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EVALUATION

Evaluation of the impact of LEADER towards the general objective "balanced territorial development"

{SWD(2024) 171 final}

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Glossary

Term or acronym	Meaning or definition
AIR	Annual implementation report
CAP	Common agricultural policy
CLLD	Community-led local development
CMES/CMEF	Common Monitoring and Evaluation System/Framework
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EAGF	European Agriculture Guarantee Fund
EC	European Commission
EIP	European Innovation Partnership
EMFF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
ENRD	European Network for Rural Development
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
EU	European Union
FA	Focus area
FTE	Full-time equivalent (workload unit of measurement equivalent to one working day of an individual worker)
LAG	Local Action Group

LEADER	Liaison entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale
LEADER/CLLD	Although LEADER is the term used for CLLD in rural areas, LEADER/CLLD is used in this document when referring to multi-funding (the use of several ESI funds to support local strategies)
LEADER added value method	Evaluation method developed by the ENRD to assess the LEADER approach. It is based on the assessment of the improvement in governance, social capital and results due to the implementation of LEADER ⁽¹⁾
LDS	Local development strategy
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RDP	Rural development programme
SME	Small or medium-sized enterprise
SWOT	Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats: a SWOT analysis is a tool used to identify those elements related to strategic planning
Umbrella projects	LAG-led LEADER Specific Actions that can be seen as a package of small operations promoted by different actors, and which is treated as a single project.

⁽¹⁾ Guidelines: Evaluation of LEADER/CLLD, European Network for Rural Development (2017) https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/evaluation/publications/evaluation-leaderclld_en.html.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the EU's main objectives is to strengthen its economic, social and territorial cohesion. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union requires the promotion of harmonious development and seeks to reduce disparities, with special attention to rural areas. The EU's common agricultural policy (CAP) contributes to balanced territorial development through a series of measures to promote economic development, employment, growth, poverty reduction and social inclusion in rural areas. These measures are financed as part of the EU's rural development policy. One of these measures is LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) ⁽²⁾.

LEADER has been used for more than 30 years to engage local actors in designing and implementing community-led rural development strategies by mobilising local resources and promoting local participation.

In 2010, the European Court of Auditors stressed the need to assess LEADER and its added value for rural areas ⁽³⁾. The European Commission (EC) therefore included LEADER as a specific topic in its evaluation plan for the 2014-2020 rural development policy. In 2022, the European Court of Auditors released a new report about LEADER ⁽⁴⁾ and recommended an assessment of not only the effectiveness of LEADER but also its added value compared to other instruments and the extent to which LEADER specific costs are justified.

This document sets out the results of the evaluation of LEADER as set out in Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 and Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013. The Commission ordered two evaluation support studies ⁽⁵⁾ to feed into this evaluation. The results of these studies have already helped improve LEADER programming, monitoring and evaluation for the new 2023-2027 CAP plans ⁽⁶⁾. The evaluation will also help in designing future rural development policy.

The evaluation takes a broad analytical perspective assessing not only the effects of the local strategies on the local economy and social cohesion, but also the LEADER approach as a tool to improve the governance and social capital of rural areas, thanks to its specific delivery mechanism.

The evaluation covers 2014-2022 and all Member States. It includes the UK, which was a Member State for most of that period ⁽⁷⁾.

⁽²⁾ 'Links between activities for the development of rural economy'

⁽³⁾ https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR10_05/SR10_05_EN.PDF

⁽⁴⁾ European Court of Auditors, 'Special Report 10/2022'. https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR22_10/SR_Leader_EN.pdf.

⁽⁵⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., 'Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'.

⁽⁶⁾ Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1475.

⁽⁷⁾ The UK withdrew from the EU on 1 February 2020. During a transition period lasting until 31 December 2020, EU law (with a few limited exceptions) continued to apply to and in the UK.

2. WHAT WAS THE EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE INTERVENTION?

2.1. Description of the intervention and its objectives

2.1.1. Context/history

LEADER is an approach to local development conceived as a community initiative in 1991. It is based on the principles of bottom-up decision-making at sub-regional level by representative private-public partnerships (local action groups) based on a local development strategy. The strategy includes innovative elements and uses cooperation and networking with other actors locally, nationally and transnationally.

Since its experimental phase in 1991, the approach has grown significantly both in terms of budget and coverage, but the method remains the same. In the 2014-2022 programming period, the LEADER approach transformed into a wider multi-fund called Community-led Local Development (CLLD). The CLLD can be financed not only from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) as originally, but also from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

Over the years, LEADER has grown from a total of EUR 1.2 billion of public funds ⁽⁸⁾ and 217 local action groups (LAGs) in its first experimental phase (1991-1993) to EUR 12.36 billion of public funds and 2 894 rural LAGs ⁽⁹⁾ in 2014-2022.

2.1.2. Key legal provisions for LEADER (2014-2022)

The basic legal framework for LEADER/CLLD is:

- Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the EAFRD.
- Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the ERDF, the ESF, the Cohesion Fund, the EAFRD and the EMFF and laying down general provisions on the ERDF, the ESF, the Cohesion Fund and the EMFF.
- Regulation (EU) 2020/2020 laying down certain transitional provisions for support from the EAFRD and EAGF in 2021 and 2022.

LEADER is Measure 19 in the rural development programmes with an obligatory allocation of at least 5% of the EAFRD contribution ⁽¹⁰⁾.

The rural development programmes, originally planned for 2014-2020, were extended by 2 years with supplementary budget allocations. They are being implemented according to the N+3 rule (with N being year 2022). This means that the projects can run and be finished by end-2025.

⁽⁸⁾ EU funds, Member States co-financing and additional financing (top-up).

⁽⁹⁾ The LEADER method has been extended to non-rural areas through CLLD for fisheries and urban areas. There are 443 non-rural LAGs in 2014-2022. Non-rural LAGs are financed from the EMFF, the ESF or the ERDF.

⁽¹⁰⁾ With the exception of Croatia, in which the minimum allocation is 2.5%.

The management of rural development programmes, including the LEADER measure, is done on the basis of shared management with the Member States' authorities ⁽¹¹⁾. In particular, the programming and day-to-day implementation of the measure is carried out by the Member States' authorities whereas the Commission approves the programmes and participates in the financing, monitoring, audit and evaluation of the LEADER measure, in line with the current legislation.

Table 1: Content of LEADER Measure 19

Sub-measure	Content
19.1. Preparatory support consisting of capacity building, training and networking with a view to preparing and implementing the local development strategy (LDS)	This sub-measure finances the setting up of new LAGs, the preparation of an LDS by both potential new LAGs and already established LAGs, and related training and networking. The purpose is to have a quality strategy created in consultation with the local population.
19.2. Implementation of operations under the LDS	<p>This sub-measure provides funding to implement the LDS via specific projects.</p> <p>The LAGs then open calls for projects by local applicants (such as local businesses, NGOs, public organisations, etc.) in line with the strategy, and select them for funding according to a set of clear criteria.</p> <p>The LDSs to be financed are selected by a competitive quality-based procedure.</p>
19.3. Preparation and implementation of the LAG's cooperation activities	Cooperation projects involve joint activities by two or more LAGs from one (interregional cooperation) or more Member States (transnational cooperation). These projects typically go beyond an exchange of experience or training. Each project has a partner. Projects are selected by the managing authorities
19.4. Running costs linked to the management, monitoring and evaluation of the LDS; animation to facilitate exchanges between stakeholders, to provide information and to promote the strategy and to support potential beneficiaries with a view to developing operations and preparing applications	This sub-measure provides funding for the functioning of LAGs (typically its staff and office) and animation efforts as well as publicising, monitoring and evaluation of the strategy. These costs can go up to a maximum of 25% of the total public expenditure incurred within the community-led LDS.

⁽¹¹⁾ In line with Art. 62 of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union.

2.1.3. LEADER/CLLD objectives

LEADER/CLLD objectives for the period assessed are set out by Member States in line with the EU regulations at three levels: (i) an overall framework for the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF); (ii) the rural development programmes, i.e. at regional or national level; (iii) and more specifically, at local level.

The first strategic choices for LEADER/CLLD are set by the Member States in the Partnership Agreement. The document links LEADER/CLLD to one of the thematic objectives of Art. 9 of Regulation 1303/2013 for the structural funds. Typically, it is the thematic objective 9: ‘Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination’, but it could also be another objective.

In the rural development programmes, the Member States or regions LEADER/CLLD programme measure under Priority 6 ‘Social Inclusion and Economic Development’, and more specifically Focus Area 6B. ‘Promoting local development in rural areas’. However, the measure can and does contribute to other focus areas (such as ‘Facilitating diversification, creation and development of small enterprises, as well as job creation’ (Focus Area 6A), or ‘Improving competitiveness of primary producers by better integrating them into the agri-food chain’ (Focus Area 3A) - see Table 5.

Within these broader objectives set by the Member States or regions, local communities formulate more specific goals in their LDS in a bottom-up manner, based on local needs and potential. The term ‘local development’ is then translated into a whole array of specific goals such as improving the quality of rural life, providing services (e.g. transport, healthcare, education or leisure), protecting heritage, improving public spaces, increasing social inclusion, diversifying economic activities, creating jobs, developing tourism, supporting young people, protecting the environment, creating local food supply chains, promoting local products or responding to climate change, among many others.

Mobilising local private and public stakeholders in collective efforts, promoting strategic thinking and decision-making and the best use of endogenous resources for the territory are also important underlying objectives of LEADER/CLLD.

2.1.4. Types of projects supported by LEADER

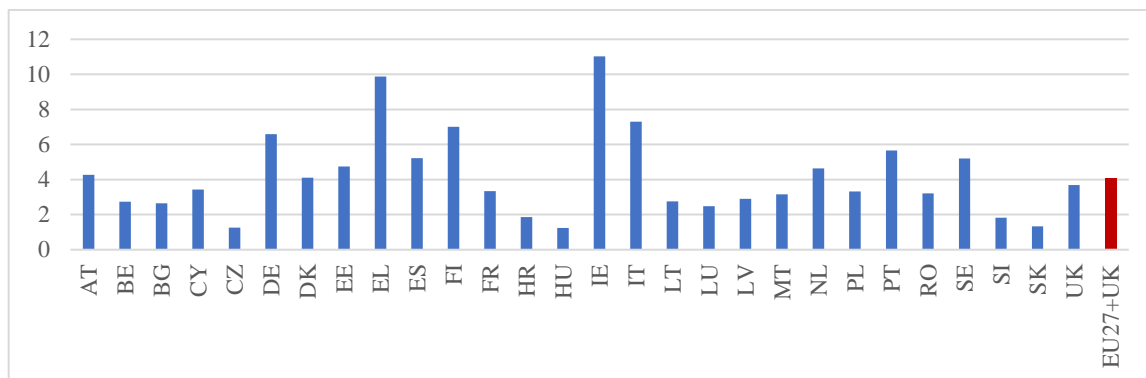
LEADER supports the implementation of the LDS. Legally speaking, at EU level there is great flexibility in defining the eligibility of projects which contribute to these strategies. This flexibility allows LAGs to finance both projects eligible under other rural development measures and those beyond such measures, which are specific to Measure 19.

The Member States or regions may target the use of LEADER on some key thematic areas in their rural development programmes. If they do so, typical LEADER projects tend to be focused on the areas of rural tourism, rural services, diversification of economic activities, quality of life, culture, rural services, local products and food value chains, but this can vary greatly.

LEADER also supports transnational and transregional cooperation projects. In these projects, LAGs engage in joint activities with another similar LEADER group that is taking a similar approach, in another region or Member State, with an urban or fisheries area or even with a rural group in a non-EU country. The general objective of LEADER cooperation is to help local actors to improve the potential of their own areas.

The amount of public resources allocated to each LDS in 2014-2022 is small and averages EUR 4 million, with variations between Member States from less than EUR 2 million in Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, Slovenia and Croatia to more than 8 million EUR in Ireland and Greece.

Figure 1: Average amount of public funds in rural development programme per local development strategy in 2014-2022 (€ million)



Source: AIR report 2021 and latest adopted RDP on March 2023.

2.1.5. How does LEADER work?

The LEADER method is based on seven principles. Each of these principles is important to ensure that the approach delivers value and fulfils its multiple objectives.

Table 2: The seven principles of the LEADER method

LEADER principle	What does it mean in practice?
Bottom-up approach	<p>A local community draws up their development plan in line with their own needs and priorities.</p> <p>They do this by drafting their LDS and selecting local projects for funding.</p>
Area-based approach	<p>The LDS covers a clearly defined geographical area.</p> <p>The development is focused on a sub-regional area, with a population between 10 000 and 150 000 inhabitants.</p> <p>The area covered is usually a small, homogenous, and socially and functionally cohesive territory, often characterised by common traditions, a local identity, a sense of belonging or common needs and expectations.</p>

LEADER principle	What does it mean in practice?
The local partnership	<p>The local partnership in LEADER, called the ‘Local action group’ (LAG), is the key actor in LEADER.</p> <p>It is composed of representatives of public and private local socio-economic interests, in which, at the decision-making level neither public authorities, nor any single interest group represents more than 49% of the voting rights. Typically, a LAG is an association or foundation, but other legal forms also exist in the Member States.</p> <p>The LAG prepares their LDS, selects projects, animate the territory, helps project applicants and selects projects for funding.</p>
The area-based development strategy	<p>The approach is carried out through an integrated and multi-sectoral LDS based on a particular area.</p> <p>The LDS includes the definition of the area covered, a SWOT analysis, the objectives and actions, targets and the desired results , information on the management and monitoring arrangements, and a financial plan. Each LDS also describes how the community was involved in developing the strategy.</p> <p>The LDS (strategy) is prepared by the LAG with wide consultation of the local population.</p> <p>They are then submitted to the managing authority for selection before they get funding (or not).</p>
Networking	<p>The LAG is a network of local partners. The benefits of networking in LEADER extend well beyond this local horizon into local, national and international networks.</p> <p>LAGs participate in the National Rural Development Networks and, as appropriate, in the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)</p> <p>Networking involves not only building relationships and exchanging of ideas between LEADER stakeholders, but also collecting best practices, and taking part in training and communication activities.</p>
Innovation at local level	<p>Innovation applies to what is done (the types of activity supported, the products or services developed etc.) and, importantly, to how things are done.</p> <p>Each LAG should aim to bring new elements and solutions to the development of its territory. This applies to its strategy, its delivery and animation structures and processes, and to how it takes decisions and selects projects.</p> <p>The term ‘innovation’ is relative (innovation in a given territory). Innovation is relevant to the whole LDS, but not necessarily to each individual project supported by the LAG.</p>

LEADER principle	What does it mean in practice?
Cooperation	<p>Inter-territorial and international cooperation adds a wider dimension to local development in rural areas.</p> <p>LAGs develop joint projects with other LAGs in the same Member State, other Member States or even outside the EU.</p> <p>Cooperation is intended to bring innovations to local areas and establish relationships between territories.</p>

Source: adapted from ENRD: https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/leader-clld/leader-toolkit/leaderclld-explained_en.html.

The governance of the LEADER approach is multi-level. It engages managing authorities, Paying Agencies and LAGs, but the actual models vary greatly between the Member States and regions. This means that within a broader common framework, the actual division of tasks and relationships between the main players are diverse.

The basic tasks for LAGs in implementing LEADER as set out in the legal basis ⁽¹²⁾ include:

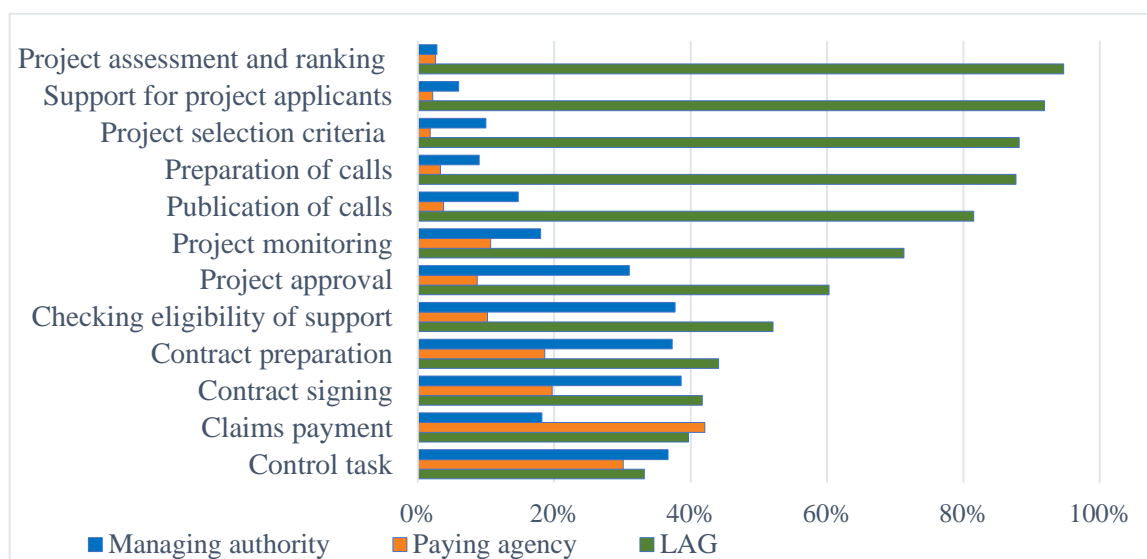
- to animate and build the capacity of local actors;
- to draw up non-discriminatory project selection criteria in line with the LDS, to prepare and publish calls for proposals;
- to receive and assess applications, to select operations and fix the amount of support;
- to monitor the LDS and operations supported, and carry out monitoring and evaluation activities.

LAGs thus perform a dual role. First, they animate the territory, which means that they encourage and train potential applicants to submit projects in the areas covered by the LDS. Second, LAGs organise calls for applications and assess them according to transparent criteria. The decision-making process within the LAG partnership is an opportunity for exchanging information, balancing interests and finding compromises between different stakeholders.

Several other tasks such as checking the eligibility of projects, administrative or on-the-spot checks, drawing up contracts with beneficiaries, or authorising or making payments are not usually in the list of duties for LAGs and are performed by the paying agencies, managing authorities or – if formally delegated – by LAGs themselves, depending on the Member States' arrangements, the variety of which is wide.

⁽¹²⁾ The tasks of local action groups are set out in Art. 34 of Regulation (EU) 1303/2013.

Figure 2: Bodies responsible for LEADER managing and monitoring tasks



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey of local action groups (number of respondents: 509).

As a novelty, and in recognition of the LEADER method, since 2014 LEADER can be multi-funded, in particular to also use the ERDF, the ESF and/or the EMFF. In this case, the authorities may select a lead fund to support all the running and animation costs.

The advantages of using multi-fund for LAGs are not only a higher amount of funding for the local area but a richer policy mix, and potentially stronger links with adjacent urban areas (usually small towns). Multi-fund LAGs can do more: they can support more and bigger projects, make more strategic investments, have better access to innovation ecosystems and knowledge, and can better support the building of competences in the area.

2.2. LEADER intervention logic

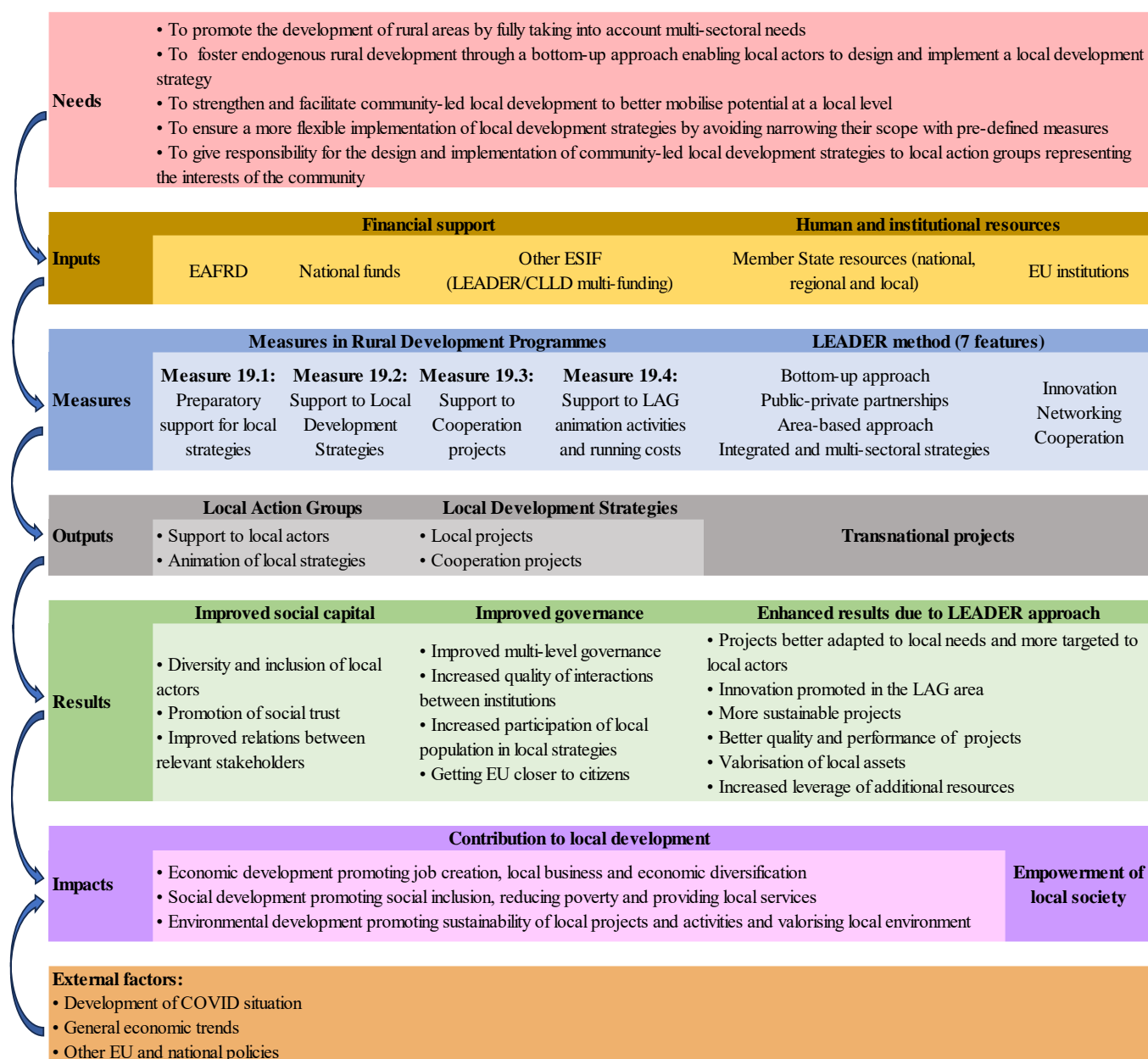
LEADER aims to address specific local needs through the LDS in a bottom-up manner. LEADER is therefore implemented by LAGs following their own intervention logic. This means that there are close to 2 900 local intervention logics according to the LDS of each LAG. However, the diverse local intervention logics have a key common basis: the LEADER method itself, based on the seven LEADER principles (see Table 2). This method is the foundation of LEADER’s added value.

