

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE SEE LEADER CONFERENCE 2019 OPATIJA, NOVEMBER 20-22

*A LEARNING PROCESS FOR EVERYONE THAT TAKES INTO ACCOUNT
DIFFERENT MEMORIES AND RISES TO THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY*

CONTEXT

Today in the countries of South-East Europe there are more than 1400 local action groups and local action group initiatives (further: LAGs; conceptually unites the types of groups: LAGs, FLAGs and ULAGs). They demonstrate best the interest and potential of these areas for a participative and integrated approach to territorial development. A neo-endogenous approach to development.

However, for the administration and the territories in Eastern and South-eastern Europe LEADER and CLLD still represent a new approach that questions the traditional way of doing things. At all levels, it is a process of capacity building and learning.

A dimension that needs to be more taken into account by strengthening animation, education, networking and evaluation. A process that needs to be protected by Integrity Pacts as Civil Control Mechanism for Safeguarding EU funds as an initiative that has received European Ombudsman's Award for Good Administration 2019 in the category Excellence in open administration.

An **Integrity Pact** is a contract between a contracting authority and economic operators bidding for public contracts that they will abstain from corrupt practices and will conduct a transparent procurement process. To ensure accountability and legitimacy, an Integrity Pact includes a separate contract with a civil society organization which monitors that all parties comply with their commitments (European Commission, "Integrity Pacts", 2019)

From 2004, and with the consequent expansion of the European Union in 2007 and 2013 the LEADER approach expands from the countries of the older democracies to the former communist and socialist countries of the younger democracies. To the countries where the meaning of *grassroots*, *participatory*, and *local development* bares different historical contexts and whose rural population has a different perspective on development.

It is through the process of Europeanization that this happens. A twofold process. One of the adoptions of the European *acquis* and the Europeanization of member states administration and a road of the flexibility of the EU policy. And one where EU policies take into account different memories of the rural population, the final beneficiaries. Pushing at the same time Europeanization processes within national administration themselves.

ASPIRATIONS

Inspired by the lessons learned in the implementation of LEADER in territories with weak to no knowledge of democratic and participative approaches to development. Inspired by the challenges faced in the cooperation with national administrations that lack experience in framing, shaping and implementing such development policies we have set to organize 1st International conference on practical and theoretical implications of LEADER/CLLD approach in South-East Europe.

It is by focusing on South-East Europe and gathering LAGs from countries that share the memory of communist and socialist approaches to development that we aspired to

- Further foster, strengthen and catalyze awareness of local development stakeholders, local action groups, experts and decision-makers (managing and implementing bodies).
- Demonstrate that the development of LEADER/CLLD should be based on local communities innovation and resources. Emphasize the need to embed it on experience of LEADER communities and in the contributions and recommendations stemming from academic research.
- Contribute to a creation of a common framework for LEADER/CLLD implementation for the next programming period by taking into account: historical context of LEADER and the countries it is being implemented in, benefits to the local communities in the examples of good practices and European Commission's guidelines for the post-2020 period.

By engaging in a debate between the EU bodies, national administration, academia, rural and fisheries areas networks and LAGs.

In our quest to truly present the broad array of discussion, debates, conclusions as well as the aspirations made during the conference, the Organizing Committee of the Conference has taken time and worked hard to both summarize and contextualize 1st SEE LEADER Conference within the light of contemporary challenges LAG territories and European Union and its overseas territories face and the ongoing debate on the future of rural/fisheries areas and neo-endogenous development in Europe.

KEY LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

1. Investing in people to strengthen democracy and reconciliation between communities

Eastern and South-Eastern territories of Europe have lived times of significant change over the last 100 years. Times of war, change of frontiers, ideologies and economic systems. The existence of local action groups and like-wise initiatives in these territories has allowed space for dialogue and fostered development dynamics embedded in the practice of reconciliation and mutual exchange. However, this is a process that takes time. It is a process that is fragile and that needs to be nurtured – supported and strengthened.

