

What's a LEADER approach?



There are seven principles adopted by ELARD:

1. The area based approach

An area-based approach takes a small, homogenous, socially cohesive territory, often characterised by common traditions, a local identity, a sense of belonging or common needs and expectations, as the target area for policy implementation. Having such an area as a reference facilitates the recognition of local strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities, endogenous potential and the identification of major bottlenecks for sustainable development.

Area-based essentially means local. This approach is likely to work better than other approaches because it allows actions to be tailored more precisely to suit real needs and local competitive advantage. The area chosen must have sufficient coherence and critical mass in terms of human, financial and economic resources to support a viable local development strategy. It does not have to correspond to predefined administrative boundaries.

The definition of a 'local area' is neither universal nor static. On the contrary, it evolves and changes with broader economic and social change, the role of farming, land management and environmental concerns, and general perceptions about rural areas.

In order to achieve economic and social development the Local Action Groups area must be small enough to be cohesive and large enough to ensure that development can be generated from within the area. The generation of development from within the area depends on the capacity of its inhabitants.

2. The Bottom Up approach

The bottom-up approach means that local actors participate in decision-making about the strategy and in the selection of the priorities to be pursued in their local area. Experience has shown that the bottom-up approach should not be considered as alternative or opposed to topdown approaches from national and/or regional authorities, but rather as combining and interacting with them, in order to achieve better overall results.

Of the seven features of LEADER the most distinctive one is the bottom-up approach. Rural policies following this approach should be designed and implemented in the way best adapted to the needs of the communities they serve. One way to ensure this is to invite local stakeholders to take the lead and participate. This holds true in both the EU of 15 and of 27 Member States, but is equally important in countries aspiring to EU membership where there are structural problems in agriculture and many opportunities to improve the quality of rural life.

The involvement of local actors includes the population at large, economic and social interest groups and representative public and private institutions. Capacity building is an essential component of the bottom-up approach, involving:

awareness raising, training, participation and mobilisation of the local population to identify the strengths and weakness of the area (analysis);

participation of different interest groups in drawing up a local development strategy; establishment of clear criteria for selection at local level of appropriate actions (projects) to deliver the strategy.



Participation should not be limited to the initial phase but should extend throughout the implementation process, contributing to the strategy, the accomplishment of the selected projects and in stocktaking and learning for the future. There are also important issues of transparency which need to be addressed in the mobilisation and consultation procedures in order to reach consensus through dialogue and negotiation among participating actors.

Many would recognise the Bottom-up approach of LEADER as its anchor tenet. By involving local communities in rural development planning and implementation LEADER has breathed new life into communities facing unprecedented challenges.

3. The Local Action group

Setting up a local partnership, known as a 'local action group' (LAG), is an original and important feature of the LEADER approach. The LAG has the task of identifying and implementing a local development strategy, making decisions about the allocation of its financial resources and managing them. LAGs are likely to be effective in stimulating sustainable development because they:

- Aggregate and combine available human and financial resources from the public sector, the private sector, the civic and voluntary sectors;
- Associate local players around collective projects and multi-sectoral actions, in order to achieve synergies, joint ownership, and the critical mass needed to improve the area's economic competitiveness;
- Strengthen the dialogue and cooperation between different rural actors, who often have little experience in working together, by reducing potential conflict and facilitating negotiated solutions through consultation and discussion;
- Facilitate, through the interaction between different partners, the processes of adaptation and change in the agricultural sector (for example, quality products, food chains), the integration of environmental concerns, the diversification of the rural economy and quality of life.

A LAG should associate public and private partners, and be well-balanced and representative of the existing local interest groups, drawn from the different socioeconomic sectors in the area. At the decision-making level, the private partners and associations must make up at least 50 % of the local partnership.

LAGs may be set up ad hoc to access LEADER support, or may be based on previously existing partnerships. Endowed with a team of practitioners and decision-making powers, the LAG represents a model of organisation that can influence the delivery of policies in a positive way. Experience shows that several types of LAG have been developed from these common characteristics, as a result of different forms of regional and national political and institutional organisation, and also with differing degrees of autonomy regarding project approval and financial management. The role and responsibilities of LAGs have also evolved over time in some Member States, as familiarity with the LEADER approach has grown.



LAGs decide the direction and content of the local rural development strategy, and make decisions on the different projects to be financed. Actual payments are often made by a paying authority dealing with public funding rather than the LAG itself, on the basis of project selection made by the LAG.

The rural actors that are most active in local initiatives are:

- professional organisations and unions (representing farmers, non-farming professionals and micro-enterprises),
- trade associations, citizens,
- residents and their local organisations,
- local political representatives,
- environmental associations,
- cultural and community service providers, including the media,
- women's associations,
- young people.

Often overlooked once the group is established, the ongoing development of the Local Action Group itself is crucial to the success of LEADER. The composition of the group, which should include representatives of all sectors of the region in which it operates, with a good geographic spread, rotation of board and sub committee members and of course gender balance is only sustained through ongoing Capacity Building work.