The added value of LEADER, compared with centralised top-down approaches, is expected to translate into improved governance, enhanced social capital and better results from projects. Therefore, at the EU level, the overall LEADER intervention logic frames the purpose, features, interventions and expected outcomes of this method instead of the specific needs and objectives set at local level in the LDS.

The LEADER intervention logic is presented in Figure 3 and captures the consecutive steps (causal links) from the initial needs to be addressed to the ultimate goals to be achieved. An individual LDS comprises actions and projects with different focus areas, covering many aspects of local development (see Table 5). Given its wide scope, the general and specific objectives of LEADER are set in broad terms at EU level. They do not provide the kind of specific and measurable objectives that are typically assigned to smaller and more targeted programmes (i.e. local development strategies). Moreover, they

do not fulfil the SMART criteria⁽¹³⁾. Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas through local development is the main objective of LEADER, under which specific objectives at the local level are set in the LDS.

Figure 3: LEADER's intervention logic



Source: DG Agricultural and Rural Development based on Evaluation Helpdesk guidelines and evaluation support studies⁽¹⁴⁾.

The intervention logic, as outlined in Figure 3, comprises the following elements:

1. **Needs** are described in the Rural Development Regulation (EU) No.1305/2013 (recitals 31 to 33) and in the Common Provisions Regulation (EU) No. 1303/2013 (recitals 31 and 32) and in the impact assessment of the 2014-2020 CAP⁽¹⁵⁾. The

⁽¹³⁾ They cannot be considered as specific, measurable, assignable, realistic, and time-related ('SMART').

⁽¹⁴⁾ Evaluation Helpdesk, ENRD, 'Guidelines. Evaluation of LEADER/CLLD. Brussels.'; ADE s. a et al., 'Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development'.

⁽¹⁵⁾ SEC(2011) 1153 final <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52011SC1153>.

extent to which LEADER is addressing the needs, including local needs, is assessed under the effectiveness criterion. The extent to which LEADER is fit for purpose is assessed under the relevance criterion.

2. **Inputs** refer to the financial inputs (EU and national funds) as well as the human resources needed to manage and implement LEADER. Costs, including specific LEADER costs and administrative arrangements, are covered in the efficiency analysis.
3. **Measures** refer not only to the interventions supported through LEADER (see Table 1), but also to the delivery system. The LEADER delivery method intends to make a difference in promoting local development by engaging local actors and strengthening the social fabric. Analysis of the various LEADER features is carried out under the effectiveness criterion.
4. **Outputs** are defined as the immediate products stemming from the implementation of the measures. By implementing LEADER measures according to its seven principles, local partnerships (i.e. LAGs) will be set up to provide support to local actors, and LDSs are designed and implemented with the participation of local actors. These elements are assessed under the effectiveness criterion.
5. **Results** emanate from the outputs. LAG activities, projects supported by LDSs and transnational cooperation following the LEADER method. The method is the foundation of LEADER's added value. The added value of LEADER compared with the centralised top-down approaches is expected to translate into improved governance, enhanced social capital and better project results.⁽¹⁶⁾ Results are assessed according to the effectiveness criteria and are used to assess LEADER's efficiency, in particular the extent to which the specific costs of LEADER provide added value.
6. **The outcomes and impacts** of LEADER are expected to be at the local level. LEADER's effects on the three dimensions of local development (economic, social and environmental) will be as diverse as the objectives and needs identified at the local level. Therefore, the analysis of impacts at the EU level under the effectiveness criterion intends to assess the overall effects of LEADER on these dimensions together with the effect on the empowerment of local people due to the improvement of social capital and governance.
7. **External factors** have also affected the implementation and evaluation of LEADER. The influence of some of these factors have been considered in the analysis. Other EU and national policies are analysed under the coherence criterion.

2.3. Points of comparison

2.3.1. Points of comparison

The success of the policy is monitored and assessed in relation to indicators at the EU and rural development programme levels. The **outputs** of LEADER are assessed in relation to a set of output indicators (Table 3). The degree to which the LEADER method and its seven features have been implemented, as well as the performance of the delivery

⁽¹⁶⁾ Guidelines: Evaluation of LEADER/CLLD, European Network for Rural Development (2017) - https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/evaluation/publications/evaluation-leaderclld_en.html

mechanisms, are mainly assessed from a qualitative viewpoint through surveys of managing authorities and LAGs.

Table 3: Common EU monitoring indicators for the LEADER measure in rural development programmes

Result indicators	Output indicators
Number of people and percentage of the rural population covered by the LDS	Number of LAGs selected
	Number of LEADER projects supported
	Number and type of project promoters
Jobs created in supported (LEADER) projects	Number of cooperation projects
	Number of LAGs involved in cooperation projects

Reporting is done in the annual implementation report (AIR) submitted by 30 June for the preceding year. This evaluation is mostly based on the information from the AIR for 2021.

In terms of LEADER added value, the **results** of the LEADER method are based on its contribution to improving social capital, to creating networks and collaborative activities, to better governance through local partnerships, and to the provision of additional benefits through the strategies implemented. However, there are no common indicators to assess such results. Therefore, to complete the assessment of LEADER results, in particular the intangible benefits of LEADER (governance and social capital), the evaluation uses a set of quantitative and qualitative methods ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Those methods range from the analysis of data (composition of LAGs and networks, the number of collaborative or innovative projects, etc.) collected through surveys of managing authorities, LAGs and other stakeholders and beneficiaries, to the qualitative analysis of information collected through interviews and judgements triangulated with focus groups. Combining EU-wide surveys with case studies ensures an adequate coverage of the analysis of LEADER across the EU.

LEADER's intangible benefits, such as governance and social capital, are assessed through indicators of structural and normative social capital ⁽¹⁸⁾ and of the diversity of stakeholders participating in projects and decision-making. Those indicators are complemented with information about the quality of the interactions between stakeholders and the interactions between the various actors within the multi-level governance system.

The **impacts** of LEADER are its positive contributions to local development, to creating jobs and providing improved services in rural areas, while also contributing positively to the three dimensions of balanced local development (economic, social and environmental). Since common impact indicators ⁽¹⁹⁾ cannot capture the impacts of LEADER at the local

⁽¹⁷⁾ Methods and indicators are described in more detail in Annexes II and III.

⁽¹⁸⁾ The five indicators to assess social capital were: a network diversity index (structural social capital), a trust index (normative social capital), a number of horizontal links with beneficiaries (structural social capital), perceived improvement of social capital, and the number of cooperation projects supported by Sub-measure 19.3.

⁽¹⁹⁾ The common impact indicators for rural development are:

level (impact indicators are only set at national and regional level), impacts are assessed through Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) output and result indicators (Table 3), and quantitative and qualitative analysis of information collected through EU-wide surveys and case studies. To ensure that the findings are robust, various sources of evidence are triangulated (see Table 8).

It is not possible to compare the results of LEADER with the preexisting situation because there is no specific baseline for LEADER's main results. Typically, the progress shown through the indicators listed in Table 3 is evaluated against the targets set at the start of the programmes. It is very difficult to assess LEADER's added value due to its complexity, and partly because of its intangible nature and thus the limited availability or even lack of relevant data. In this case, the evaluation uses equivalent top-down measures of rural development (e.g. Measure 7 – basic services), other forms of cooperation (e.g. Measure 16 - cooperation) and other relevant references (e.g. social capital indices in SIMRA ⁽²⁰⁾) as benchmarks to compare social capital, governance, and improved results. However, it is not always possible to make a comparison. For that reason, those elements of LEADER's results are defined and assessed mostly on a qualitative basis, in particular the intangible aspects.

On causality, it is not possible to attribute changes in rural communities to LEADER. The counterfactual analysis, notably a comparison with a non-LEADER, scenario is not possible. This is because first, there are no sub-regional areas without LEADER that can be used for such a comparison. Second, 'standardised' data on aspects of local development (GDP, employment, social inclusion, poverty, etc.) at sub-regional level across the EU are not available. However, to overcome this limitation, the evaluation provides a narrative linking the outcomes to the specificity of LEADER's approach. In addition, a technical report by the Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) on the impact of the CAP ⁽²¹⁾ carried out a counterfactual analysis to capture the effects of CAP measures on territorial development. This is now used as a reference for triangulating evaluation results.

Finally, given the limitations to quantifying the effects of LEADER, further explained below, and the complex and holistic nature of LEADER's approach, qualitative methods have been one of the main analytical tools used to assess LEADER.

2.3.2. Limitations and external factors

The main findings of the LEADER evaluation can only be fully understood by taking into account five key contextual constraints: (i) the small scale of funding; (ii) the long lead-in time of LEADER's implementation; (iii) the lack of well-designed data on a local scale due to the nature of the monitoring and reporting system for the 2014-2022 CAP; (iv) major external economic and social trends; and (v) the difficulty in measuring intangible benefits (see also Annex II).

I.14: Rural employment rate (national and regional level)

I.15: Degree of rural poverty (national and regional level)

I.16: Rural GDP per capita (national and regional level).

⁽²⁰⁾ SIMRA is a Horizon 2020 project aimed at assessing social innovation in rural areas by providing methods and tools to understand and improve social innovation. SIMRA collected evidence on social innovation from 23 case studies: <http://www.simra-h2020.eu/>.

⁽²¹⁾ Joint Research Centre (European Commission) et al., An Evaluation of the CAP Impact.

First, LEADER's funding is small, and it is hard to capture its effects on overall rural development trends. Despite a high number of projects and a wide coverage of the rural population, LEADER's budget accounts for only 6% of the total public expenditure⁽²²⁾ on rural development programmes, i.e. only 2% of CAP expenditure. In addition, LEADER does not usually support any big investments but rather a whole range of small initiatives at local level.

Second, the most recent available data for the evaluation studies date from the end-2021, which is early in the policy cycle and thus still shows a low rate of absorption⁽²³⁾, which makes it hard to capture the effects of LEADER. Usually, LEADER has a long lead-in time and the bulk of expenditure is made towards the end of the programme. In addition, most results are reported after the projects have ended.

Third, the small set of common EU indicators does not properly reflect the great heterogeneity of localised intervention logics and of LEADER projects. In addition, although LEADER can and does contribute to several focus areas, LEADER is mainly planned and thus monitored only under Focus Area 6B (local development). Therefore, data on LEADER's contribution to other areas is unavailable. Moreover, the set of indicators is small, with a focus on jobs and services whereas many LEADER projects can have several other locally tailored objectives, thus largely outside the scope of the common set of indicators.

The CMEF was designed to assess rural development programmes. Therefore, the set of common indicators aims to capture the effects of the whole rural development programme (RDP) instead of the effects of a particular measure like LEADER. Therefore, the granularity of the available indicators, such as in the design of the CMEF (by rural development programme), is inadequate. Most of the time, socio-economic context indicators are not available at LAG level, which is sub-regional and do not always match administrative boundaries. CMEF output and result indicators are aggregates reported at RDP level in the annual implementation reports, including in the enhanced reports of 2019⁽²⁴⁾.

Fourthly, external or global factors such as trends in the general economy, inflation or the COVID-19 crisis could be stronger drivers of local development than local initiatives like LEADER, making it harder to quantify and isolate the impact of the LEADER measure.

Finally, the scarcity of practical and feasible methods and data to assess LEADER's contribution to intangible assets such as local governance and social capital has posed a particular challenge. However, some innovative approaches to quantifying these benefits have been used to complement the qualitative analysis⁽²⁵⁾.

⁽²²⁾ EU funds and Member States' co-financing, i.e. excluding top-ups.

⁽²³⁾ The first evaluation support study was more affected by the low uptake. To reduce the impact of that limitation, case studies with more advanced execution rate were selected for the complementary support study.

⁽²⁴⁾ Evaluation Helpdesk, ENRD, 'Synthesis of the Evaluation Components of the Enhanced AIR 2019: Chapter 7'.

⁽²⁵⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'.

3. HOW HAS THE SITUATION EVOLVED DURING THE EVALUATION PERIOD?

The LEADER measure for the 2014-2022 programming period can be implemented until end-2025. The most recent monitoring data available for this evaluation at the EU level is from the end of 2021. Data on financial execution comes from 2023.

The LEADER measure has a relatively long lead-in time. This includes the approval of RDPs (2014 to the start of 2015) and the selection of LDS for funding (2016-2017 or even later). In effect, only after being selected could the LAGs begin to implement their strategies by animating their territories and publishing calls for proposals. Once the calls were completed, local projects started to be implemented and paid. Therefore, the bulk of expenditure normally takes place at the later stages of the programming cycle. This needs to be kept in mind as this evaluation has been carried out well before the end of the implementation period.

3.1. Key figures of LEADER 2014-2022

The amount of EUR 8.5 billion from the EAFRD, cofounded from national and regional public sources, brings the amount allocated to LEADER to EUR 11.8 billion in 2014-2022 (EU-28)⁽²⁶⁾. With additional national financing ('top-ups') the amount of public resources allocated to the LEADER measure was EUR 12.36 billion, of which 78% was devoted to supporting LDSs (see Table 4). Rural development programmes can also finance the preparation of LDS for 2023-2027.

Table 4: Breakdown of LEADER allocation by sub-measures in the EU-28, for 2014-2022, in EUR million

LEADER sub-measure	Total public support	%
19.1. Preparatory support, including capacity building, training and networking	65.6	1%
19.2. Implementation of operations under LDSs	9 695.7	78%
19.3. Preparation and implementation of LAGs' cooperation activities	437.7	4%
19.4. Running costs and animation	2 064.7	17%
Total Measure 19	12 363.7	100%

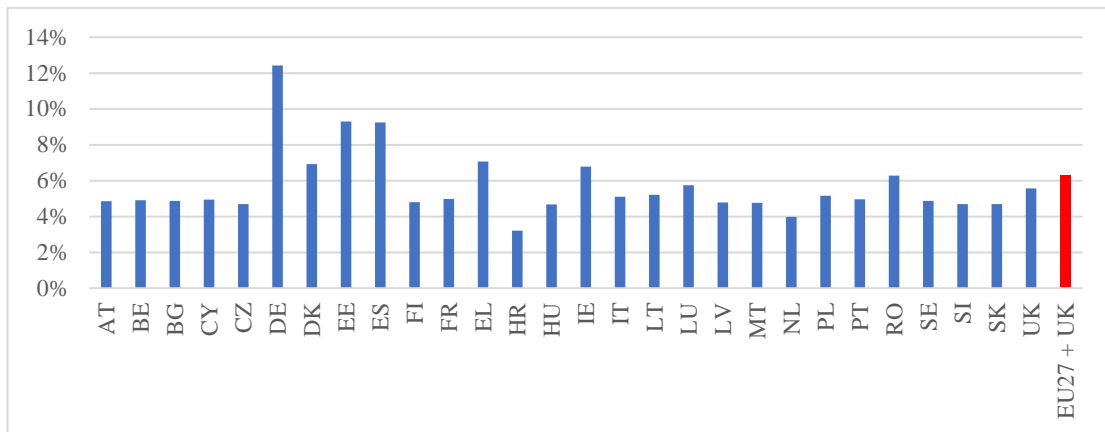
Source: AIR 2021. Total public support includes EU funding, national public co-financing and national additional financing.

The share of the LEADER measure in the EAFRD varies between Member States⁽²⁷⁾ from 3.2% in Croatia to over 12% in Germany, with an EU average of 6%.

⁽²⁶⁾ The EU support for LEADER originally planned for 2014-2020 amounted to EUR 6.7 billion (EU-28). For the transition years 2021-2022, EUR 1.5 billion was added, bringing the allocation to a total of EUR 8.5 billion of EU funding. The measure is co-financed by Member States or regions, thus bringing the amount of public support allocated to LEADER for the extended period of 2014-2022 to 11.8 billion EUR (EU-27+UK).

⁽²⁷⁾ Figures of some Member States are below the threshold of 5% due to exceptions in Art 59(5) of Reg. (EU) No 1305/2013, namely transfers from 1st pillar to rural development in years 2021 and 2022 and reductions following performance reserve exercise (Art. 22(5) of Reg. (EU) No 1303/2013 Common Provisions Regulation).

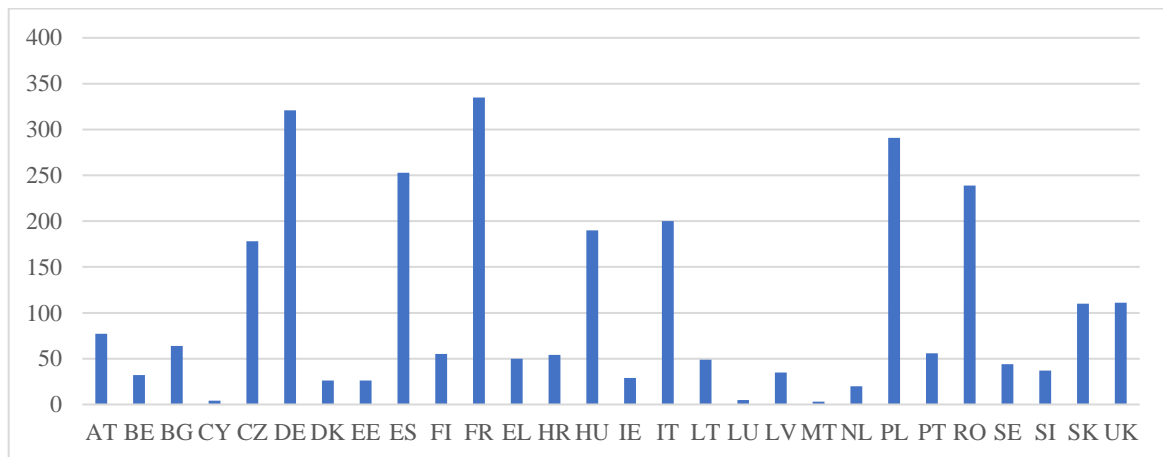
Figure 4: Allocation to LEADER as a share of the EAFRD 2014-2022



Source: Based on latest adopted RDPs in March 2023.

There have been 2 894 (EU-28) Local Action Groups ⁽²⁸⁾ operating in rural areas in 2014-2022, half of them operating in Germany, Spain, France, Poland, and Romania.

Figure 5: Number of LAGs approved (2014-2022) by Member State (EU-28)



Source: AIR 2021.

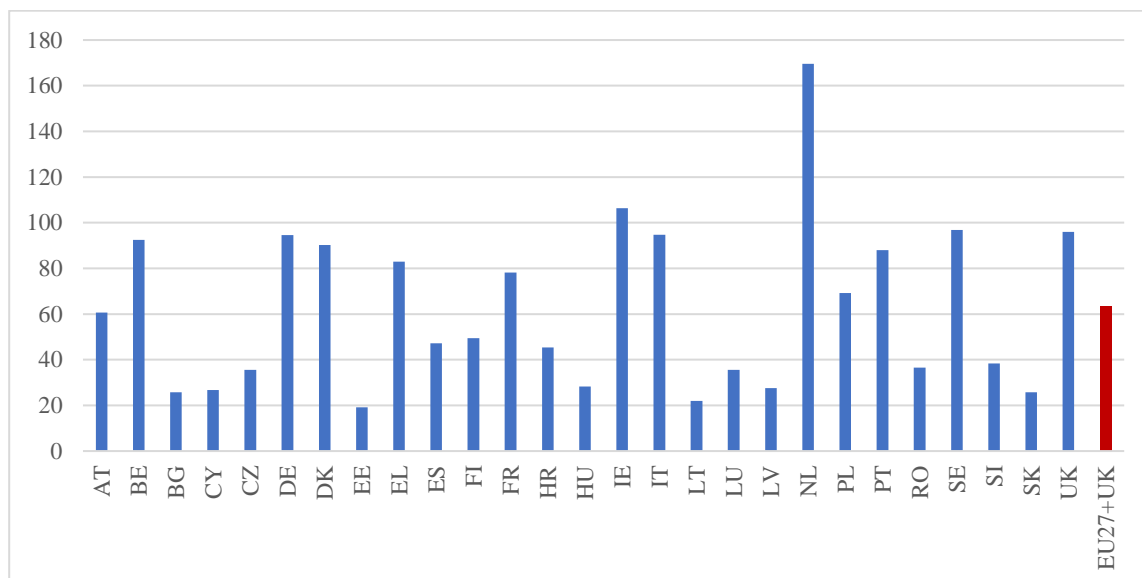
LEADER strategies cover a rural population of 173.6 million people in the EU (62% of the total EU rural population ⁽²⁹⁾). This means that on average each LAG covers 63 000 people. However, the average size varies significantly between Member States, from 19 000 in Estonia to 169 000 in the Netherlands ⁽³⁰⁾.

⁽²⁸⁾ 2 783 LAGs for the EU-27.

⁽²⁹⁾ Member States are free to specify which rural population they target; it can be rural areas only or also intermediate areas and other definitions can be used.

⁽³⁰⁾ The Netherlands has an exception to the population threshold given its very high density of population. Chapter 8.2 for Measure 19, section (f) of the Netherlands' RDP sets a general threshold of 300 000 people per LAG and 350 000 people for the Randstad region.

