



LEADER's potential from a policy perspective

POLICY INSIGHTS

The EU's LEADER methodology is world famous for leaving no one behind in a variety of rural policy fields. LEADER's flexibility continues to make it an ideal tool for helping Local Action Groups (LAGs) deliver valuable local contributions to high-level objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the coming years.

The LEADER approach to rural territorial development is now over 30 years old and its stakeholders have gained significant insight into best practice approaches to implementing innovative rural development policy. The methodology is acknowledged for its capacity to build social and human capital through helping communities to innovate and advance. Resulting benefits also often boost confidence of local populations to take forward new initiatives that help them help themselves.

Success stories from three decades of such LEADER **implementation** reinforce its international credentials. For example, the **United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization meeting of the European Commission for Europe in 2022** highlighted the opportunities that LEADER offers. The methodology was promoted by the UN to agricultural and rural development Ministers from EU and other governments as good practice. LEADER's competence was heralded for paving new territorial development pathways in rural areas and offering options for significant additionality contributions to creating new **jobs**, income opportunities, facilities, and services. LAGs in various EU Member States have also successfully applied the method in addressing emerging challenges, for examples related to climate change adaptation and mitigation, the **social inclusion of migrants**, and even the **COVID-19 crisis**.

LEADER will continue to deliver these vitally important results at local level in EU Member States during the 2023-2027 programming period of the **CAP**, through support for cooperation within the **CAP Strategic Plans** (CSPs). These will provide resources for LAGs to coordinate community-led projects reflecting localised territorial

priorities for socio-economic development and environmental management.

Policy implementation benefits

EU rural communities can benefit greatly from the thousands of LAGs involved in implementing the new CAP. This additional critical mass of bottom-up development practitioners and expertise can also act as a valuable resource to help implement the top-down policy.

LAGs are all connected via national and EU networking. Together, this web of rural development extension services can provide an effective policy outreach channel that allows high level policies direct access to engage with EU citizens – through village level action on the ground all around rural Europe. Similarly, the LAGs are able to raise awareness of their local area's development priorities at the highest CAP levels through their connectivity and close networking relations with local, national and EU bodies. This policy outreach and implementation channel is unique in the CAP and it can be considered to represent a specific and highly valuable strategic attribute of LEADER from a policy perspective – including for those responsible for thinking globally and needing to act locally.

Top-down priorities of the CAP are packaged through the policy's three over-arching general objectives: fostering a smart, competitive, resilient, and diversified agricultural sector ensuring long-term food security; as well as supporting and strengthening environmental protection, including biodiversity and **climate action**; while strengthening the socio-economic fabric of rural areas. LAGs are well-placed to translate these general CAP objectives into concrete results through LEADER processes and projects.

In this context, LEADER will continue to deliver CAP results related to many of the topics dealt with through our publication series of Policy Insights. LAGs for instance share a spectrum of CAP implementation



experience supporting rural stakeholder groups and policy priorities such as **local farmers**, **rural women**, environmental sustainability, and others spanning the **CAP's ten specific objectives (SOs)**. LEADER is part of **SO 8 of the CAP** and its policy success will mainly be measured from here. It can also offer considerable potential to complement other CAP goals and create policy synergies with other SOs from the LAG resources.

CAP contributions

Agri-food cooperation has been a focus for LEADER since the methodology's early days in the **1990s**. A large library of **LAG-funded agri-food good practices** demonstrates LEADER's relevance at a local level for supporting farm income in ways which reinforce the resilience of agri-food supply chains to enhance long-term food security and agricultural diversity, in addition to ensuring the economic sustainability of agricultural production. LAGs remain a useful part of the CAP funding toolkit for improving responses by EU agriculture to societal demands on food and health, including safe, nutritious and sustainable food, as well as animal welfare.

Results from LEADER action in these CAP fields not only help protect food quality and health, but they also increase competitiveness, enhance market orientation and help improve farmers' position in long and short value chains. LAGs can, and do, use their budgets to launch locally-led, small-scale approaches to fill gaps in EU funding opportunities for helping rebalance the power in the food chain. LEADER is purposely designed to leave no one behind in policy implementation through SO 8. LAG support is often used to first assess, then address the needs of vulnerable rural groups (like youth, the elderly, or newcomers).

LEADER can be a popular source of rural funding for young people and the methodology has been at the vanguard of **valuing young peoples' potential** for improving the current and future prospects of EU rural communities. LAGs have long supported community-led action by and for younger rural residents. This includes building social and human capital through promoting **youth entrepreneurship** opportunities that can help tackle depopulation pressures and result in Europe's countryside being considered more attractive to **younger generations** of farmers, foresters, and other rural residents.

The CAP's vision for vibrant rural areas can be realised in part by LAGs thanks to LEADER's holistic characteristics. LAG assistance has always extended far beyond agri-food sectors and, by default, promotes inclusive approaches to employment, growth, **social impact**, and local development in rural areas. LAGs' funding flexibility can be adapted to bolster competitiveness along the full range of rural economic sectors, including community-led approaches in service provision, uptake of new technology, and

improved digital know-how for **rural communities**, the bio-economy, and **sustainable forestry**. LEADER can for example fund cooperation among forest stakeholders through the networking of forest-related innovations. It can also enhance other CSP interventions through LAG support for ecosystem services, like storing carbon in soil and biomass, as well as reducing emissions and providing rural employment.

LEADER LAGs can also pursue environmental goals including the promotion of climate action and sustainable transitions to better protect biodiversity, habitats and landscapes. LAGs throughout the EU contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as sustainable energy as part of the methodology's mainstream emphasis on environmental care. LEADER's focus on the latter can facilitate and foster **sustainable development** and efficient management of natural resources such as **air**, **water**, and **soil**. LAG interests in pursuing community partnerships can allow important local environmental matters to be debated and agreed in inclusive manners. By improving communication in such circumstances, collaborations, synergies and trade-offs between different objectives can be found through LAG governance mediation mechanisms, leading to appropriate actions being decided mutually.

LEADER's well proven methodology enables LAGs to adopt strategies suited to the specific needs of their local territories and review and modify these strategies according to emerging needs. Results can support the diversity and integration of projects, like LEADER's instrumental support for **Smart Villages** actions. Such positive policy traits typify LEADER's considerable potential for helping LAGs facilitate community-led innovative developments through SO 8 that can complement other CAP goals and creates policy synergies from LAG resources. The methodology has matured over its 30 years and collected **copious insights** as a successful policy delivery tool for bottom-up practitioners that also holds significant outreach benefits for policy practitioners working from a top-down perspective.



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