4. The Innovative Approach

LEADER can play a valuable role in stimulating new and innovative approaches to the development of rural areas. Such innovation is encouraged by allowing LAGs wide margins of freedom and flexibility in making decisions about the actions they want to support. Innovation needs to be understood in a wide sense. It may mean the introduction of a new product, a new process, a new organisation or a new market. This common definition of innovation is valid for rural as well as urban areas.

However, rural areas, because of their low density and relatively poor level of human and physical resources, have weaker linkages with research and development centres and may find it difficult to produce radical innovations, although this is of course possible.

Innovation in rural areas may imply the transfer and adaptation of innovations developed elsewhere, the modernisation of traditional forms of know-how, or finding new solutions to persistent rural problems which other policy interventions have not been able to solve in a satisfactory and sustainable way.

This can provide new responses to the specific problems of rural areas. Introducing the LEADER approach, with its seven features, may be an innovation in policy-making in its own right, which may generate innovative actions by the original policy-delivery method that has been adopted. For example, the bottom-up approach described above may stimulate the emergence of new project ideas which may then be supported by the LAG because it is not bound by a fixed menu of measures. The adoption of information and communication technologies in rural areas may become an important channel for wider access to innovations by the rural population.



Local Action Groups stretched themselves to tackle more difficult problems and look far beyond their own boundaries to find solutions. Innovation is crucial in addressing rural decline and Local Action Groups have risen to the challenge to be innovative in their approach as well as in their projects.

5. Integrated & Multi sectoral approach

LEADER is not a sectoral development programme; the local development strategy must have a multi-sectoral rationale, integrating several sectors of activity. The actions and projects contained in local strategies should be linked and coordinated as a coherent whole. Integration may concern actions conducted in a single sector, all programme actions or specific groups of actions or, most importantly, links between the different economic, social, cultural, environmental players and sectors involved.

Sometimes explained as the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Its delivery in the LEADER programme is again dependent to a large extent on the Animation and Capacity Building work of the Local Action Groups. Integration between sectors and actors is a fundamental element of the LEADER programme.

6. Networking

Networking is one of the main features of the LEADER approach; furthermore, it is a very complex one in terms of objectives, tools, implementation methods, actors involved and ways of meeting the needs of members.

Networking includes the exchange of achievements, experiences and know-how between LEADER groups, rural areas, administrations and organisations involved in rural development within the EU, whether or not they are direct LEADER beneficiaries. It is also about means of transferring good practice, of disseminating innovation and of building on the lessons learned from local rural development.

There are different types of networks:

Institutional networks

- These are funded by the European Commission, which defines their role. The EU supports networking structures at both European and national level which bring together LEADER groups, administrations, and all other interested partners active in rural development.
- Since 2007, the types of institutional network include also the European network for rural development (run by the Commission) and a national rural network, to be set up in each Member State.
- Networking activities have primarily been focused on LEADER only, but from 2007 onwards they will address a much broader range of rural development issues. They will have expert support and undertake practical activities such as preparing publications on different aspects of rural development, organising seminars, analysing rural development actions to identify good practice, identifying development trends in rural areas, running websites and helping LEADER groups search for potential partners and launch cooperation projects. The European network also acts as a meeting point for national networks and administrations in each Member State in order to share experience at European level. Participation in networking activities is mandatory for all LEADER groups receiving EU

financial support, but other groups are welcome to feed in their knowledge and experience into the network.



National, regional and local networks

- Networks or associations of LEADER groups have also been set up or have emerged more informally at local, regional or national level in some Member States and at European level the European LEADER Association for Rural Development.
- Networking forges links between people, projects and rural areas and so can help overcome the isolation faced by some rural regions. It can help stimulate cooperation projects by putting LEADER groups in touch with each other.

7. Cooperation

Cooperation goes further than networking. It involves a local action group undertaking a joint project with another LEADER group, or with a group taking a similar approach, in another region, Member State, or even third country.

Cooperation can help LEADER groups to boost their local activities. It can allow them to resolve certain problems or add value to local resources. For example, it can be a way of achieving the critical mass necessary for a specific project to be viable, or of encouraging complementary actions. Examples include joint marketing by Leader groups in different regions whose areas share a specialisation in a specific product (chestnuts, wool, etc.), or developing joint tourism initiatives based on a shared cultural heritage (Celtic, Roman, etc.).

Cooperation projects are not just simple exchanges of experiences. They must involve a concrete joint project, ideally managed under a common structure. There are two different types of cooperation possible under LEADER:

- interterritorial cooperation: this means cooperation between different rural areas within a Member State; it may take place between LEADER groups, and it is also open to other local groups using a similar participatory approach;
- transnational cooperation: this means cooperation between LEADER groups from at least two Member States, or with groups in third countries following a similar approach.

The potential of the measure in sharing experience across rural Europe and assisting in the achievement of cohesiveness amongst different and diverse states has yet to be realised fully. Moreover with the pre-accession states enthusiastic to get involved in the LEADER Program, Animation and Capacity Building take on a whole new dimension.