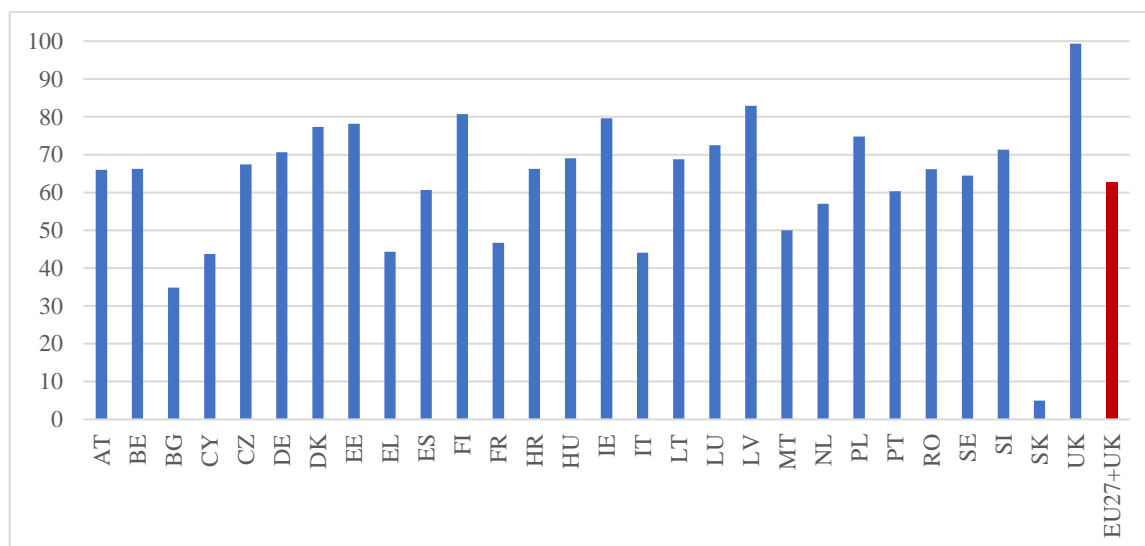
Figure 6: Average population covered by a LAG by Member State (in thousands of people)



Source: AIR 2021.

By September 2023, 63% of the funding allocated to LEADER for 2014-2022 had actually been used. The rate of absorption or spending varies greatly between Member States, with Slovakia visibly lagging behind while the execution rate was close to 80% in Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia and Finland (and 100% for the UK, which had left the EU).

Figure 7: Use of LEADER funding 2014-2022 (% of budget allocation paid)



Source: Member States' declarations of expenditure as of September 2023.

LEADER activities have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which brought many operations to a standstill. In several Member States many contracted projects have been discontinued or not even started due to rising costs partly generated by the COVID-19 crisis and rising energy prices. A beneficiary must estimate the costs of their project well in advance when they sign a contract for funding. Once the amount of LEADER funding has been stipulated in a contract, it cannot be increased, and the beneficiary must cover potential higher costs themselves if they can. If they do not have enough money to

implement the project as contracted, then the LEADER funding cannot be used. This issue has been particularly acute since 2022.

The LEADER measure has a target of covering 56% of the EU's rural population with local strategies by 2025, and of creating around 57 000 jobs by 2025. Those targets were reached in 2022 (see Table 7). These numbers may seem relatively modest but many projects in LEADER are local and have objectives other than job creation.

Indeed, LEADER projects contribute mostly to local development (58%) and diversification of the local economy (22%) but they can also have other objectives in various focus areas, for example the economic performance of farms (9%). However, the contribution to other objectives, such as the protection of natural resources and climate action, is very small.

Table 5: Number of projects implemented by focus area by end-2021

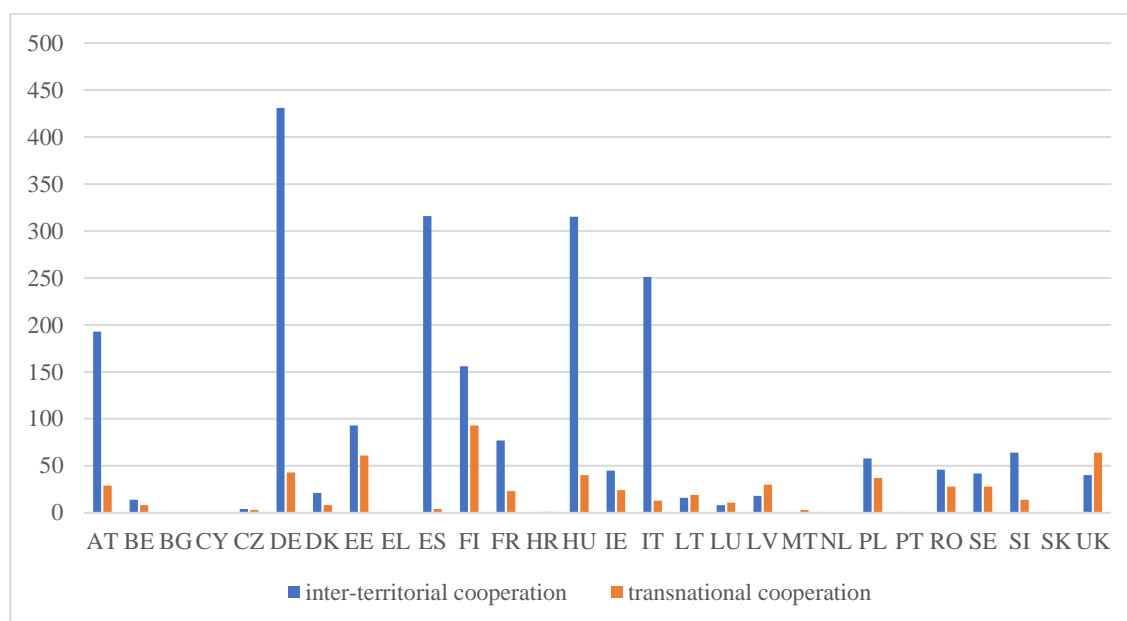
Focus area to which a project mainly contributes	Number of LEADER projects (EU-28)
Knowledge transfer and innovation	
Fostering innovation, cooperation and the development of the knowledge base in rural areas (1A)	2 902
Strengthening the links between agriculture, food production and forestry and research and innovation (1B)	348
Fostering lifelong learning and vocational training in the agricultural and forestry sectors (1C)	409
Farm viability and competitiveness	
Improving the economic performance of all farms and facilitating farm restructuring and modernisation (2A)	11 895
Facilitating the entry of adequately skilled farmers into the agricultural sector and generational renewal (FA 2B)	1 616
Food chain organisation and risk management	
Improving competitiveness of primary producers by better integrating them into the agri-food chain (FA 3A)	1 996
Supporting farm risk prevention and management (FA 3B)	68
Restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems	
Restoring, preserving and enhancing biodiversity (FA 4A)	644
Improving water management (FA 4B)	64
Preventing soil erosion and improving soil management (FA 4C)	175
Resource-efficient, climate-resilient economy	
Increasing efficiency in water use by agriculture (FA 5A)	15
Increasing efficiency in energy use in agriculture and food processing (FA 5B)	103
Facilitating the supply and use of renewable sources of energy (FA 5C)	194
Reducing greenhouse gas and ammonia emissions from agriculture (FA 5D)	183
Fostering carbon conservation and sequestration in agriculture and forestry (FA 5E)	9
Social inclusion and economic development	
Facilitating diversification, creation and development of small enterprises, as well as job creation (FA 6A)	28 931
Fostering local development in rural areas (FA 6B)	74 522
Enhancing the accessibility, use and quality of information and communication technologies (ICT) in rural areas (FA 6C)	784
Additional focus areas	3 269
Financial instruments	649
Total	128 776

Source: AIR 2021.

The majority of projects are carried out by SMEs (some 25% of projects), followed by public bodies (20%) and NGOs (16%). LAGs are project promoters for 4% of projects.

A total of 2 796 cooperation projects were completed by end-2021, of which 2 235 were transregional and 561 transnational. Again, the achievements are highly variable between Member States with strong cooperation between territories in Germany, Spain, Hungary, Italy, Austria and Finland. Finland and Estonia were the biggest participants in transnational cooperation. By contrast, Cyprus, Greece, the Netherlands and Slovakia did not implement any cooperation projects.

Figure 8: LEADER cooperation projects implemented by end-2021



Source: AIR 2021.

CLLD/LAGs used other EU funding besides the EAFRD, albeit only to a limited degree. The vast majority of rural LAGs (2 206) were funded exclusively from the rural development programmes. Czechia, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden made the most comprehensive use of the multi-fund approach in rural areas. Other Member States made some use of the multi-fund approach, in a small number of LAGs ⁽³¹⁾.

ESI funds ⁽³²⁾ engaged in multi-fund rural CLLD (2014-2020) accounted for 25% of all funds for LEADER/CLLD ⁽³³⁾. The ERDF contributed EUR 1.1 billion (12%), the ESF provided EUR 650 million (7%) and the EMFF added EUR 548 million (6%).

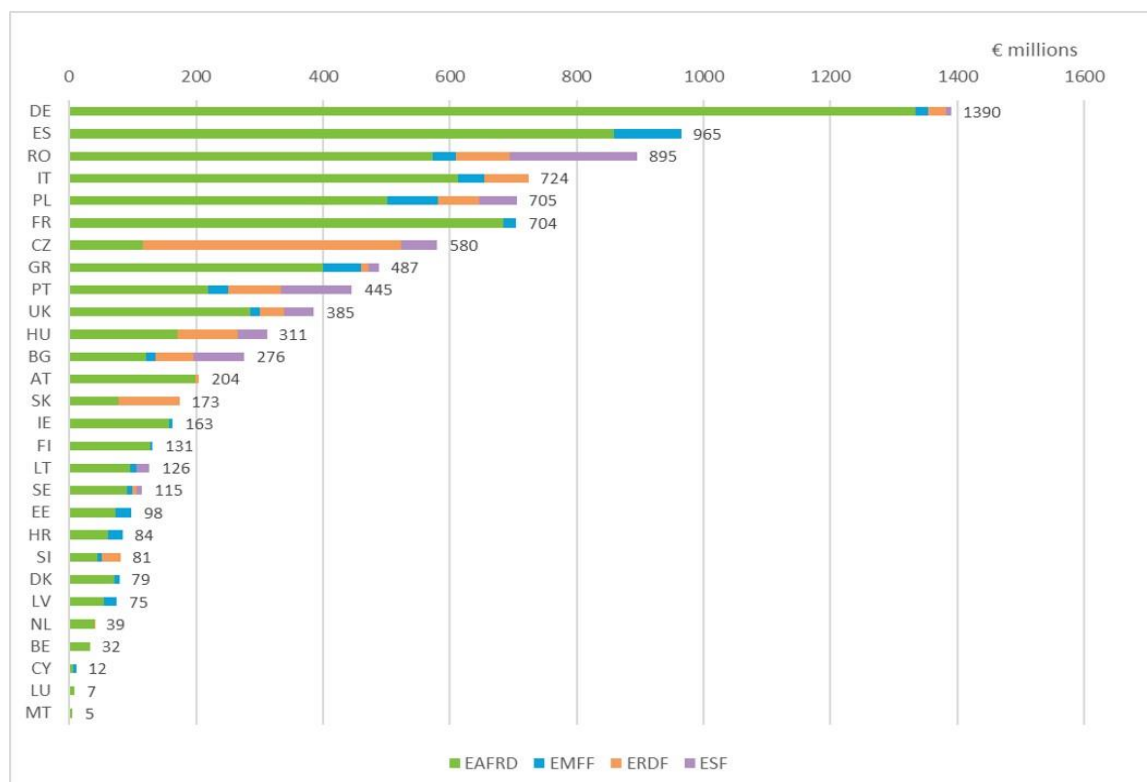
Networking by the LAGs is taken place through regional, national and EU rural development networks, which are mostly financed from the technical assistance part of rural development programmes. LEADER stakeholders are active in them to exchange best practice and build capacity, improve communication and seek improvements to policies.

⁽³¹⁾ <https://ldnet.eu/implementing-cohesion-policy-funds-through-multi-fund-clld/>

⁽³²⁾ The ESI funds were programmed for 2014-2020, with no extension for 2021-2022.

⁽³³⁾ European Court of Auditors, 'Special Report 10/2022'.

Figure 9: Contribution of ESI funds to LEADER/CLLD per Member State (EUR million)



Source: Kah (2021) *Where does the EU share of CLLD funding come from?* – LDnet ⁽³⁴⁾.

3.2. Summary of the implementation of LEADER

The LEADER measure in the 2014-2022 rural development programmes has enabled close to 2 900 LAGs in rural areas in all Member States ⁽³⁵⁾ to design and implement their bottom-up LDSs. They cover 170 million people in rural areas.

By March 2023, 57% of LEADER’s funding had been paid out, with significant variations between Member States. With a long lead-in time, the later years in the policy cycle, in this case up to end-2025, are generally crucial for disbursement.

Up to end-2021, the LAGs implemented their strategies through almost 130 000 local projects covering a wide variety of areas such as local development, diversification of economic activities, farm competitiveness and knowledge transfer. These projects were usually small and scaled to local needs as the financial resources allocated to each LDS tend to be relatively modest (EUR 4 million on average for 9 years).

Cooperation projects led by LAGs have been mostly inter-territorial but there have also been some international ones. However, by end-2021 some Member States had not completed any cooperation projects.

The EAFRD has been by far the main fund supporting rural LEADER/CLLD, contributing 75% of funding. The majority of LAGs received finance from a single fund.

⁽³⁴⁾ <https://ldnet.eu/implementing-cohesion-policy-funds-through-multi-fund-clld/>.

⁽³⁵⁾ EU-27 and the UK.

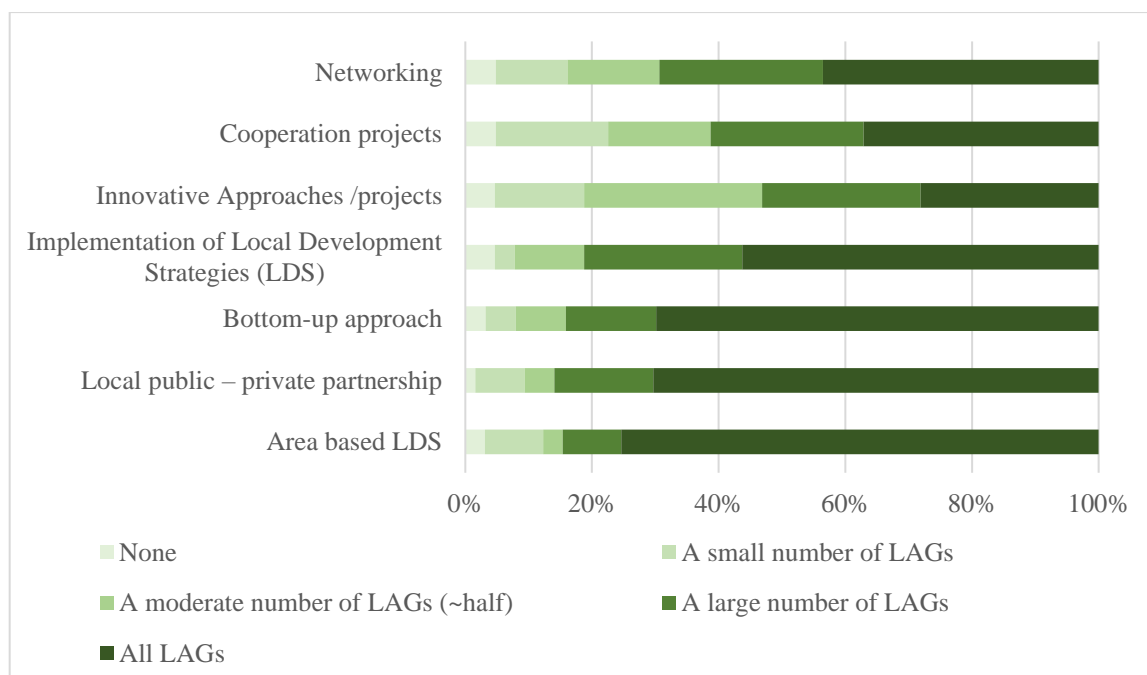
4. EVALUATION FINDINGS

4.1. To what extent was the intervention successful and why?

4.1.1. The quality of implementation of LEADER has influenced the ability of LEADER to deliver results.

The LEADER approach is based on seven features⁽³⁶⁾ which are at the core of the LEADER delivery method. However, the degree to which these features⁽³⁷⁾ were implemented varied substantially among Member States and LAGs, according to the evaluation support study⁽³⁸⁾. A survey of managing authorities (Figure 10) explored the proportion of LAGs within a Member State or region that had implemented the seven features of LEADER. Most respondents (more than two thirds in each case) indicated that the territorial approach, local strategies and partnerships, the bottom-up approach and networking were implemented by a large number of LAGs in their rural area. Cooperation (35%) and innovative approaches or projects (28%) were less implemented. A minority of managing authorities replied that none of the LAGs in their area had completely implemented LEADER features⁽³⁹⁾.

Figure 10: Share of LAGs with a high degree of implementation of LEADER features



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey to managing authorities (65 respondents).

⁽³⁶⁾ Bottom-up approach, private-public partnerships, territorial approach at sub-regional level, the local development strategy, innovation, networking and cooperation.

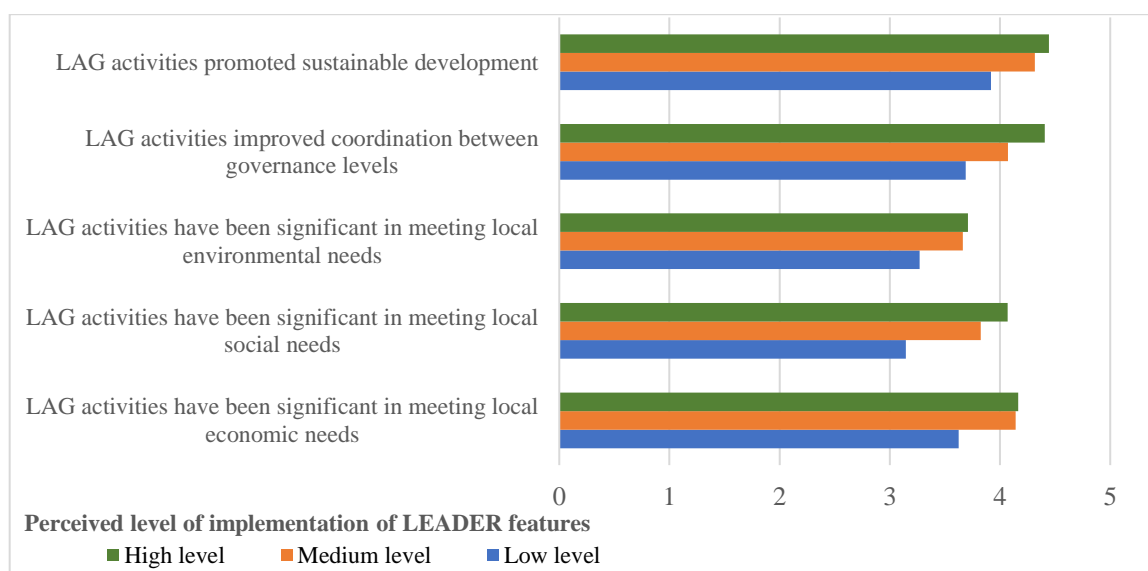
⁽³⁷⁾ It should be noted that most of the features are implemented progressively during the whole period (e.g. cooperation projects) and that managing authorities' replies only covered the situation until 2021, when progress on implementation was quite limited.

⁽³⁸⁾ ADE s. a et al., Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development.

⁽³⁹⁾ Responses for LEADER features that should be already implemented from the beginning have been interpreted as the respondent's perception of the quality of implementation.

The EU-wide surveys and case studies demonstrate that LEADER has a bigger impact if more of the seven features of LEADER are implemented. The EU survey of LAGs showed that a low level of implementation of LEADER’s features (rather than a medium to high level of implementation) is associated with a lower performance. This is particularly relevant for improving cooperation between different levels of governance and for meeting local social needs.

Figure 11: Contribution of LEADER to meeting local economic, social, environmental and governance needs, and its link to the perceived extent to which the seven features of the LEADER approach have been implemented.



Scale 1 to 5 where 1 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 5 = Strongly agree.

Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey of LAGs (509 respondents)

The qualitative analysis of LEADER’s main drivers for effectiveness pointed to the bottom-up approach, the participatory methods, capacity building among local actors, the LAGs’ animation and facilitation activities and networking as the most important elements in the effectiveness of LEADER.

Although other relevant aspects like a LAG’s **maturity and experience**, its size or degree of autonomy have been identified in the literature ⁽⁴⁰⁾, there is no clear evidence of their influence on LEADER’s effectiveness.

Another influencing factor reported in the public consultation is the size of the **LAG’s budget**. Position papers that were collected state that the financial resources allocated are not always enough for local development needs, and remain too limited for territorial animation, to train local agents and empower local communities.

On the **process to select LAGs**, the Agrosynergie study found that in many Member States or regions the selection process tried to reward the key value added elements of the LEADER method. High scores have been observed for the criteria related to the promotion of innovative projects, projects that create new jobs, projects that deliver community benefits and cooperation projects. On the importance given to the targets of the strategy,

⁽⁴⁰⁾ ADE evaluation support study.

65% of the managing authorities in the study considered that it was very important to have clear targets for output and result indicators.

The low level of implementation of **cooperation** projects (Measure 19.3) meant a significant delay in supported projects. Cooperation was regarded by both LAGs and managing authorities as providing high added value; however, the application process was considered too difficult. According to evidence collected through case studies, the low uptake of Measure 19.3 can be explained because differences in guidance and implementing rules, including cooperation topics, between RDPs made it more difficult for LAGs to identify areas for collaboration and to implement cooperation projects. More precisely, a recent study ⁽⁴¹⁾ identified ‘the increased time investment (e. g. for project presentations in the different decision-making bodies) and the different project selection criteria of the cooperating regions were further challenges perceived’.

The majority of cooperation projects were implemented within Member States (inter-territorial cooperation), and few LAGs opted for transnational cooperation, which was regarded as even more difficult, with language also reported as a barrier.

In addition, **innovation** is still limited. Managing authorities considered innovation at local level an important criterion during the selection process of local strategies and supported the capacity of LAGs to promote innovation ⁽⁴²⁾. However, the case studies and interviews highlighted the importance of the ‘enabling context’ to promote innovation. Innovation should be seen in a broad sense, including social innovation and products and methods, which can be considered innovative in a particular rural area. Even more importantly, innovation needs a context that allows for risk taking, and an occasional failure.

4.1.2. *LEADER adds value compared to similar non-LEADER measures.*

According to the evaluation support study on LEADER’s costs and benefits ⁽⁴³⁾, LEADER has been effective in improving local governance and social capital. It has also produced better project results compared to other similar RDP measures. However, these findings should be treated with some degree of caution as some of the measures may not be fully comparable due to limited data and the administrative delimitation between LEADER and non-LEADER measures ⁽⁴⁴⁾.