Over 1400 local action groups and like-wise initiatives, stemming in territories that have been wrenched with conflicts and marked with ethnic divisions represent an opportunity. Opportunity to go beyond economic empowerment and democracy towards being united in peace, not only in diversity. Opportunity to surmount the treats of corruption, nepotism and depopulation that arise due to economic underdevelopment. An opportunity to empower the citizens to envision their own sustainable development and push public authorities to rise to these challenges via transparent, responsible and participative governance.

It is a process of learning for all the actors involved. A process of learning how to dialogue and how to learn from this dialogue. Not only how to foster economic empowerment, but how to recreate territorial dynamics embedded in togetherness.

How to build, and re-build communities marked by conflicts and are now faced with demographic challenges on the basis of inclusive and democratic sustainable development.

2. Leaving space to the local actors & local partnerships – allowing for a local vision of development

The role of LAGs has been recognized as one of a local community animator, local strategy

facilitator and a creator of social capital in a local community.

Member States should take into account the knowledge and the field experience of (F)LAGs. One that can and should feed into every step of the policy planning process.

LAGs are in the territory working daily with the rural actors on the development of their territories. In numerous cases, they have begun to demonstrate their knowledge of the territory in the projects they have implemented. They have shown they have sufficient administrative capacity to run LEADER on its own.

LAGs and LAG territories are therefore resources to be identified and valorized. In that regard capacity building of LAG professionals and LAG territories is the key. Equipping them with both financial and social resources necessary to create and maintain grassroots dynamics through the process of community-led local development AND at the same time lessen their administrative burden that will give them the time to do that is a MUST.

3. A rural agenda for an integrated-territorial development of rural areas

Rural areas represent great potential for the whole of Europe, but above all for the countries of South-East Europe. Its' territories are rich in the heritage of every sort: cultural, social and natural. It is therefore of the outmost importance that every public policy whether it be transportation, infrastructure or research and development looks at the totality of the territory and takes into account how different elements of these policies will affect this vast heritage and enormous capital.

If we are to have living in rural areas every single public policy needs to ask what impact does it have on rural areas. How does it help make rural areas alive? It is something public policies often disregard looking at development projects as separate from the area in which they are embedded. A new bridge is not just a national project that develops infrastructure, it is also an opportunity to revitalize, or further pacify rural areas. It can exist as an element of the landscape detached from the community or it can be embedded in the community representing its competitive advantage.

Using LEADER logic in the framing, shaping and implementation of each and every policy that touches rural areas is a way of doing development not on an equal footing, but on an equity basis. LEADER is a participative approach that requires both horizontal and vertical collaboration of actors in each step of the process. We therefore strongly suggest to SEE national administration to invest time and effort in developing a different perspective to development, specifically integrated territorial development. One of participation, trust, flexibility and multiscale redistribution of tasks related to LEADER-CLLD in a continuous dialogue between managing authorities and LAGs.

Since the mainstreaming LEADER to CAP and ESI, every programming period has brought ever more important administrative burden that has hindered the LAG capacities to deliver tangible, moreover, promised results in LAG territories. It is a challenge all LAG territories share but is more evident in countries of young democracies such as SEE. In the conference, SEE LAGs continuously drew attention on the distribution of their work that is more and more administration and not sufficient time for animation and community building.

4. CLLD as an approach to social capital creation and a tool of multilevel governance

LEADER-CLLD is recognized as an important tool for developing a circular economy and fostering democracy.

LEADER, today community-led local development represents an approach that is to foster empowerment of rural areas not only through subsidy distribution but via community engagement, building of social cohesion and skill transfer.

LEADER-CLLD is to be seen as a tool for permeating national measures (top-down) and local activities (bottom-up). LAGs have the possibility to serve as knowledge brokers between the central and local levels of governance. This could be achieved through a flexible framework of multilevel governance that facilitates the use of different EU programs and funds for delivery of an encompassing integrated projects that foster development, democratization and innovation in rural areas.

