, coordination and articulation of policies and funds under CLLD at local level is not easy and the **announced separation of Rural Development from ESI Funds is a clear step backwards** in the achievements made so far, which can have negative implications to the smooth implementation of multifunded Local Development Strategies.

The current programming period is marked – we all know – by an enormous increase of complexity, bureaucracy, administrative work for all involved in policy delivery, including Local Action Groups. In many Member States – like in Portugal, my own country – LAGs lost their autonomy and flexibility and are contaminated by administrative procedures and have less capacity and time to **territorial animation**.

We already know that the new CAP framework will need more time to enter into force, so we ask for clarity on the **technical measures to allow a smooth transition** between the current funding period and the next, including LEADER/CLLD. There is a big risk of an almost certain time gap between the current and the next programming period resulting in negative impacts on LEADER groups and other stakeholders and Civil Society Organisations in rural areas, if an adequate transition mechanism is not implemented.

These negotiations and discussions have not finished. The legislative proposals from the Commission were an important step on the preparation of the next programme period, but we need to take advantage of this moment to build a positive framework and avoid mistakes from the past.

We must continue this dialogue at EU level, profiting from the European Rural Parliament platform and joining all relevant stakeholders. But, also at Member State level.

We hope to achieve a reinforced local development approach both in Common Agriculture Policy and in Cohesion Policy.

Thanks to the European Economic and Social Committee and thank you for your attention.

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