4.1.2.1. LEADER has improved local governance by promoting local actors’ participation and collaboration with other administrations.

The governance of LEADER should be seen at two levels. At local level, governance is based on stakeholders’ participation in the LAG and in the decision-making process. The other level is a broader multi-level governance, notably the tasks and responsibilities of the linked administrative bodies - mainly LAGs, managing authorities and paying agencies - and their relationship in implementing LEADER.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Fynn and Pollermann, ‘Fostering (Supra-)Regional Cooperation through LEADER/CLLD’.

⁽⁴²⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., ‘Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER’.

⁽⁴³⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., ‘Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER’.

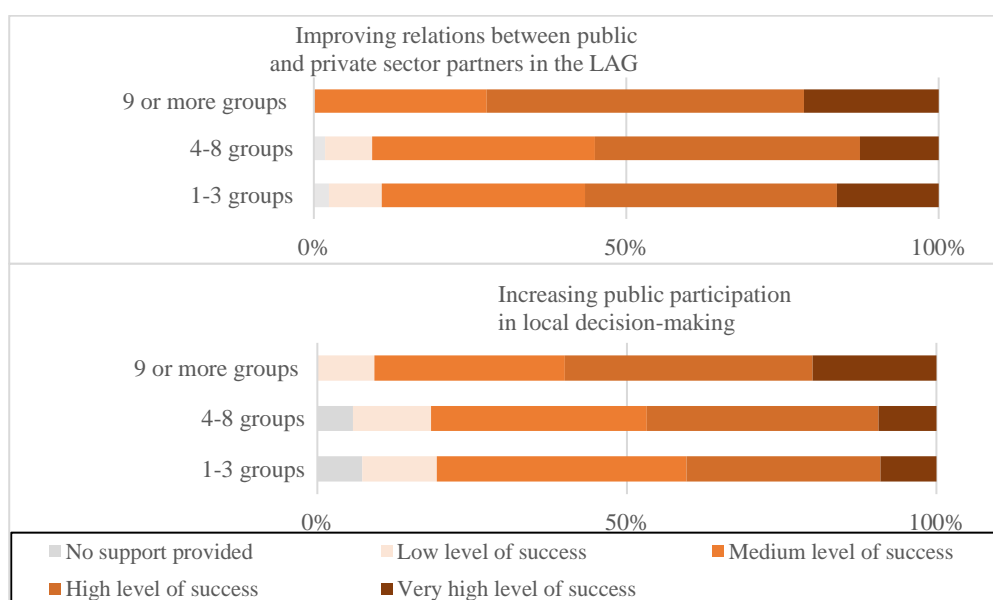
⁽⁴⁴⁾ Managing authorities can set out certain rules by which both types of measure (LEADER or non-LEADER) cannot be applied for the same objective or scope. In these cases, the outcomes of comparing them should be interpreted with caution.

LEADER promotes the participation of different socio-economic interest groups in board meetings and other decision-making bodies ⁽⁴⁵⁾. However, a wide range of working cultures are represented in the participation and organisation of LAGs. In some places, LAGs are partnerships with appointed members whereby the participation of individuals or the inclusion of other groups in decision-making is limited. In other regions, participation is more democratic, and LAGs are organised more openly, so that people can stand for election or participate in decision-making through establishment of interest groups.

Inclusiveness in the composition of the LAG has an impact on delivery of results. Figure 12 illustrates how LAGs with 9 or more groups showed better results in terms of governance than less inclusive LAGs by increasing participation in the LAG’s decision making and improving relations between public and private partners.

However, only 13% of the LAGs indicated that there were more than 9 groups in their decision-making bodies, with most LAGs having between 4 and 8 groups (54%). Furthermore, the participation of young people and women was limited. 25% of LAGs indicated that women’s associations were represented while youth organisations were present in 32% of LAGs. Environmental NGOs were represented in 33% of LAGs.

Figure 12: Composition of local decision-making in LAGs and its link with improved local governance



Based on a scale ranging from 1 = no support provided to 5 = Very high level of success.

Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey to local action groups (509 respondents).

LEADER contributed positively to multi-level governance. According to the views ⁽⁴⁶⁾ of all the administrative bodies involved (managing authorities, paying agencies and LAGs), LEADER has enabled them to improve the quality of their interactions. Moreover, *‘LAGs had positive relations with regional/national managing authorities and paying agencies linked to the creation of stable and shared forms of governance. These arrangements are*

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Focus groups gave an average score of 4.7 for the LAGs’ capacity to stimulate participation, on a scale ranging from 1 = Very poor to 5 = Very good. Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., ‘Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER’.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ 90% of managing authorities and 94% of LAGs in case studies.

not simply about more LAG autonomy, but a "collaborative and enabling climate" providing a clear operating framework' (47).

Good practice to ensure wide participation and inclusiveness

In Denmark, a LAG is an association with elections to the board. Anyone can join and help decide who should be part of the board. This form of organisation facilitates involvement of different groups. Everyone is free to stand for election. If there are more people who want to be part of the board than posts on the board, then there are competitive elections, and there is no guarantee that those who are already on the board will be elected.

Source: Evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits (Agrosynergie).

4.1.2.2. LEADER has improved social capital, but this is difficult to quantify.

Social capital is one of the most challenging elements of LEADER's added value. The lack of a common and workable definition and relevant indicators, along with the limited availability of data and points of comparison, are the most limiting factors to assess the growth of social capital. Nonetheless, the evaluators attempted to (48) assess whether there had been an improvement in social capital within LAGs, within LAG rural areas and between LAG areas by using a combination of indicators (49) to calculate comparable indices of social capital. Such indices have been calculated on a scale from 0 to 1, for which values above 0.50 are medium to high while values above 0.70 are considered high.

The evaluators compared the indices obtained for LEADER with indices from similar rural development measures (i.e. Measure 16 cooperation) and with some indices used in selected case studies in the SIMRA project (50). This comparison demonstrated that the values for social capital related to LEADER were higher than for other rural development measures (51). In addition, structural social capital (52) performed slightly better in LAG organisational structures (with an average value of 0.66) compared to the SIMRA case studies (0.64), which can be considered as a high benchmark.

(47) ADE s. a et al., 'Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development'.

(48) Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., 'Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'.

(49) The five indicators to assess social capital were: (i) a network diversity index (structural social capital); (ii) a trust index (normative social capital); (iii) the number of cross-cutting links with beneficiaries (structural social capital); (iv) the perceived improvement in social capital; and (v) the number of cooperation projects supported by Sub-measure 19.3. See Annex II and Annex III.

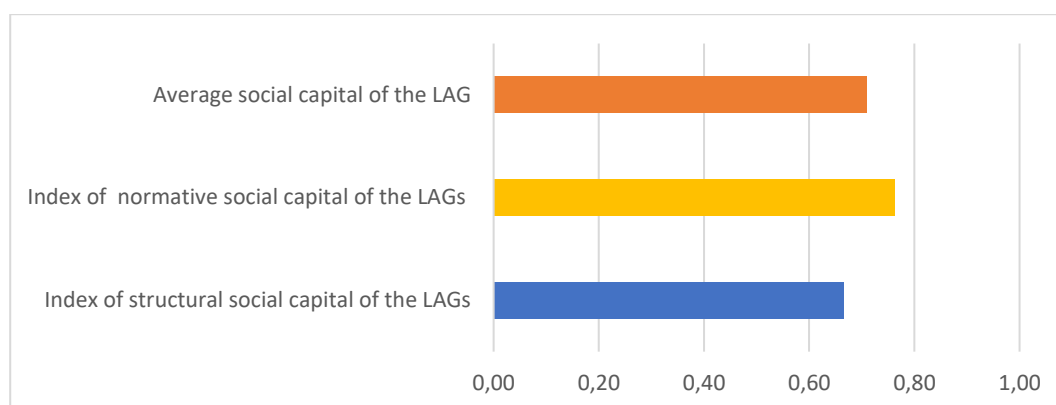
(50) Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas (SIMRA) was a Horizon 2020 project that aimed to assess social innovation in rural areas by providing methods and tools to understand and improve social innovation. SIMRA collected evidence on social innovation from 23 case studies. <http://www.simra-h2020.eu/>

(51) Measures other than Measure 16 are not aimed at promoting networks of different stakeholders. Therefore, most rural development measures would score very low or even zero on social capital.

(52) Structural social capital represents the tangible side of social capital. Specifically in a LAG, it is associated with relations across the network of private-public actors, which facilitate the collective action of the organisation. In the study this is assessed through the composition of networks within the LAG (assembly and decision-making bodies) (see Annex II).

Another essential element of social capital is ‘a normative social capital’ ⁽⁵³⁾. LEADER has also improved this type of social capital, meaning that LAGs have been able to improve trust among stakeholders. The analysis showed a better performance of LAGs in terms of generalised trust compared to the average value at national level. The average is 0.78 for LAGs and 0.64 for the national level, and the median values are 0.87 and 0.63 respectively. Despite the low number of cases studied and limited data, combining both values for structural and normative social capital showed that LEADER contributed to increasing social capital in the LAGs.

Figure 13: Social capital indices within LAGs (average of LAGs in case studies)



Source: Own elaboration based on the evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits (Number of respondents 13). Scale from 0 (no social capital) to 1 (maximum LAG diversity and trust).

Social capital in LAG areas, meaning the inclusiveness of the LAGs’ activities and the creation of links between local actors in the rural area, has been more difficult to assess. The measurement of structural capital based on the diversity of beneficiaries and participants in LAG events scored almost 0.50, meaning a medium value. However, expert groups assessed the improvement in social capital in LAG areas to be very high (0.90).

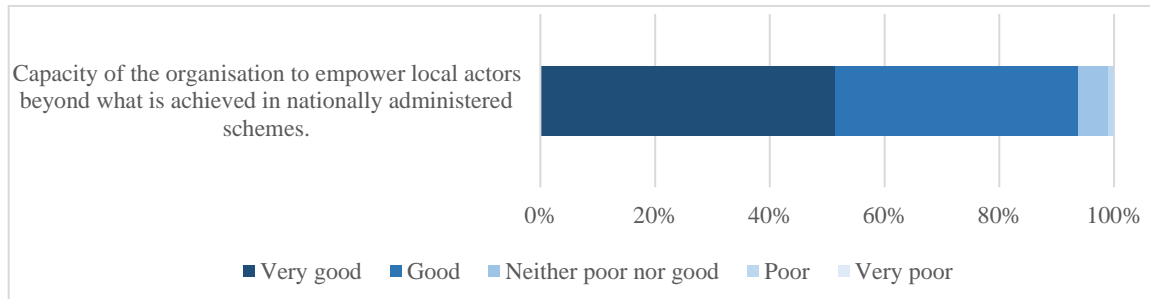
On LEADER’s contribution to social capital beyond the LAGs’ areas through cooperation (rural development Measure 19.3), evidence stemming from case studies shows a high average value of general indices (0.67). However, inter-territorial and, particularly, transnational cooperation has showed the lowest scores and there were significant differences between case studies. According to the indices’ values, LEADER improved social capital, although there is margin for improvement by increasing the diversity of project promoters and the participation of a wider range of stakeholders in cooperation projects.

According to the qualitative information collected in the study, the main drivers of the improvement in social capital were the role of the LAG as a mediator between public authorities and local social and economic stakeholders, the synergies created between interventions, and networking. The ability of LAGs to create networks beyond the actual project supported is worthy of note. Most LAGs in the case studies created new networks within and between the public, business and voluntary sectors. Indeed, the mobilisation of voluntary work has been clearly described in both studies (Agrosynergie and ADE).

⁽⁵³⁾ Normative social capital represents the intangible side of social capital and refers to norms and values within the organisation and its networks to strengthen coordination and cooperation. It is assessed through a combination of trust indices (see Annex II).

As a result of the improved governance and social capital, there is evidence of the empowerment of local people. According to focus groups *‘the implementation of LEADER reaches the local population beyond what is achieved in nationally administered schemes’* ⁽⁵⁴⁾ and supports to a great extent the main thesis that LEADER has the capacity to empower people.

Figure 14: Assessment of the capacity of LAGs to empower people.



Source: Focus groups. Evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits.

Furthermore, the LAGs’ activities not only empowered people but also helped to leverage additional resources. Through their knowledge and experience, LAGs also supported local actors and authorities to attract resources at local level by providing know-how in preparing calls for funding, providing expertise in the project application process, and disseminating information to stakeholders about the potential resources available.

ESIF operational programmes in Czechia

All three Czech LAGs have been continually active in securing additional funding: LAGs have implemented projects on inclusive education, financed through the operation programme (OP) Science, Innovation and Education (financed by ERDF), as well as additional projects (beyond the CLLD scope) targeting social topics (OP employment financed by ESF). They have secured additional funding from regional governments/authorities, as well as through membership fees and their own consultancy activities - writing tenders and project proposals for external bodies. One of the LAGs was successful in gaining funding from a cross-border cooperation fund (Czechia-Slovakia).

Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development.

4.1.2.3. LEADER has provided enhanced results to some extent.

The evaluation of the impact of CAP on territorial development ⁽⁵⁵⁾ already evidenced that LEADER (along with Measure 7 - basic services) had been the most effective measure for local development of rural areas. Moreover, the European Economic and Social Committee ⁽⁵⁶⁾ concluded that ‘support for LEADER was found to be potentially the most

⁽⁵⁴⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., ‘Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER’.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Evaluation of the impact of the Common Agricultural Policy on territorial development of rural areas. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/NL/TXT/?uri=SWD:2021:394:FIN>.

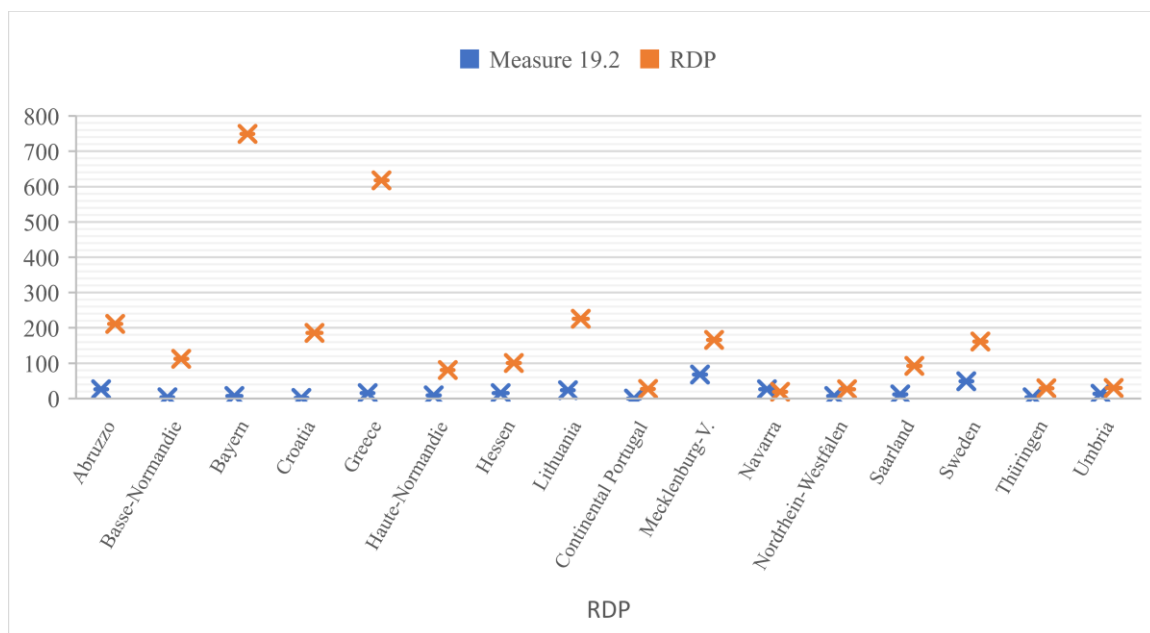
⁽⁵⁶⁾ European Economic and Social Committee, ‘Evaluation on the CAP’s Impact on Territorial Development of Rural Areas (Information Report)’. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/information-reports/evaluation-caps-impact-territorial-development-rural-areas-information-report>.

effective of all measures, diversifying the economy of rural areas, creating new governance mechanisms, preserving historical and cultural heritage and supporting entrepreneurship’.

In line with these findings, the European Committee of the Regions’ evaluation study of CAP instruments⁽⁵⁷⁾, found that LEADER was a rural development measure better qualified to address many rural challenges, particularly those related to social issues, local services and low growth.

The comparison with other relevant rural development measures and the evidence from the case studies and focus groups showed some indications of the **greater economic efficiency** of LEADER projects in providing services to the rural population and creating employment in many rural areas.

Figure 15: Average public expenditure per unit of ‘Population benefiting from new or improved services’: Comparison between rural development Measure 7 and LEADER projects under Measure 19.2 (EUR)



Source: Case studies. Evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits.

Figure 15 shows that, on average, the cost per beneficiary is 50% lower when the service is provided through LEADER projects instead of rural development Measure 7 (basic services and village renewal in rural areas). In terms of jobs, the cost per job created by LEADER was one third of the average cost per job created by all rural development measures contributing to the same objective⁽⁵⁸⁾. However, comparisons should be treated with caution given the diverse types of services and their associated costs.

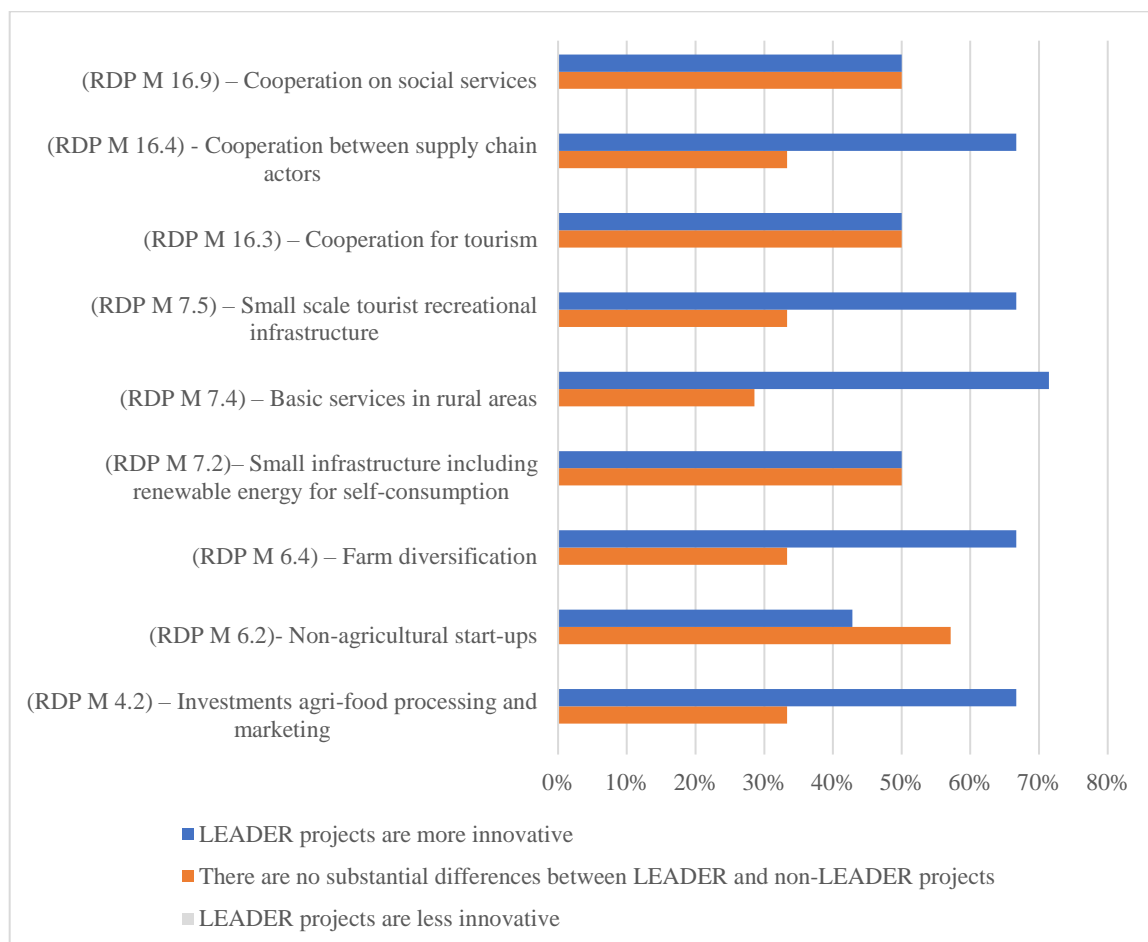
Innovation at local level is another key element of LEADER in terms of improved results. Managing authorities largely considered LEADER as more innovative than other rural development measures. Based on a sample of 53 comparable projects, managing authorities found LEADER more innovative when it comes to the provision of local

⁽⁵⁷⁾ European Committee of the Regions, Progress Consulting S. r.l, and Soldi, *The Impact of CAP on Territorial Development of Rural Areas*.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ A comparison was made between RDP measures linked with Focus area 6A and LEADER projects (Sub-measure 19.2) with a secondary contribution to the same focus area.

services, and tourism (Figure 16). By contrast, they found LEADER less innovative in supporting business start-ups.

Figure 16: Percentage of LEADER projects that are innovative compared to non-LEADER projects.



Source: Own elaboration based on case studies of the evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits (opinions of 10 managing authorities from a sample of 53 projects).

However, innovation is still limited, and opinions of LAG members participating in the focus groups are on average slightly ‘less positive’ on this issue ⁽⁵⁹⁾. However, the case studies and interviews highlighted the importance of the ‘enabling context’ to promote innovation. It is also essential that LAGs have the ability to support project applicants who have an innovative project, and to encourage promoters to introduce innovation in their projects.

LEADER also delivers better results thanks to **networking, animation and support to local actors**, the promotion of local products and support for cooperation and multi-actor projects.