LEADER actors need to have more stability, administrative and financial flexibility in order to do their part of knowledge brokers that fosters the creation of public goods in its territory. In SEE countries whose territories hold an array of different memories of development stability is crucial.

The role of the LAGs in that respect extends beyond distribution of funds for local development projects and moves toward fostering local economic self-sufficiency. One that is good for the planet and for democracy.

5. Simplification for Innovation

Permanent dialogue between Member States, with the rural networks and with the LAGs is desirable in order to constantly seek the administrative processes best suited to the needs of rural actors while guaranteeing the indispensable rigor and transparency necessary for the management of public funds.

Important work has been carried out by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) and Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) in collaboration with the managing authorities. The proposals put forward in this context deserve to be taken into account by the Member States.

LEADER-CLLD is best used and gives the best results when sufficient funding and flexibility are available.

It is a lesson already learned by some Member States. As the decision on the way LEADER is to be implemented in the certain Member States at present lies almost exclusively on the national administration we urge that decision to be taken in dialogue or co-construction with LAG territories.

A multi-source funding allocation of a minimum of 5% from each ESI fund, and giving LAGs a possibility to attribute a lump sum for project implementation would give a TRULY local management framework to the LAGs and more flexibility to deliver integrated projects that demand various investments. Of course following the principle of transparency all along the policy chain.

6. Local Action Groups as Communities for Future, the Green Deal from and with citizens and territories

Local Action Groups (LAGs) gather different territorial stakeholders in building a common vision for the territory. They are territorial catalysts for a community-led action on climate & sustainability.

The success of the Green Deal needs vigorous action from all levels. With LEADER it is the citizens, the actors in the territory who are closest to the local reality, that engage and can construct social change. A change that is indispensable for a social and ecological transition. It is a potential often disregarded and insufficiently taken into account in top-down policies.

They are the drivers that have the people, knowledge and the skills needed to push towards a greener and more caring society. It is embedded in LAGs as organizations and LEADER territories. The time to change this is now. It is now that European, but above all national bodies need to address the potential of LAGs and LEADER territories and give them the tools to act and act now.

To develop both participative and integrated policies for rural areas that will focus on impact assessment. LAGs are (or could be) the keystone of democratic participation. Participation of citizens, entrepreneurs, workers, consumers, scientists and the public

sector in achieving synergy between the public and private funds that jointly steer long term sustainable investment plans. This especially concerns the countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe that fall behind both in the democratic development of its societies, as well as in scientific, economic and technological development in relation to the other EU Member States.

It is crucial that Eastern and South-Eastern Europe doesn't remain simply a bastion of free labor and market for the other EU Member States. It is precisely with LEADER-CLLD and rural, urban and fisheries local action groups all over the EU that we see the opportunity to overcome this threat. It is a way of economic and democratic empowerment toward a more just and inclusive transition.

We see it as the main way towards the revitalization of abandoned and heavily depopulated rural areas. It is a way of making rural areas attractive to live, work and do business in, both for young people, and those that are less so.

LEADER is the key to securing the implementation of the Just Transition Mechanisms of Europe towards a climate-neutral continent. One that secures its citizens work places based on the circular economy, cleaner environment and improved quality of life that ensures the preservation of our Planet.

These are the recommendations of the SEE LEADER Conference held in Opatija, Croatia 20-22 November 2019 attended by 320 representatives of LAGs, Scientists, Managing Authorities and Operational Bodies from 20 (CE)SEE countries. Recommendations are intended as a help and recommendation to the EU Commission and the governments of the Member States as well as the candidate countries in planning and programming the implementation of the LEADER-CLLD methodology in the next programming period.

These conclusions are aimed to facilitate the work of LAGs in the coming period. The recommendations strive to give back to the basic starting points and values of LEADER in order to develop the rural communities of Europe as high as possible.

SEE LEADER Conference invites the EU Commission and national governments to accept and incorporate these recommendations into the programming of ESI Funds in the 2021-2027 programming period.

Organizing Committee of the SEE LEADER Conference 2019