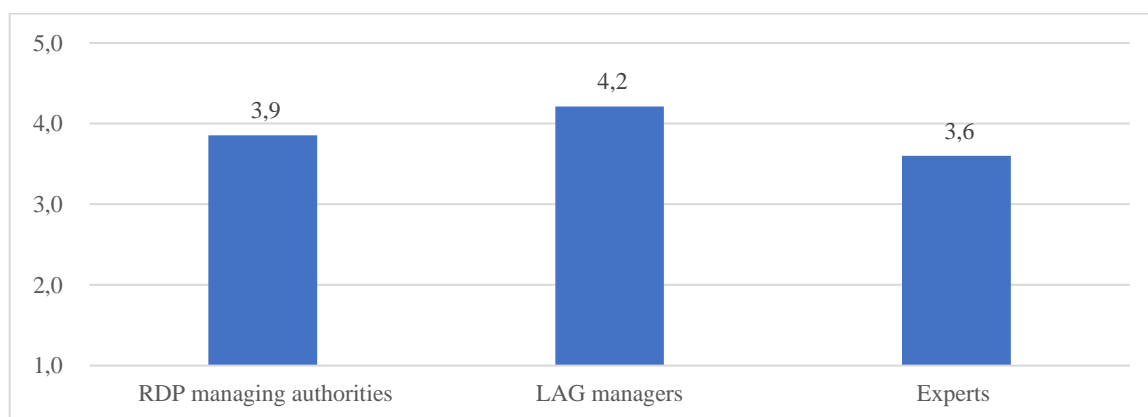
According to the case studies, between 70% and 100% of initially submitted projects were improved thanks to LAG support to beneficiaries. The training and information provided to potential beneficiaries allowed them to succeed in getting project funding. The rate of success of those who applied to calls for proposals was 67.1%, which was considered rather

positive by the evaluators. However, it is not possible to compare this with non-LEADER measures.

LEADER has also supported specific and **multi-actor projects** ⁽⁶⁰⁾, with 36% of LAGs supporting this type of project, which provided specific and integrated solutions to local needs. Moreover, an analysis of case studies showed an average of 12 beneficiaries per project. However, these results should be treated with care due to the availability and variability of data, together with a lack of suitable comparisons.

Nevertheless, the triangulation with the assessment given by managing authorities (65 respondents), LAG managers (13 respondents) and LEADER experts (14 respondents) mostly confirmed that LEADER delivered improved results compared to other rural development measures.

Figure 17: Perceptions of the extent to which LAG support produces improved results compared to other rural development measures



Source: Own elaboration based on evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits. Scale: 1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly agree.

Findings from the various sources of information (literature review, indicators, case studies and focus groups) have been summarised by Agrosynergie in a set of LEADER characteristics that provide added value due to the LEADER method ⁽⁶¹⁾. As shown in Table 6, the scores on the improvement of local governance showed generally higher values, which suggests that the participation of local actors and coordination between institutions have been improved. Social capital enhancement received somewhat lower scores. However, this by no means is to say that social capital has not been improved but cooperation projects were judged as the smallest contributors to any improvement. In addition, the capacity of LEADER to create networks and links between local actors through activities other than cooperation projects has also resulted in an improvement in social capital.

On enhanced results (see Table 6), the evaluation support study suggests that LEADER supported more sustainable projects and promoted local assets thanks to a better knowledge of local conditions. However, innovation at local level and stakeholders' collaboration could be improved to produce more enhanced results. LAG activities to support and

⁽⁶⁰⁾ Specific projects are operations that cannot be assimilated to other rural development measures. Multi-actor projects refer to integrated projects shared by groups of local beneficiaries.

⁽⁶¹⁾ To provide an overall estimation of the added value generated by LEADER, primary data collected from case studies were used to compute an overall score for each added value feature, expressed on a scale from value 1 = very low to 5 = very high.

animate local actors and mobilise local assets have been assessed as a very positive characteristic of LEADER. Indeed, respondents to the open public consultation⁽⁶²⁾ considered LEADER to be the most effective CAP measure when it comes to supporting local communities. NGOs and rural development networks were the stakeholder groups that gave LEADER higher scores for effectiveness.

Table 6: Overall estimation of the added value generated by LEADER.

LEADER added value element	Added value features of LEADER	Average score
Non-tangible benefits of LDS in terms of improved governance	Improved coordination between different levels of governance	4.0
	Improved quality of interactions between relevant institutions	4.3
	More involvement/participation of the local population in the design and implementation of LDS	4.4
	More involvement/participation of women and young people in the design and implementation of LDS	3.5
	Promoting involvement of new actors in LEADER who would not normally apply for EU funding	4.3
	LEADER brings the EU closer to citizens	4.2
Non-tangible benefits of LDS in terms of improved social capital	Improved relations and social trust within the LAGs	3.6
	Improved relations among local actors in the LAG areas	3.4
	Improved relations through inter-territorial and transnational cooperation (sub-measure 19.3)	2.8
Enhanced results of LEADER projects	Promote collaboration among local actors, cooperation or collective process to reinforce local production and local assets	3.6
	Promote projects with innovation at the local level	3.0
	More sustainable or cheaper projects due to knowledge of local conditions (e.g., diversification)	4.3
	Better performance of funded projects thanks to LAG assistance/training	4.1
	Valorisation of unique territorial assets to contribute to the socio-economic dynamics thanks to the integrated territorial approach	4.2

Source: Evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits.

Note: overall score for each added value feature expressed on a scale from value 1 = very low to 5 = very high

⁽⁶²⁾ See Annex V.

4.1.3. Positive but small contribution of LEADER to local development

Looking at Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) indicators that aimed to assess the contribution of LEADER to local development, LEADER has contributed to creating close to 59 000 jobs. LEADER has covered a bigger rural population than initially planned.

Table 7: Achievement of LEADER target indicators (EU-28)

Target Indicator name	Realised	% achieved (completed)	Target 2025
T21: percentage of rural population covered by local development strategies (Focus Area 6B)	60.54%	107.43%	56.35
T23: Jobs created in supported projects (LEADER) (Focus Area 6B)	58 936	103.08%	57 175

Source: Annual implementation reports (AIR), data 2022.

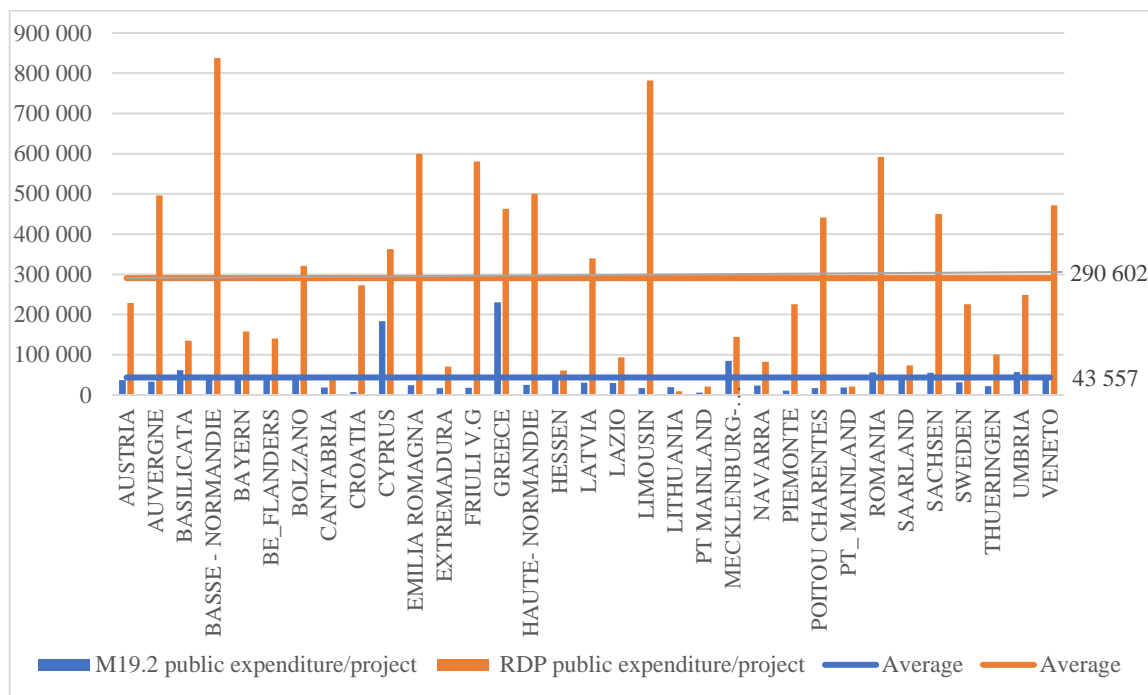
In terms of impacts, the analysis of relevant impact indicators cannot appropriately capture LEADER's contribution. LEADER had a limited effect on regional dynamics as captured by the common EU indicators, which do not have enough granularity to reflect the evolution of the key variables related to local development (growth, employment, etc.).

Notwithstanding the limitations in assessing LEADER's net contribution to territorial development, it is worth mentioning the results of a recent JRC study evaluating CAP's impact on gross added value (GVA) and on employment⁽⁶³⁾. The study attempted to isolate the effects of CAP at NUTS3 level by comparing different CAP scenarios. The main results of this study suggest that in regions with programmes with a high implementation of rural development measures (including LEADER), there is a causal effect of CAP contributing to GVA and employment to a greater extent than in regions with a low level of CAP implementation. Comparison with other blends of CAP measures, with a stronger focus on the EAGF (markets and direct payments) showed mixed results. However, strong rural development policies have a bigger impact than the EAGF on the overall local economy, but less of an impact on outcomes in the agricultural sector.

Nevertheless, LEADER's effects on local development are small and difficult to isolate from external factors and the main socio-economic trends affecting local development. LEADER is not designed to support big projects, but to make relatively small financial investments that can make a difference at local level. Figure 18 shows that projects contributing to the same objective supported by LEADER were almost seven times smaller in terms of budget than projects supported by equivalent rural development measures.

⁽⁶³⁾ Joint Research Centre (European Commission) et al., *An Evaluation of the CAP Impact*.

Figure 18: Average public expenditure (EUR) per project related to local development: comparison between LEADER and non-LEADER measures



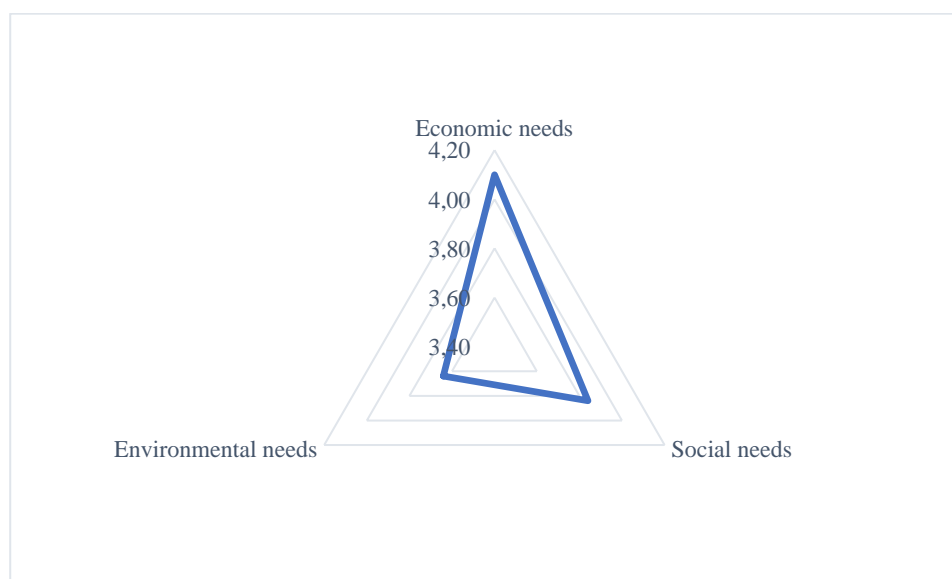
Source: Case studies of Evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits (Agrosynergie) based on AIR 2021.

In addition, local needs are not just about jobs creation or providing services. Looking at CMEF output indicators, LEADER supported many different types of projects that contribute to other objectives (see Table 5), following a more integrated approach to local development. These projects are, therefore, not always fully reflected in the common result indicators.

LEADER has not been equally effective in each of the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental). Surveys at EU level and case studies ⁽⁶⁴⁾ showed that LAGs have been more effective at addressing economic and social needs than environmental ones.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ ADE s. a et al., 'Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development'.

Figure 19: Effectiveness of LAGs in meeting local development needs (EU-28)



Source: own elaboration based on evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balance territorial development - EU survey of LAGs (509 respondents) Scoring scale goes from 1 = None to 5 = Very high level.

These findings are supported also by the Agrosynergie evaluation support study. The summary of evidence sources (Table 8) shows that, according to all stakeholders, LEADER was quite effective in improving quality of life, promoting economic activities (creating new businesses or improving tourism) and addressing social issues by reinforcing community identity and improving social capital and local governance. By contrast, all stakeholders agreed that local strategies were not really effective in creating new local units of production of companies. In addition, local strategies are less effective in supporting social inclusion and farm diversification, in the opinion of managing authorities (but not LAGs and other experts on these issue). Experts are, however, less convinced about the capacity of local strategies to prevent depopulation.

Table 8: Capacity of LEADER local strategies to have an effect on local development, by source of evidence

Benefits of LAG action	EU-wide survey of managing authorities	Managing authorities on case studies	LAGs on case studies	Experts
Improved quality of life for the population	4.4	4.3	4.6	4.3
Preventing depopulation	3.7	3.9	3.9	3.2
New businesses	4.0	4.6	4.4	3.9
New local units of companies	3.6	3.4	3.6	3.3
New tourist accommodation and increased tourist flow	4.4	4.7	4.2	4.2
More farms with diversified activities	3.6	4.0	4.1	3.8
Increased employment	3.9	4.4	4.2	4.0

Benefits of LAG action	EU-wide survey of managing authorities	Managing authorities on case studies	LAGs on case studies	Experts
Increased revenues / new revenue sources	3.9	4.3	4.3	4.3
Improved social inclusion	4.0	3.4	3.9	4.0
Improved social capital in local areas	4.2	4.6	4.4	4.7
Improved local governance	4.1	4.3	4.1	4.4
Increased leverage	3.8	3.9	4.5	4.1
Reinforcing community identity	4.5	4.7	4.5	4.4

Source: Evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits. Scale ranging between Very poor = 1 to Very good = 5. Low values that denote low impact according to the evaluators are highlighted.

A total of 25% of project promoters supported by LEADER until 2021 were SMEs ⁽⁶⁵⁾. Several other studies highlight the contribution of LEADER to the economic aspect of local development:

- The interim evaluations in Member States ⁽⁶⁶⁾ submitted in 2019 highlighted LEADER’s positive contribution to creating and maintaining jobs, to economic diversification through the creation and development of small businesses and to local services. LEADER contributed to these achievements by promoting participation in decision making, mobilising local actors and creating employment opportunities. Moreover, the Agrosynergie evaluation support study found that, based on the case studies, on average LEADER is capable of creating 1.8 jobs per project.
- Evaluations carried out in Member States since 2021 have reported a total of 188 findings relevant to territorial development ⁽⁶⁷⁾. The findings reported in relation to LEADER often display mixed or unspecified effects. Nonetheless, LEADER evaluations reported by Member States have highlighted several achievements. These include supporting businesses in rural areas, fostering job creation, promoting non-agricultural activities to diversify rural economies, enhancing equal opportunities in rural regions, and improving public services for disadvantaged people and those at risk of social exclusion. It has also been reported that LEADER interventions had a positive impact on social capital and have helped to strengthen community bonds.

⁽⁶⁵⁾ AIR 2021.

⁽⁶⁶⁾ Evaluation Helpdesk, ENRD, ‘Synthesis of the Evaluation Components of the Enhanced AIR 2019: Chapter 7’.

⁽⁶⁷⁾ Outcomes from the review of evaluation activities in Member States reported in Section 2 of AIR.

- For LAGs, LEADER's contribution to the local economy was effective in new business development, creating and maintaining employment, networking and cooperation, and promoting sustainable development ⁽⁶⁸⁾.
- Case studies have also shown LEADER's contributions to farm diversification and non-agricultural business, or to facilitating links between sectors, including agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, connecting different activities such as tourism or food production.

Good practice for promoting local economy: Italy - Tuscany

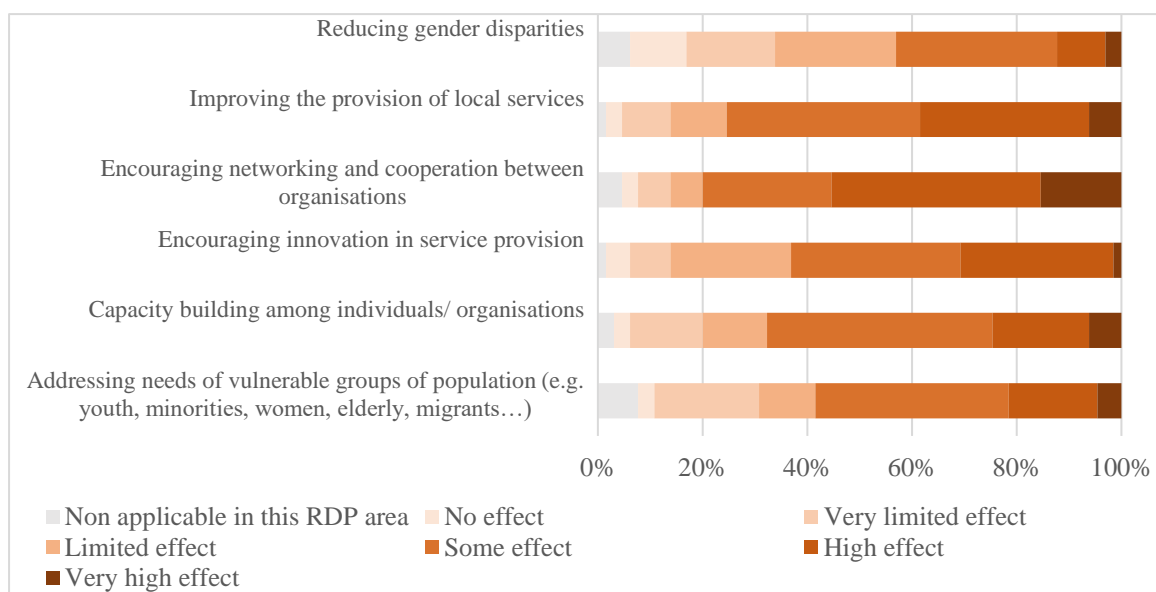
In Tuscany, the Montagna Appennino LAG has widely adopted an integrated package approach, under two different forms: integrated territorial projects (ITPs) and supply chain projects (SCPs). The former mainly addresses intersectoral development needs to increase local products' added value like processing and marketing of agricultural products, while the latter focuses more on agri-food valorisation needs with relevant linkages between agri-food and tourism or agri-food and culture.

Source: ADE evaluation study report

On social issues, the EU-wide surveys of LAGs and managing authorities rated as high or very high LEADER's effectiveness in improving local services and encouraging networking to address these types of issues. Managing authorities (see Figure 20) ranked 'encouragement of networking and cooperation' between organisations working on social aspects (55%) and 'improving the provision of local services' (38%) as having the biggest effect. However, the lowest perceived effects were on 'reducing gender disparities' (51% said there was a limited, very limited or no effect) and 'addressing the needs of vulnerable sectors of the population' (34% limited or no effect; 8% not relevant).

⁽⁶⁸⁾ ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

Figure 20: Managing authorities' perception of LEADER's impacts on social issues in Member States or regions



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey of managing authorities (65 respondents).

Good practice in addressing social issues: Ireland

In Ireland, LEADER collaborated with the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), promoting social inclusion and providing improved services by renovating and restoring community centres.

Source: ADE evaluation study report.

Social inclusion and poverty reduction in rural areas were perceived by both LAGs and managing authorities as complex issues that go beyond the capacity and resources of LEADER to solve them. However, most of the case studies addressed social exclusion by incorporating weighted criteria at the project selection stage⁽⁶⁹⁾, (i.e. giving higher scores to projects that addressed the specific criteria selected by the LAG).

On the environment, both the Agrosynergie and ADE support studies found LEADER effective in addressing certain environmental issues, albeit to a lesser extent. LEADER's contribution to environment development is mainly in awareness raising, and linked to sectors like tourism, in particular eco-tourism, sustainable tourism, and nature tourism⁽⁷⁰⁾. The environment is seen as a secondary issue in some regions⁽⁷¹⁾. Moreover, some environmental needs, particularly infrastructure or protection, are difficult to address through LEADER. As previously stated, LEADER projects are small, and the environmental issues are complex and usually extend beyond a LAG's area of coverage. In practice, therefore, the environmental dimension of local development has a lower

⁽⁶⁹⁾ Spain, Italy and Slovenia case studies in the ADE study on LEADER.

⁽⁷⁰⁾ Austria, Romania and Italy case studies in the ADE study on LEADER.

⁽⁷¹⁾ EU-wide survey of LAGs and Austria case studies in the ADE study on LEADER.

priority, but is pursued concurrently in the projects that support social or economic development.

LEADER primarily contributes to mobilising local resources and engaging rural populations, while addressing each dimension of local development together ⁽⁷²⁾. However, it is clear from the evidence above that the contribution of LEADER to local development is on a small, local scale well in line with its limited (financial) resources.

4.1.4. Despite its specific costs, LEADER has overall been efficient in delivering additional benefits.

LEADER entails specific costs due to its delivery model. Indeed, the European Court of Auditors ⁽⁷³⁾ has noted that LEADER entails additional costs to support LAGs, which are at the core of LEADER method, through Measure 19.4 (animation and running costs) of the rural development programmes.

The analysis of LEADER specific costs (i.e. Measure 19.4) and general administrative costs ⁽⁷⁴⁾, namely costs borne by managing authorities and other administrative bodies ⁽⁷⁵⁾ to manage Measure 19 (LEADER), are summarised in Figure 21. These figures are comparable but partial, and thus should be used only for comparison with other rural development measures. Some administrative costs, namely costs of controls, were not available by measure in a way that allowed a fair comparison to be made in terms of money.

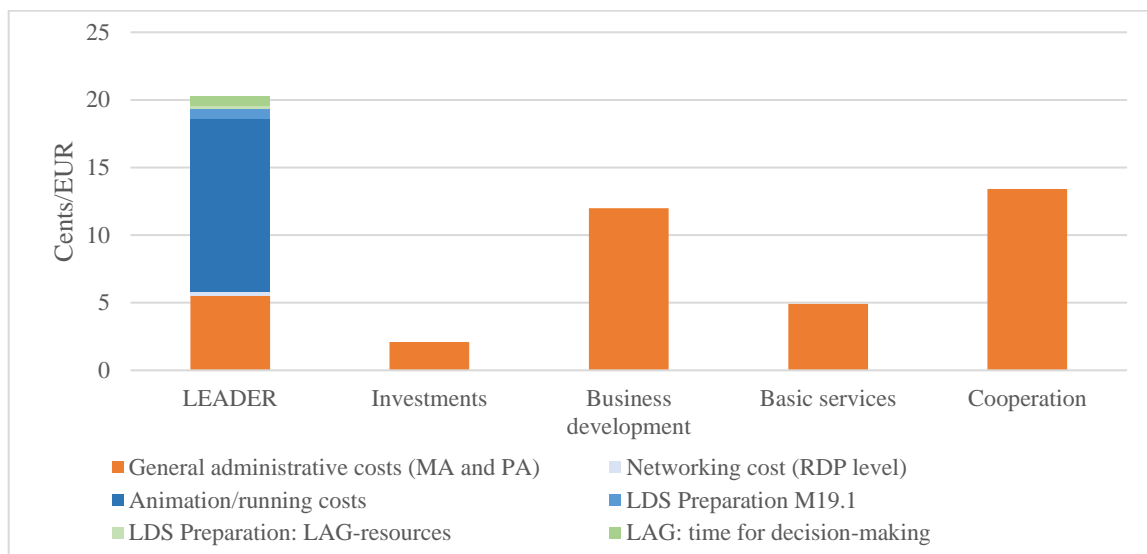
⁽⁷²⁾ The Slovenia case studies noted that both local and national cooperation built social capital, and selection criteria contributed to socio-economic cohesion by funding vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. In Spain, economic capital was generated through strong public-private partnerships, in Italy-Toscana through support for innovation and supply chain development. In Germany's case study regions, economic capital generated through investment in infrastructure development also created social capital through local networking and by linking different stakeholder organisations. ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

⁽⁷³⁾ European Court of Auditors, 'Special Report 10/2022'.

⁽⁷⁴⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., 'Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'.

⁽⁷⁵⁾ Administrative costs of LEADER include costs for the managing authority and for the paying agency, namely: (i) the costs associated with implementing LEADER projects (including cooperation projects), which are assimilable to the costs of implementation of the other rural development measures (non-LEADER); (ii) the costs associated with the selection of LDS/LAGs (establishment of selection criteria, of decision-making bodies and of the selection procedures); and (iii) the costs associated with networking and providing technical assistance to LAGs.

Figure 21: Comparison of implementing costs of LEADER and other rural measures (cents per euro committed) in 2015-2022



Source: Evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits.

The general administrative costs of LEADER in 2015-2022 are estimated at 5.5 cents per euro committed ⁽⁷⁶⁾. These costs are equal to or even lower than the administrative costs of other rural development measures ⁽⁷⁷⁾. For Measures 6 (investments) and 16 (cooperation) general administrative costs were clearly higher than for LEADER, and the same was true for Measure 7 (basic services). By contrast, Measure 4 (investments) seem to be less costly to manage due to possible effects of scale (bigger financial size of the projects).

Although the data on costs are limited ⁽⁷⁸⁾, LEADER's costs, including specific costs for the preparation of local strategies (0.7 cents/euro) and for animation and running costs (14.8 cents/euro), were higher than the general administrative costs of the other rural development measures.

The importance of animation costs varies greatly between rural development programmes and case studies. There are cases in which animation counts for more than 50% of Sub-measure 19.4 (animation and running costs) ⁽⁷⁹⁾ while for others animation accounts less than 5%. However, there are many managing authorities that do not monitor how funding is distributed between running and animation costs.

Moreover, the distribution of non-core tasks between LAGs and other administrative bodies managing LEADER also varies greatly (Figure 2). If these additional tasks are attributed to a LAG they contribute to its administrative burden. However, this also reduces the administrative burden (and costs) for other institutions and beneficiaries.

⁽⁷⁶⁾ Based on the total public expenditure.

⁽⁷⁷⁾ The rural development measures selected were those supporting projects similar to LEADER projects.

⁽⁷⁸⁾ Information is limited in particular when it comes to animation and running costs. Many LAGs and managing authorities do not report them separately but only the total expenditure for both. Moreover, in evaluation support studies LAGs and managing authorities pointed out the difficulty of estimating this type of costs.

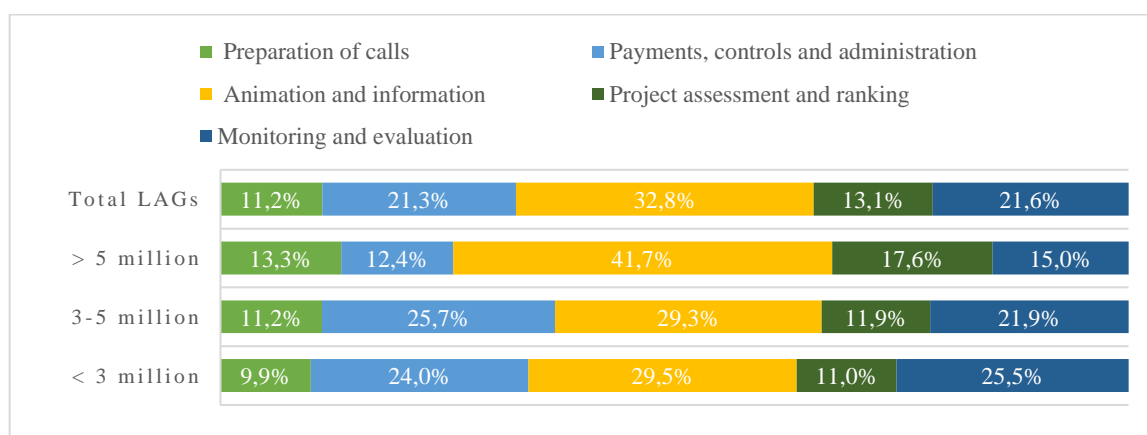
⁽⁷⁹⁾ Austria, Spain-Cataluña and France case studies. Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., 'Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'.

The general administrative costs do not create any added value. However, some LEADER specific costs do create direct value. Furthermore, they can be seen as investments as they contribute to activating the LAG’s endogenous resources. Sub-measure 19.4 (animation and running costs) supports the LAG, which is at the heart of LEADER. Studies and evidence from public consultations ⁽⁸⁰⁾ clearly indicate that LAGs are key for mobilising and animating local actors and people, promoting networking and drawing up and implementing local strategies.

Therefore, the specific costs of LEADER should not be considered just as costs but also as investments in local areas and people. Animation and administrative tasks performed by LAGs resulted also in a reduction in costs and time spent by beneficiaries (on average 34% less time compared to other rural development measures) and administrations (12.5% less time spent processing funding applications).

Interestingly, the studies also detected some economies of scale that allowed LAGs to devote more resources for animation and supporting activities to local actors, which are key for LEADER to produce added value. LAGs with a budget above EUR 5 million spent 10 percentage points more of their workforce on animation and 10 percentage points less on payments, controls and administration.

Figure 22: Share of human resources in LAG activities by LAG budget size in EUR (percentage of total LAG’s FTE)



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development – case studies (35 respondents).

Moreover, a correlation analysis between LEADER adding value elements (listed in Table 6) and the costs of LEADER suggests that the larger the share of resources invested in animation and other specific costs, the greater the possibility of creating added value for the LAG area. The following added value elements have been identified in the analysis as correlating most closely and positively to the size of the specific costs of LEADER: (i) promoting collaboration between local actors through cooperation or collective processes that reinforce local production and local assets; (ii) promoting projects with innovation at the local level; (iii) valorisation of unique territorial assets; (iv) better performance of funded projects thanks to assistance/training provided by the LAG; (v) increasing the participation of the local population in the design and implementation of local development strategies.

⁽⁸⁰⁾ See Annex V.

4.1.4.1. Although LEADER has improved simplification and reduced the administrative burden for beneficiaries and administrations, there is room for improvement

For LAGs and administrations, one of the LEADER administrative processes that is perceived as challenging and burdensome is the **selection process for LDSs** ⁽⁸¹⁾. This is due to the complexity of the process, which entails several steps: preparation of the call; approval of the eligible areas, partnerships and LDSs; and, finally, the contractual agreement between managing authorities and LAGs.

Except for Czechia and Slovenia, the selection process was completed within 2 years (22 months on average). The German regions and Italia - Veneto were the most efficient (between 13 and 17 months), whereas Czechia and Slovenia were the least efficient (38 and 27 months respectively). Although a significant variation in the selection processes and procedures between Member States and regions does not allow for a simple and fair comparison, there is some evidence that stresses the importance of preparatory work on the LDS during the selection process and the possibility of starting even before the end of the previous rural development programme.

According to case studies ⁽⁸²⁾, the selection process under the LEADER/CLLD multi-fund approach was particularly complex due to the involvement of different funding administrations and the need to coordinate the schedules and tasks of the different selection bodies. One case study highlighted a multi-fund selection process done by only one managing authority, which was easier and less time-consuming ⁽⁸³⁾, by reducing the number of administrations involved and simplifying the rules for all ESI funds.

On the **assessment and approval of projects**, most of the administrative burden on LAGs and administrations comes from the distribution of tasks between LAGs, managing authorities and paying agencies. Although the evidence from the evaluation studies is mixed, the greater the 'independence' of the LAGs (or, in practice, the more tasks delegated to the LAGs), the bigger their workload, which may reduce the resources available in LAGs for animation, networking and technical support activities. For most of the LAGs covered by the case studies, the areas in which the administrative burden was perceived to be heaviest are handling payment claims (61% of LAGs), supporting project applicants (51%), and carrying out controls (51%). Other tasks that were seen as highly burdensome are eligibility checks (50%) and project assessment and ranking (49%). Several of these tasks are outside the legally defined core tasks of LAGs.

The study has also found that managing authorities and paying agencies see skilled personnel and detailed guidelines as the most relevant drivers in reducing the administrative burden.

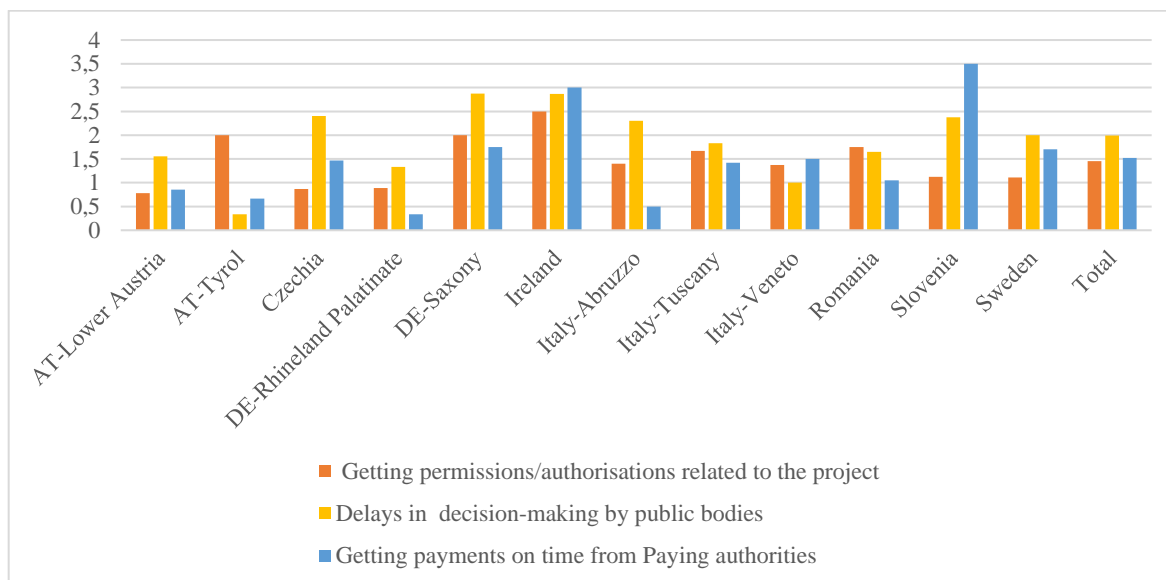
From the perspective of beneficiaries, even though support from LAGs was considered positive, the administrative process is still seen as burdensome. According to the interviews, delayed payments and, especially, long delays in approving projects are considered the main administrative barriers to beneficiaries.

⁽⁸¹⁾ Outcome of case studies. ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

⁽⁸²⁾ Outcome of case studies. Ibid.

⁽⁸³⁾ Sweden. Ibid.

Figure 23: Main administrative barriers for beneficiaries in implementing LEADER projects



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development – case studies (131 respondents). Scale ranging between no burden = 0 to high burden = 5

Public consultations ⁽⁸⁴⁾ also supported the perception that administrative procedures were too complex, and sometimes discouraged potential applicants. However, it seems that this issue is not specific to LEADER, but a general problem for rural development measures. Stakeholders ranked the administrative complexity of CAP instruments (not only LEADER) as the main factor limiting CAP’s contribution to territorial development, which is the most important limiting factor for rural networks and the second most important for individuals.

There is not enough evidence to differentiate which part of the perceived administrative burden is due to CAP’s rules or is specific to LEADER. However, the evidence collected ⁽⁸⁵⁾ indicates that cost drivers are not specific to LEADER but general requirements for funding (at EU level as well as from procedures set by individual Member States). Moreover, animation and support to beneficiaries provided by LAGs resulted in a reduction of costs and time spent by beneficiaries on administration (on average 34% less time compared to other rural development measures). Therefore, it can be said that LEADER entails a lower administrative burden for beneficiaries.

A **multi-funding approach** for LEADER has enabled LAGs to use the most suitable fund to support projects. However, the multi-fund approach was seen as more complex to implement than mono-fund approach, despite attempts to simplify. According to the survey of managing authorities, 85% of respondents said that the mono-fund EAFRD approach is more efficient and simpler than multi-funding. Case studies, especially in Czechia and Slovenia, where the shift to multi-funding has increased the administrative burden, supported this statement. In other cases, like Sweden, the organisation was simplified with one single managing authority and one paying agency for all ESI funds. Even though other funds than EAFRD increased the LAGs’ opportunities to cover broader social and

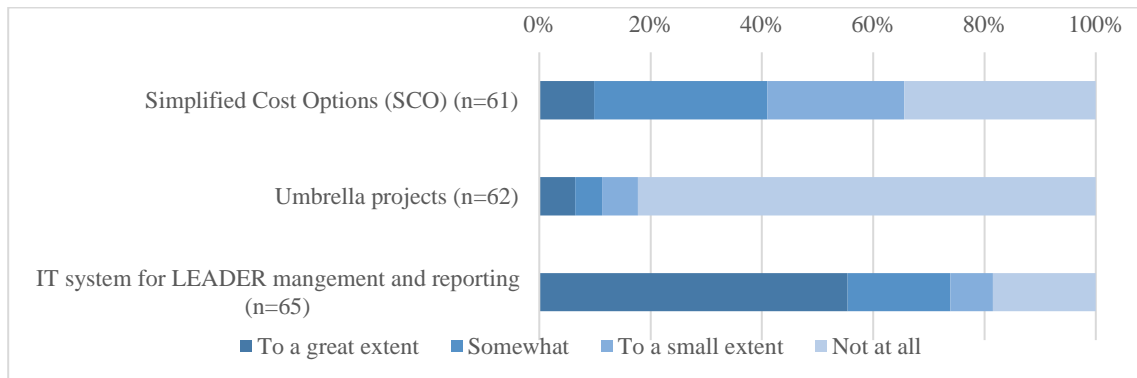
⁽⁸⁴⁾ Ecorys, 'Synthesis of the Online Public Consultation on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas'.

⁽⁸⁵⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., 'Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'.

economic issues through additional funds, most Member States and regions decided to use mono-fund schemes for LEADER (see Figure 9).

Amongst the **mitigation measures to reduce the administrative burden**, most Member States used **IT systems** for administrative management and, to a certain extent, **simplified cost options (SCO)**.

Figure 24: Key actions to reduce the administrative burden in LEADER



Source: Survey of managing authorities and paying agencies. Evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits.

While IT systems mainly reduced the administrative burden on administrations, SCOs are recognised as a means of simplification for both beneficiaries and administrations. According to case studies ⁽⁸⁶⁾, SCOs had an impact on reducing the documentation that beneficiaries had to provide to LAGs and administrations: applicants must submit fewer supporting documents in response to a call for proposals, and the eligible cost did not have to be proven in several cases. SCOs have been mainly used for sub-measures 19.1 (preparation of LDS) and 19.4 (animation and running costs). However, it was used rather infrequently for projects implementing local strategies. SCOs are seen as unsuitable for complex projects as they may require further cost analysis ⁽⁸⁷⁾.

Umbrella projects are widely accepted as adding value ⁽⁸⁸⁾, with a significant potential to simplify procedures for beneficiaries. They are designed to support several promoters and activities under one project. However, some LAGs found umbrella projects burdensome as they are of the opinion that ‘umbrella projects have reduced the administrative burden for the small beneficiaries, but the burden has been transferred to the LAG, which runs the umbrella project’. In addition, LAGs are responsible for project justification which cannot be done until the last beneficiaries have completed their activities.

Both studies and public consultations are clear that **good communication and coordination, and a clear and balanced distribution of tasks** between the different levels of LEADER governance (LAGs, managing authorities, and paying agencies) reduces the administrative burden and allow for the more efficient delivery of results.

Evidence has also showed that the skills and competence of LAG staff and the size of the LAG’s budget affects LEADER’s efficiency. The more **skilled staff and budget** a LAG

⁽⁸⁶⁾ ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

⁽⁸⁷⁾ Swedish case study. Ibid.

⁽⁸⁸⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., ‘Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER’.

had, the more efficient and effective LEADER was. As regards the tasks of LAGs, the studies have not found a clear correlation between the number of tasks delegated to LAGs and LEADER's effectiveness and efficiency. However, LAGs considered that administrative tasks are burdensome and should be simplified.

4.1.5. LEADER has worked coherently with other CAP instruments, particularly with rural development measures.

The outcomes of the evaluation support study ⁽⁸⁹⁾ and public consultations ⁽⁹⁰⁾ revealed that LEADER had a high level of internal coherence with other rural development measures and CAP objectives and instruments. At a local level, the coherence of development strategies was ensured not only at the key moment of the process to create the strategy but also during its implementation. Indeed, in most of the case studies, the strategies or activities were adapted to the changing context when needed ⁽⁹¹⁾.

Moreover, the surveys and case studies ⁽⁹²⁾ largely confirm an internal coherence of LEADER with the objectives of RDPs and, albeit to a lesser extent, with EAGF instruments and objectives. Around 90% of respondents to the LAGs survey ⁽⁹³⁾ consider that LAG activities are either coherent with other rural development measures, or do not specifically interact with them. LAG activities and other rural development measures were viewed as in conflict and creating difficulties by only 10% of respondents. The responses of managing authorities to the surveys followed the same pattern (see Figure 25).

⁽⁸⁹⁾ ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

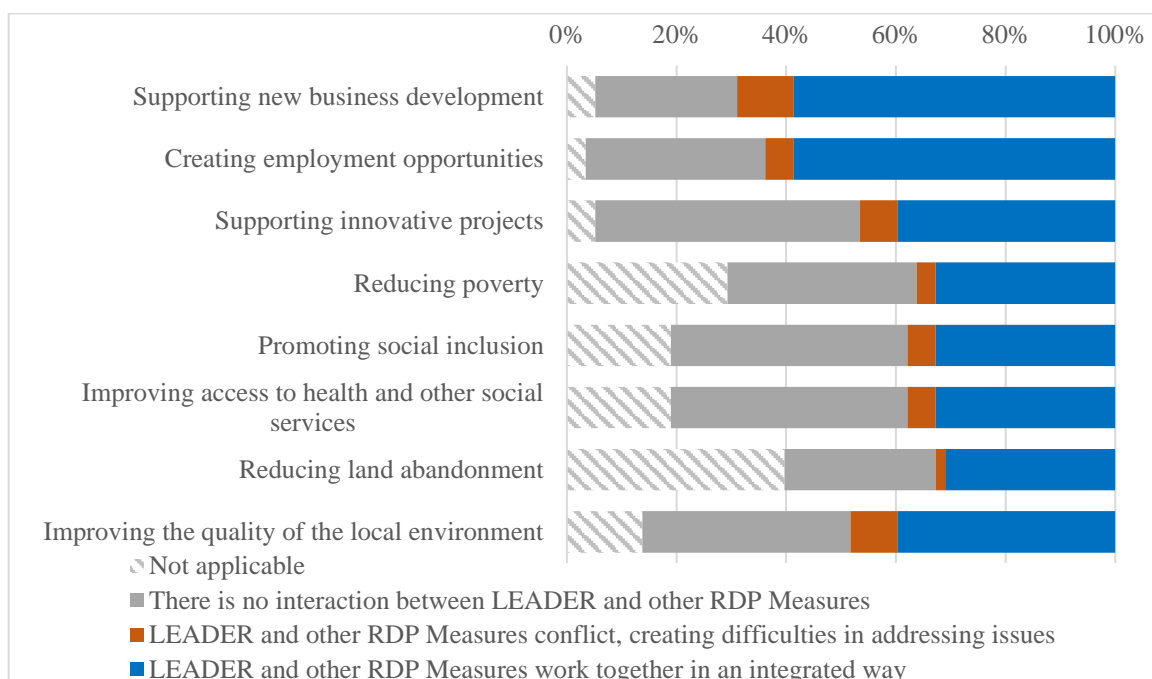
⁽⁹⁰⁾ Ecorys, *Synthesis of the Online Public Consultation on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas*.

⁽⁹¹⁾ Adaptations of the LDSs were made in Austria, Czechia, both German case study regions, Ireland, Italy-Abruzzo and Slovenia. Adaptation of projects and activities were found in Belgium-Wallonie and Sweden.

⁽⁹²⁾ ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

⁽⁹³⁾ 480 respondents.

Figure 25: LEADER coherence with other rural development measures



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey of managing authorities (58 respondents).

Synergies with Measure 7 (basic services) have been reported to be the strongest. There are also examples of LEADER projects reinforcing other CAP instruments and increasing farm income by supporting farm diversification and improving farmers’ position in the supply chain. In addition, most RDPs defined clear rules to avoid overlaps with other rural development measures that contribute to local development. However, LEADER cooperation (Measure 19.3) has been more difficult to implement in a coherent way due to differences in guidance and implementing rules between RDPs. Also, external factors such as language barriers or territorial differences made it hard to implement more cooperation projects.

The European Court of Auditors found that some LAGs were supporting the statutory tasks of national, regional or municipal authorities, or other activities for which other specific EU and national funding programmes existed. However, evaluations support studies could not assess how widespread this issue was, mainly due to the lack of a clear definition of a statutory task. However, delimitations set by managing authorities aimed to reduce overlaps with other rural development measures and other policies.

4.1.6. Overall, LEADER has been coherent with relevant EU, national and regional policies, particularly with other EU funds.

LEADER was largely considered by managing authorities, LAGs and stakeholders coherent with other funds and policies (external coherence), particularly with policies related to the ESIF and CLLD⁽⁹⁴⁾. Feedback provided in the public consultation highlighted that, when it comes to the territorial specificities, LEADER seems to complement other EU funds, extending and enhancing support to categories of beneficiaries that in practice are often excluded from the typical pool of beneficiaries of EU structural funding. Moreover, the LEADER and multi-fund local development

⁽⁹⁴⁾ Evidence from evaluation support studies and public consultation.

approaches showed stronger complementarity with other EU policies (such as the ESF and social welfare payments) than other CAP instruments and measures, when addressing social inclusion issues ⁽⁹⁵⁾. However, there seems to be less coherence with national and regional policies. From this perspective, stakeholders, especially NGOs, call for greater coordination between different authorities at national and regional level to create a more coherent mechanism at local level ⁽⁹⁶⁾.

Managing authorities also set out rules to ensure complementarity, while avoiding overlaps with other EU funds, when drafting their rural development programmes ⁽⁹⁷⁾.

Furthermore, there have been complementarities between LEADER and INTERREG and, to a lesser extent, with LIFE projects. LEADER is also perceived by LAGs and managing authorities as coherent with national and regional policies to promote rural development. According to the case studies ⁽⁹⁸⁾, LEADER generally created synergies and complementarities on economic, social, agricultural and environmental issues. However, a lack of coherence (Slovenia) or a lack of connection (Romania) between LEADER and other rural development policy initiatives was also found in some Member States. However, those limitations seem ‘to emerge from a lack of clarity or common vision in these national programmes or between Ministries, not specific to LEADER’.

According to the evaluators ⁽⁹⁹⁾, when addressing social issues, the LEADER and CLLD approaches show stronger complementary relationships with other EU policies than with other CAP instruments and measures. Therefore, it may be necessary to create stronger synergies between different CAP instruments and LEADER, particularly regarding the CAP’s social dimension.

4.2. How did the EU intervention make a difference and to whom?

LEADER is a genuine EU product, not only because it was implemented as an EU initiative but also because there are no comparable Member State actions. Case study evidence ⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ highlighted that LEADER is one of the elements of CAP rural development policy that provides EU added value. Moreover, LEADER would not have been implemented without the EU. As noted in all the case studies, LEADER touches especially the social fabric of rural areas and supports the social aspects of local development. Developments like this might have happened without EU support (especially in those areas where social capital was already established), but probably not everywhere. Moreover, LEADER ringfencing ⁽¹⁰¹⁾ ensures that the LEADER method is applied in all Member States.

The EU added value of LEADER was also widely reported by managing authorities, as Figure 26 shows.

⁽⁹⁵⁾ ADE s. a, *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of the CAP on Territorial Development of Rural Areas*.

⁽⁹⁶⁾ Ecorys, *Synthesis of the Online Public Consultation on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas*.

⁽⁹⁷⁾ Section 14 of the Rural Development Programme.

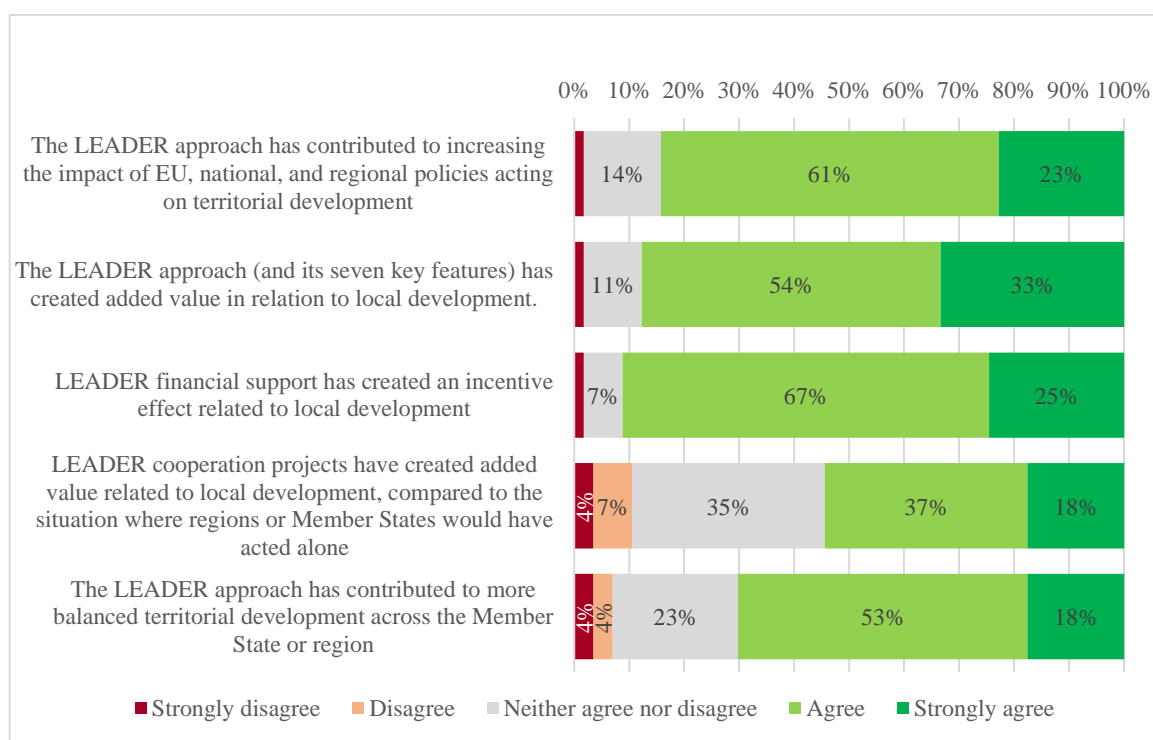
⁽⁹⁸⁾ ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

⁽⁹⁹⁾ ADE s. a, *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of the CAP on Territorial Development of Rural Areas*.

⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Ibid.

⁽¹⁰¹⁾ Minimum share of RDP budget that should be allocated to LEADER. See Section 2.1.2.

Figure 26: Managing authorities' perception of LEADER's EU added value



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey of managing authorities (57 respondents).

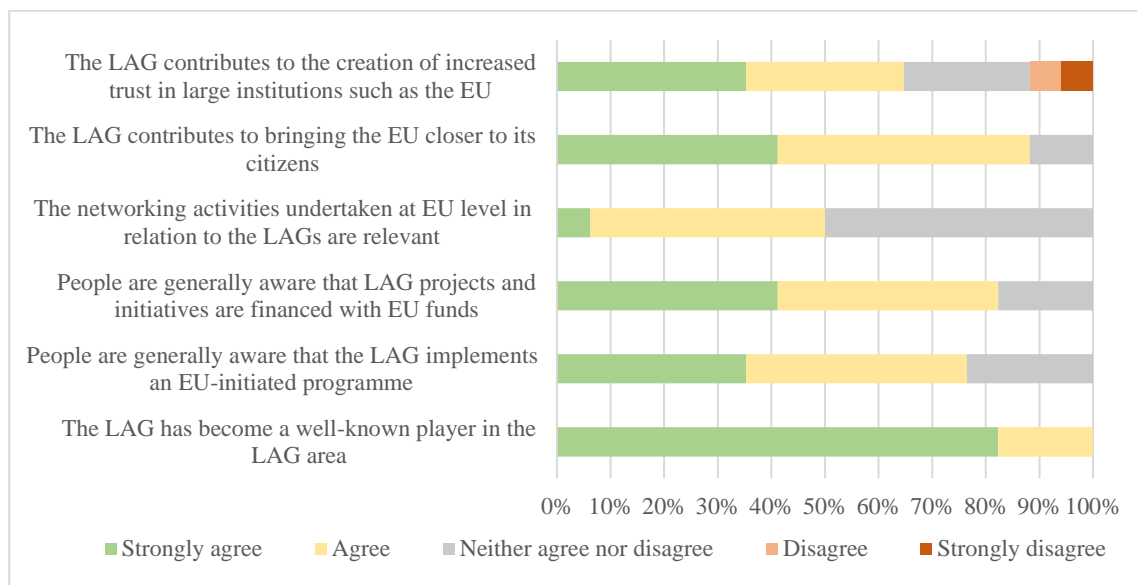
According to the public consultations⁽¹⁰²⁾ there is abundant evidence of the strong link between the LEADER approach and recognition of EU added value. LEADER was recurrently highlighted by stakeholders as a tool to align local needs with EU objectives. The impact of the CAP on the governance of rural areas, specifically through the capacity building elements of the LEADER approach, were consistently mentioned. LEADER ensured that rural communities across the EU have the chance of participating in their own development process, which might not be implemented by Member States themselves without LEADER. Moreover, the EU provided a common framework for action for all Member States and regions, while respecting the autonomy of rural communities. Thanks to the EU action, LAGs have expanded the capacity of rural communities across the EU to resolve problems in a bottom-up way through innovation and cooperation.

The EU added value of cooperation is also significant as it promotes networking and cooperation activities between LAGs from different EU regions and Member States. Cooperation is key to build up connections that otherwise would not exist between and within rural territories in the EU, which allowed LAGs, regions and Member States to improve local development more than acting alone. In addition, LAGs and cooperation are supported by the EU level activities of the European Network for Rural Development, which creates an extra layer of collaboration that would not happen otherwise.

Furthermore, LEADER is 'bringing the EU closer to citizens', and increases public awareness about the initiatives carried out in rural areas using EU funding, about the relevance of such initiatives for the population concerned and about the 'inclusive' nature of LEADER initiatives carried out by LAGs. In addition, LEADER is also increasing trust in the EU to some extent.

⁽¹⁰²⁾ Ecorys, *Synthesis of the Online Public Consultation on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas*.

Figure 27: Knowledge of and views on EU-LAG interconnections and contributions



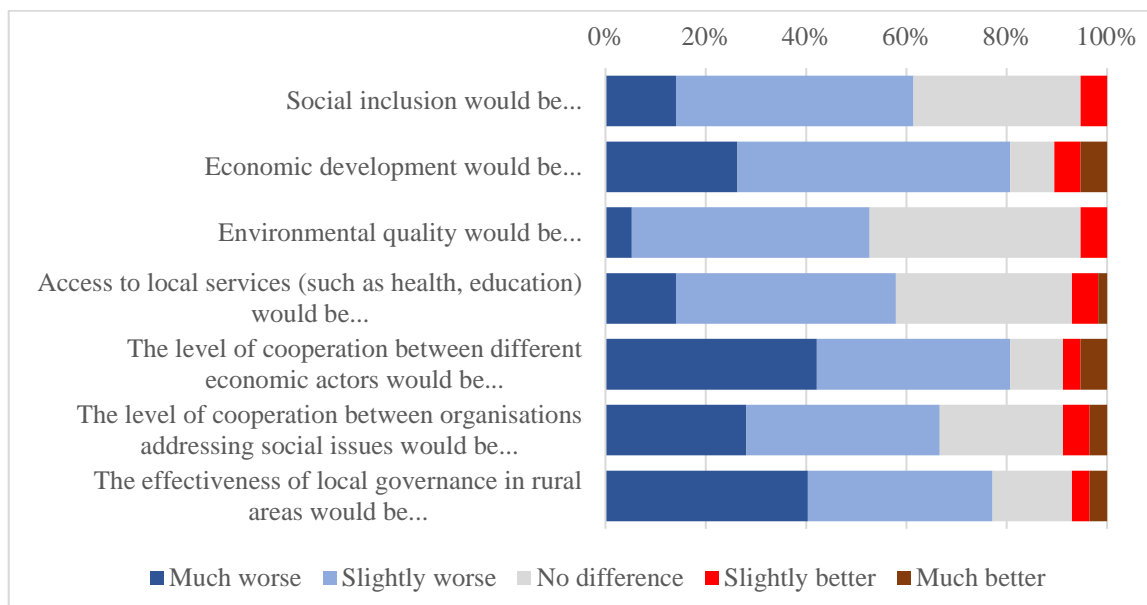
Source: Case studies from the evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits.

As already mentioned (Figure 14), LEADER has empowered local actors and the rural population. The implementation of LEADER reached the local population beyond what is achieved by nationally administered schemes. However, it should be kept in mind that ‘if [LEADER] key principles are not applied properly, it restricts the EU added value of LEADER’⁽¹⁰³⁾.

Finally, both managing authorities and LAGs agreed that the absence of LEADER would be worse for economic development, cooperation between economic actors, and the effectiveness of local governance. Environment and access to local services would be less affected, although more than 50% of respondents felt that both would be in a worse position without LEADER.

⁽¹⁰³⁾ ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

Figure 28: Managing authorities' perception of the condition of rural areas without LEADER



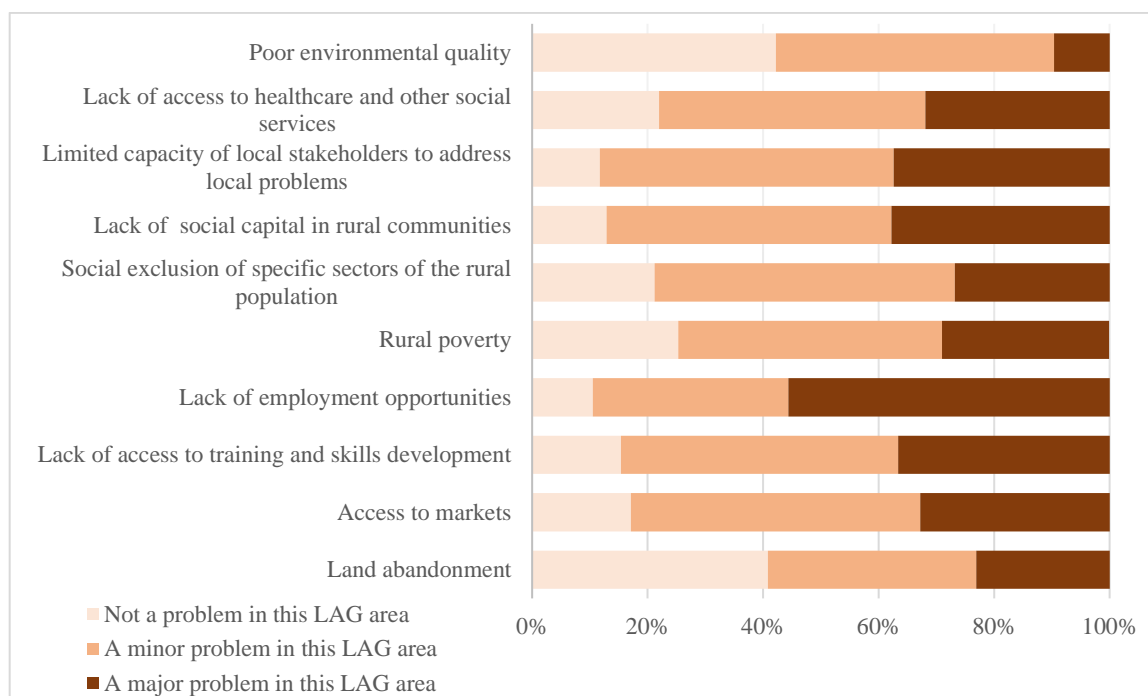
Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey of managing authorities (57 respondents).

4.3. Is LEADER still relevant?

It is clear from the studies and public consultations that LEADER is highly relevant in addressing local needs to promote rural development⁽¹⁰⁴⁾. LEADER is considered particularly well-targeted and relevant to local needs (at the sub-regional level). Looking at the three dimensions of local development, LEADER is more relevant to addressing socio-economic needs, while environmental needs at local level were perceived as less important to some areas or better addressed by other instruments. Still, LEADER targets local development in a holistic manner in which all the three dimensions are considered. These findings are in line with the problems perceived by LAGs at local level (Figure 29).

⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Studies on the impact of the CAP on balanced territorial development, on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development, and on the costs and benefits of LEADER; the public consultation on the long-term vision of rural areas and on the impact of the CAP and LEADER on balanced territorial development; the European Economic and Social Committee's evaluation of CAP's impact on territorial development and the European Committee of the Regions' study on the impact of CAP on the territorial development of rural areas.

Figure 29: Perceived scale of problems in the LAG area



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development - EU survey of local action groups (511 respondents).

It should be noted that, when looking at the CAP, LEADER is perceived to be more relevant to addressing social issues rather than other CAP objectives and, along with Measure 7 (basic services), the key rural development measures for addressing the needs of the rural population outside of the agricultural sector.

Most importantly, according to the survey of managing authorities⁽¹⁰⁵⁾, networking and social capital, and improving local capacity (i.e. the skills, knowledge, and confidence of rural stakeholders) are perceived as the most important needs that LEADER is best placed to address.

LEADER is recognised as the key instrument to address local needs due to its unique method, particularly its bottom-up approach, strategic planning (which requires a local needs assessment), public-private partnerships, capacity building and networking.

The relevance of LEADER is influenced by the capacities of stakeholders and LAG staff, the support provided to LAGs by Member States and regions (mainly through the managing authorities and rural networks), and the eligibility rules defined in the RDP. Local capacity to identify local needs and to formulate the relevant strategies is key.

Evidence shows that the LEADER approach has been relevant to territorial development in many ways. In many cases⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ LEADER specifically targeted areas which are economically disadvantaged, peripheral or remote, or which host vulnerable communities. However, and in line with findings on effectiveness, the overall scale of LEADER's resources was too

⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ The importance (either of major importance or extremely important) of LEADER's role in building capacity was supported by 79% of respondents. LEADER's role in building relationships and social capital was supported by 84% of respondents. ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Ibid.

limited to see significant impacts across the whole rural territory ⁽¹⁰⁷⁾. This is particularly relevant to complex issues such as depopulation, which are affected by a whole range of factors and general trends.

Targeting less favoured areas in Germany

Areas with a comparatively low GDP per capita such as Sächsische Schweiz-Osterzgebirge (70% of the EU-27 average) receive higher amounts of LEADER funding both overall and per capita. The distribution of funding across thematic funding areas varies in relation to local needs and is also indicative of its being adapted to different regional development needs.

Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balance territorial development.

Finally, it is noteworthy that LEADER remains a very relevant intervention for the development of rural areas. Participatory foresight for the long-term vision on rural areas ⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ highlighted the importance of multi-level governance: it was an axis for the development of scenarios that underpinned the vision. Participatory foresight facilitated for the identification and selection of building blocks for the vision. One of the four blocks identified ⁽¹⁰⁹⁾, ‘stronger rural areas’, included ‘empowered rural communities’ and ‘social innovation’. Furthermore, analysis of CAP strategic plans for 2023-2027 ⁽¹¹⁰⁾ showed that Member States almost exclusively chose LEADER to address the needs of rural areas, as it contributes to all four blocks of the rural vision. LEADER is seen as particularly relevant to stronger and resilient rural areas, which are more linked to social issues and the provision of services, and to some extent to ‘prosperous rural areas’, which is focused on economic issues. The importance given to LEADER is also clear from the allocation of funds in CAP strategic plans. On average, Member States allocated significantly more funding to LEADER intervention than the required legal minimum. However, this often comes with the reduction of other interventions for wider rural development beyond the primary agricultural sector.

5. WHAT ARE THE CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED?

5.1. Conclusions

LEADER is primarily a method to improve and mobilise local resources and capacity, increasing participation and improving governance and social capital, rather than an instrument to support significant big capital investments/projects in rural areas. On average in the EU, public support per LAG was EUR 4 million over the programming period of 9 years. This illustrates the relatively limited scale of this instrument and its local nature. LEADER represents only 2% of CAP spending and covers 170 million EU rural citizens.

With close to 2 900 LAGs covering most of rural Europe, LEADER is ‘bringing the EU closer to citizens’. The bottom-up approach ensures that projects and strategies meet

⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ The GDP of rural areas amounts to an estimated 2 516 billion in PPS (EU 2012), and LEADER funds totalling just EUR 7 billion (AIR 2020). Therefore, LEADER resources represent an average level of EUR 20 per capita of the rural population that is covered by LAGs.

⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ SWD (2021) 167 final.

⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ Stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas. https://rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-vision_en

⁽¹¹⁰⁾ *Taking stock of how CAP strategic plans contribute to the objectives of the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas.* Report to be published soon.

priority local needs. In addition, LEADER has also targeted areas which are economically disadvantaged, peripheral or remote, creating close to 60 000 jobs and playing an important role in territorial development for rural areas.

LEADER has succeeded in promoting local development, particularly supporting local economies and businesses (25% of beneficiaries were SMEs), providing local services for improved quality of life, and contributing to social capital enhancement and addressing social issues. In Ireland, 10 projects showcased how LEADER is instrumental for the development and enhancement of the bioeconomy to assist Ireland's transition to a low-carbon economy, and improve the quality of life for people in rural areas through increased employment opportunities, as well as other substantial environmental and socio-economic benefits⁽¹¹⁾. LEADER has been proved less relevant to addressing environmental needs; only 1% of the projects explicitly focused on environment or climate action. However, many LEADER projects had an environmental dimension, addressing it as a cross-cutting element.

LEADER has often produced enhanced results in comparison with similar top-down rural development measures. LEADER delivered better results in terms of cost-effectiveness, providing services and creating jobs more efficiently than other rural development measures. However, enhanced results have more to do with the intangible benefits of LEADER (i.e. the results delivered) than the investment itself. Animation and support activities and networking with local actors and beneficiaries helped to improve projects, attracted new beneficiaries who would not otherwise have applied for projects, fostered innovative approaches, and created links among economic sectors and local actors even beyond the completion of projects. LEADER has also proved effective not only in increasing the quality of projects but also in creating local 'know-how' to leverage additional resources, including voluntary work, and helping local actors to access other funds.

LEADER has effectively contributed to increasing social capital in rural areas, which is a basis for empowering people and strengthening the social fabric. LEADER has promoted participation and trust among local actors, reaching stakeholders that otherwise would not have got involved. LEADER has also fostered networking even beyond the LAG area, implementing almost 2 800 cooperation projects. Decision-making bodies (e.g. boards of directors) are diverse, according to the analysis. 65% of the LAGs studied included more than 4 groups of interests (public administrations, business associations, NGOs, etc.). However, participation could still be improved by involving an even greater variety of groups in the board, notably women and young people, and implementing democratic processes to elect board members.

The LEADER method, with its seven features, is the driver of better LEADER delivery and increased added value. The bottom-up approach seemed to be the most recognised and appreciated by stakeholders, particularly among NGOs and rural development networks. Good implementation of all features is, however, essential for the method to work at full capacity. Not all LEADER features have been equally implemented in all Member States; innovation and cooperation were considered the most challenging and should be further improved. Inter-territorial and transnational cooperation under Measure 19.3 appeared to be difficult to implement, mainly due to differing project selection criteria (including cooperation topics), which made it more difficult for LAGs to find other partners to work

(11) <https://nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader/leader-news/leader-and-the-bioeconomy-2021-booklet/>

with, and lengthy processes for approving the projects in managing authorities. Transnational cooperation faced an additional limitation of a language barrier.

To ensure good quality implementation of the LEADER method, the LAG selection process is essential. Some managing authorities already used value adding features as selection criteria for LAGs and LDS. However, the LEADER added value concept could form the basis for such selection processes in the future. Support given to preparing LDS through Measure 19.1 (amounting to more than EUR 65 million for 2014-2022) or through national/regional resources has also played a role in improving the quality of local strategies. However, the average length of the selection process could be shortened to ensure a smooth transition between funding periods.

LEADER has established a multi-level governance system, ensuring local participation and improving relationships between the various administrative levels. LAGs played a role in facilitating communication of local actors and beneficiaries with regional and national administrations. Clear and balanced distribution of tasks and smooth communication between managing authorities, paying agencies and LAGs are key to ensure the smooth implementation of LEADER. This was sometimes not the case. It is essential to find a good balance between LAG autonomy and administrative workload. LAG's human resources capacity and skills to animate local actors, supporting potential beneficiaries and dealing with administrative tasks are assets that help ensure the smooth implementation of LEADER.

LEADER has been also efficient despite entailing specific costs. At first glance, LEADER has been more costly than other rural development measures. However, a substantial part of these costs should be seen as an investment in human capital, particularly animation and support to local people, that have improved not only LEADER's effectiveness but also its efficiency, including reducing and simplifying the administrative burden for beneficiaries. It has also reduced the general administrative costs borne by other actors in the multi-level governance process.

LEADER's specific costs have produced additional benefits, including some intangible benefits. However, capturing the intangible benefits of the LEADER method remains a challenge. This limitation is particularly relevant when comparing LEADER with other measures or instruments to promote rural development. Improvements in cost reporting (e.g. animation costs) and additional benefits estimations would help to better understand the extent to which LEADER's specific costs can be considered merely as costs or as an investment in local people.

Despite efforts made so far, further work to reduce and simplify the administrative burden is still needed. Stakeholders and administrations agreed on the complexity of administrative rules and bureaucracy, which have been particularly challenging for the promoters with the least resources. While LEADER's procedures are also perceived as burdensome, the complexity of CAP procedures and administrative rules set by Member States seem to be at the core of the administrative complexity (in particular payment claims and controls) rather than LEADER procedures as such. LAGs animation and support activities have reduced the administrative burden for both beneficiaries and administrations.

Animation and support for beneficiaries have been affected by the administrative workload, meaning that in some Member States and regions, most of the LAG's human resources have been devoted to administrative tasks instead of animation activities.

Simplifying LAG selection process, extending the use of simplified cost options to implement projects within LDS, reducing administrative workload in LAGs and improving their human resources skills in relation to administrative tasks, and implementing IT systems like digitalising administrative processes or communication tools, might be key to reducing the administrative burden.

The administrative burden and complexity also limited LEADER/CLLD multi-fund implementation. Despite the leading fund approach, the various rules and administrative bodies involved discouraged Member States from using LEADER/CLLD.

Economies of scale are also relevant to improving LEADER's effectiveness and efficiency. The more budget per LAG, the more resources available for animation and supporting local actors. For instance, LAGs with a budget above EUR 5 million could devote, on average, 30% more human resources to animation and support activities than those with smaller budgets. Stakeholders also noted that financial resources need be increased to ensure LEADER performs well. A multi-funding approach is one way to increase LAGs resources and to achieve such economies of scale.

LEADER has proved to be coherent and working in synergy with other funds and policies, especially those focused on socio-economic issues. A multi-fund approach provided a good opportunity to ensure LEADER's coherence, raise additional funds and for LAGs to use the most suitable instrument for each type of activity, access new networks and know-how. However, EAFRD still represents 75% of the funding and a mono-fund approach is still the preferred option of managing authorities.

There is a clear consensus among stakeholders and administrations regarding the relevance and EU added value of LEADER as an instrument for promoting rural development and addressing the needs of rural communities by engaging local communities in participatory local development. A non-LEADER scenario would worsen conditions in rural areas. In the 2023-2027 programming period, LEADER is the most important intervention planned by Member States to address the development of rural areas.

The monitoring and evaluation system of RDPs is not designed to assess LEADER. The CMEF indicators scope is not suitable for assessing LEADER's effects at local level and additional benefits resulting from the LEADER method are difficult to capture. In addition, the intervention logic at local level is set out in the LDS. Therefore, it is not possible to rebuild it at EU level. However, the LEADER added value concept has proved to be a consistent way of understanding how LEADER works and capturing common outcomes that can be expected from LEADER implementation at EU level.

5.2. Lessons learned

LEADER's contribution needs to be seen in line with its local scale and the resources allocated to it. LEADER delivers small projects of local scale; complementary measures are therefore essential to meet the challenges in many rural areas in the EU in the CAP plans. For instance, instruments that promote innovation or improve the environment (EIP, AKIS, LIFE, etc.) can make use of the LEADER approach and LAG activities to engage rural actors. In this vein, implementing smart village strategies through LEADER is already planned in some CAP strategic plans.

Greater policy focus needs to be put on LEADER's added value, such as its capacity to build social capital, reinforce local governance and deliver enhanced projects.

- Firstly, LEADER added value needs to be better understood by all LEADER stakeholders (managing authorities, paying agencies, networks, LAGs). Internal processes within LAGs and their wider networks and local communities matter, and good practices in this area still need to be identified and encouraged.
- Secondly, LAGs need to be better monitored and evaluated. The European Commission is promoting the concept of LEADER added value as a reference for both designing and assessing LEADER intervention in the new 2023-2027 CAP. Managing authorities should include in the CAP strategic plans how they intend to promote LEADER's added value. Regarding the evaluation of LEADER, further work is planned to improve and spread LEADER added value through CAP networks.

LEADER is more suitable for addressing socio-economic needs than environmental ones. However, the environmental dimension of sustainable development can be strengthened as a cross-cutting element of local strategies or in synergy with other relevant instruments, including EU initiatives and policies.

More innovation-friendly rules (e.g. less strict requirements on durability and successfulness of projects) could be explored in the future to promote more innovative projects through LEADER. Innovation is inherently risky and this needs to be reflected in delivery systems. Better links between LEADER and research and innovation ecosystems could also increase the potential for local innovation.

Cooperation is a source of learning and knowledge exchange for local communities. Networking at regional, national and EU level provides high value. LAG engagement in cooperation projects and networks could be increased and facilitated by harmonising selection criteria for projects within Member States (inter-territorial cooperation) and at EU level (transnational cooperation). Increased support for LAGs and managing authorities could be provided, mainly through national and EU CAP networks.

There are still some areas where administrative burden and complexity could be further simplified and reduced, particularly in the delivery mechanism and multi-level governance. This is largely a matter for Member States and regions, but these areas include:

- increased use of simplified costs options (SCO) to simplify administrative procedures for projects;
- redistributing tasks between the key actors in the multi-level governance to allow LAGs to focus on their core functions ⁽¹¹²⁾;
- increasing resources for animation and capacity building, including exploring options for economies of scale;
- improving coordination and communication between all actors in the multi-level governance system and improved IT systems to facilitate administrative procedures and reporting;

⁽¹¹²⁾ Core and exclusive tasks of LAGs are defined in Article 33 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1060>.

- developing LAG staff skills and support to beneficiaries, including capacity building;
- simplifying CAP procedures, in particular those related to payment claims and controls.

Member States effectiveness in LEADER delivery varies strongly. In some Member States absorption of funding remains an issue. Targeted actions such as peer-learning and exchange of good practices could be directed to them. Also LAG selection processes need to be shorter to allow a smooth transition to the CAP 2023-2027. Transitional regulation has already allowed the use of funds from the 2014-2022 period to support LDS preparation to facilitate LEADER implementation from the beginning of the new period.

The reasons for relatively low use of multi-funding LEADER/CLLD need to be better understood. Further simplification is essential to increase the number of multi-funded projects. More extensive use of lead fund options, the harmonisation of the various procedures that still exist for the different ESI funds, or even a common regulation and national legal framework for all funds could be explored.

An encouraged and better monitored involvement of young people, women, and environmental NGOs in LEADER decision-making bodies would increase LEADER inclusiveness. The new monitoring of LEADER (under Regulation (EU) No 2022/1475) will address this need.

To improve monitoring and evaluation of LEADER, data at the LAG level is needed and the method of LEADER added value has been proved to be a good approach to assess LEADER. LEADER added value allows the depiction of the intervention logic behind the LEADER approach by showing the common elements to all LAGs and LDS (governance, social capital, and enhanced results). In this line, a new set of relevant data at LAG level will be collected. Regulation (EU) No 2022/1475 defines a set of variables related to composition of LAGs, type of projects, and potential results to be collected for each LAG, providing adequate granularity of data to assess LEADER. In addition, the LEADER added value method should be further developed with practical ways to assess governance, social capital, and results, notably with CAP networks.

New elements to monitor and evaluate LEADER in the CAP 2023-2027

The European Commission has already put in place some of the lessons learned stemming from the evaluation support studies.

The monitoring of LEADER has been improved to get relevant information at local level through the adoption of Implementing Regulation (EU) No 2022/1475 (Article 14 and Annex VII). It covers data on LAG and executive board composition: type, gender, age and number of members, financial allocation and execution and information about number, type, innovative dimension and promoters of LEADER projects and their contribution to CAP result indicators (notably jobs, business creation and social inclusion). Data will be reported by LAG to ensure adequate granularity. However, the expenditure on animation costs will not be collected as it is not possible for Member States to disentangle them from management costs, as most employees of LAGs are indeed involved in several tasks.

In addition, Member States should specifically assess LEADER added value during the implementing period of the CAP Strategic Plans (Article 2 of Regulation (EU) No 2022/1475). The result indicators of the CAP strategic plans should be updated after LDS approval to reflect the contribution of LEADER to various objectives of the CAP.

Annex I. Procedural information

Lead DG

Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI)

Decide planning references

PLAN/2020/8421

Work programme reference

Not applicable

Derogations granted to the Better Regulation guidelines

Launch call for evidence without public consultation

Organisation and timing

This staff working document is a policy evaluation included in DG AGRI's evaluation plan. The evaluation work draws principally on external evaluation support studies contracted through DG AGRI's framework contract and a service contract to provide technical assistance.

The main evaluation support study carried out by the external contractor started in June 2020. The evaluation study's final deliverable was received on 14 October 2021. After finalisation of the first evaluation support study, the European Court of Auditors delivered its special report on LEADER, providing some recommendations for the evaluation of LEADER. To follow these recommendations, DG AGRI commissioned a complementary evaluation support study which started in October 2022. The final report was received in June 2023.

Given LEADER's specific character, targeted consultation activities were conducted by evaluators to gather relevant opinions and information from stakeholders. The consultation activities targeted the following main stakeholders: local action groups, public authorities in EU Member States, paying agencies, rural networks and other organisations, including farmers' organisations, academia and experts, NGOs and other relevant civil society organisations with a special attention to gender, and organisations dealing with vulnerable groups in rural areas.

The evaluation includes support from Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, comprising Measure 19 of the Rural Development Regulation (EAFRD).

The work was carried out in conformity with the DG AGRI procedure for the organisation and management of policy evaluations carried out by external contractors. The evaluation was supervised under the technical and contractual management of DG AGRI Policy Performance Unit A.3.

An Interservice Steering Group (ISSG) was set up by the Commission, with the mandate to: (i) steer the evaluation process throughout its duration; (ii) to finalise the consultation strategy and the terms of reference for the first support study and to monitor the work of the external evaluation; (iii) finalise the evaluation roadmap, and (iv) contribute to drafting the evaluation report.

The ISSG was composed of the Secretariat-General of the Commission, DG AGRI and the invited DGs CLIMA, ESTAT, GROW, INTPA (DEVCO), MARE, REGIO, RTD and the JRC. The steering group started its meetings on 19 October 2020, holding 7 in total. The evaluation roadmap was published on 8 September 2020 and set out the context, scope and aim of the exercise.

During the feedback period on the roadmap, 40 contributions were received.

Consultation of the Regulatory Scrutiny Board

This evaluation underwent scrutiny by the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (RSB) as a standalone staff working document. The RSB upstream consultation was held on 17 April 2023, while the RSB hearing was held the on 29 November 2023.

Following the RSB hearing, the following main points were into account:

<i>RSB remark</i>	<i>Uptake in the evaluation</i>
The report should provide clear explanation of the EU added value of the LEADER programme, underpinned by evidence. The changes attributable specifically to LEADER should be clearly identified and differentiated from effects arising in general from other policies within the CAP and compared to Member States' individual action.	<p>EU added value has been further explained based on the evidence collected. However, EU added value cannot be compared consistently with similar Member States' individual action because evaluation support studies have not identified national or regional actions that can be compared with LEADER.</p> <p>On attribution, Section 2 better explains that it is not possible to isolate LEADER effects from other policies' effects (netting out LEADER effects), mainly due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Small effects of LEADER – Insufficient granularity of impact indicators. <p>However, Section 2.3.1 (points of comparison) clarifies and further explains how causality is addressed in the evaluation</p>

	and how a comparison is made with non-LEADER measures.
The report should better describe the baseline and explain how the lack of points of comparison has been addressed. It should explain what benchmarks have been identified and how and provide an overarching intervention logic for the entire LEADER programme, identifying clearly the specific problems and/or needs to be tackled, and the corresponding specific objectives on which LEADER should deliver. Those specific objectives should be expressed in more SMART terms, with specific key performance indicators (KPIs) defined to monitor the output, the outcome and the expected impact. The report should go further than a simple description of the principles, priorities of the programmes and focus areas and measures, and clearly explain the causality link between LEADER and its achievements.	<p>The intervention logic of LEADER has been improved. The logic behind the different elements of the intervention logic has been further described.</p> <p>Indicators and qualitative information to assess outputs, results and impacts are presented in more detail in the ‘points of comparison’ section.</p> <p>Explanation is provided for the lack of baseline and of appropriate KPIs, as well as for the approaches adopted to overcome this lack of points of comparison.</p>
The report should be clearer on the explanation behind the lack of an adequate monitoring framework for LEADER, considering it is a long-running programme. In spite of limitations of the evidence, in particular as regards intangible benefits such as social capital, the report should further elaborate the qualitative and quantitative indicators. The report should provide conclusions and lessons learned highlighting the need to improve the intervention logic, the lack of relevant data, evidence and effective monitoring in order to ensure a stronger substantiation of LEADER impact.	<p>The lack of an adequate monitoring and evaluation framework has been explained in Section 2.</p> <p>Specific conclusions on monitoring and evaluation have been included in the report. Lessons learned on the same issue have been further developed, including steps already taken to improve the monitoring and evaluation of LEADER.</p> <p>It should be stressed that LEADER has evolved from an experimental approach to a consolidated part of rural development policy. From 1991 to 2006, over three funding periods, LEADER I, LEADER II and LEADER+ were conceived as experimental initiatives to encourage the emergence and testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development. The LEADER approach was rolled out across the board in 2007-2013. However, it focused on</p>

	<p>developing local strategies in a bottom-up manner by using predefined measures. In 2014-2020, LEADER was freed from predefined actions, with the aim of fully releasing local potential for development. Therefore, the constant evolution of the method explains limitations when it comes to trying to establish a common and consistent intervention logic for LEADER, even though LEADER is a long-running programme.</p>
<p>The report should describe and analyse the problems encountered by Member States and applicants, in particular as regards administrative complexity as well as less successful or less effective areas of the intervention. It should also analyse more thoroughly the potential for simplification i.e. issues of complexity, length of procedures, definition of statutory tasks and other governance issues. In doing so it should be clear whether administrative complexities are due to LEADER specific arrangements or more general CAP provisions. It should strengthen lessons learned and conclusions on these aspects, providing clear and concrete indications based on the provided evidence on improvements to enhance governance and simplification.</p>	<p>The sources of administrative burden and complexities have been further explained and detailed in Section 4, with new evidence added on this issue.</p> <p>Conclusions and lessons learned (Section 5) have been further developed, providing more precise ways to make LEADER simpler.</p> <p>On statutory tasks, there is no evidence beyond what was stated in the ECA’s report on LEADER ⁽¹¹³⁾.</p>
<p>The report should further explain whether and how multi-funded projects could be further increased, and whether this would improve effectiveness, efficiency and coherence. The report should also elaborate more on the reasons for the limited uptake of inter-territorial and transnational cooperation projects in some Member States, and whether there are conclusions and lessons learned on how such cooperation projects could be enhanced</p>	<p>Although LEADER/Community-led local development (CLLD) is considered in the evaluation, the effectiveness and efficiency of multi-funding approaches are not assessed due to administrative rules governing the evaluation’s scope. Therefore, the evaluation is about the impact of the CAP with a focus on LEADER, not about LEADER/CLLD.</p> <p>Multi-funding is mainly evaluated under the section on coherence and partially assessed in the efficiency section, with regard to administrative burden. Therefore, the main evidence on how to increase multi-funding</p>

⁽¹¹³⁾ European Court of Auditors, ‘Special Report 10/2022’.

	<p>concerns the simplification of administrative processes.</p> <p>The (little) available evidence on the reasons for the limited uptake of cooperation projects has been provided in Sections 4 and 5.</p>
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Evidence used together with sources and any issues regarding its quality

The main evidence was collected for the evaluation support studies. Primary data collection took the form of surveys, interviews and focus groups involving a variety of stakeholders at various levels (individual, regional, Member States, EU). Additional evidence comprised: a public consultation, Member States' monitoring reports, Member States' evaluation reports, and other relevant European Commission evaluations and studies.

The external contractors' work on the first support study was overseen by the Interservice Steering Group. Overall, the steering group found the conclusions to be based on the analysis presented and judged the work to be, in general, of sufficient quality, as documented by the final quality assessment. The external contractors' work on the complementary study was steered by DG AGRI units A.3 and B.3. Both units found that evidence and conclusions of the study were based on the analysis done and judged the work to be of sufficient quality, as documented by the final quality assessment. Given LEADER's unique character, no quantitative modelling was carried out.

Use of external expertise

External expertise used for the evaluation analysis took the form of two evaluation support studies and a synthesis of the public consultation.

Annex II. Methodology and analytical models used

The evaluation is largely based on external evaluation support studies (the main evaluation support study and the complementary support study) with their respective methodological approaches. The evaluation was performed in accordance with the combined evaluation roadmap and inception impact assessment and followed the principles of the relevant Better Regulation tools. The call for evidence for LEADER was part of a broader consultation on the long-term vision for rural areas and the CAP's contribution to balanced territorial development.

The work of both evaluation support studies started by reconstructing the intervention logic of LEADER and by developing the judgement criteria and indicators on which the evaluation is primarily based. The two studies moved on to a descriptive part, which included an overview of the context and implementation of LEADER, including the most recent key figures at the time of the study.

The first evaluation support study addressed the five evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance, and EU added value). The main methodologies employed were a literature review, surveys at EU level, case studies, and analysis of relevant common monitoring and evaluation framework (CMEF) indicators (output and result indicators). The support study also tried to establish causality between LEADER and its achievements. The analysis of causality was based on the analysis of evidence collected for effectiveness and the role of LEADER's seven features for delivering results. Combined with qualitative evidence, this approach provides valuable insights into the direction of impacts. However, caution is required when interpreting results as the analytical methodologies used do not allow for a causal relationship in a strict sense.

The complementary evaluation support study focused on LEADER's costs and benefits, based on the concept of 'LEADER added value' ⁽¹¹⁴⁾. The main methodologies used include a literature review, surveys, interviews, focus groups (also to triangulate information collected through other methods) and analysis of secondary data (CMEF indicators).

Overall, various sources and approaches were used to support quantitative and qualitative analysis in respect of each evaluation criterion. The information from different sources was triangulated, ensuring that the analysis is based on solid and cross-checked evidence.

⁽¹¹⁴⁾ Concept developed by the Evaluation Helpdesk of the European Rural Network to evaluate LEADER [Evaluation of LEADER/CLLD | The European Network for Rural Development \(ENRD\) \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europa.eu/european-council/enrd/).

Sources of evidence and methods used in this evaluation are:

1. The evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development ⁽¹¹⁵⁾

1.1. Literature review

The literature review aimed to collect information relevant to all evaluation criteria. Such information related to the state of local development in rural areas in the EU, including detailed information on the implementation of LEADER. Desk research also collected: (i) analysis of LEADER's impacts on the local development of EU rural areas, as reported by completed and ongoing analyses and evaluations; and (ii) relevant material to investigate the causal mechanisms of LEADER interventions and impacts.

The literature review included documents from EU, national and regional levels from scientific and technical sources such as evaluations and impact assessments since 2010. The search and review of materials was based on a list of relevant sources covering academic and grey literature.

1.2. Primary data

• **EU-wide online survey of all managing authorities gathering relevant quantitative and qualitative data**

An online questionnaire-based survey was carried out from 17 February to 12 May 2021 across the EU-28. This survey was designed to provide a wider view of LEADER programme implementation across rural development programme (RDP) areas from senior personnel in managing authorities with strong experience of LEADER delivery. The managing authority survey included 32 questions and was in English ⁽¹¹⁶⁾. Questions covered the five evaluation themes, seeking respondents' opinions, experience and ranking of LEADER attributes, issues and performance, and collecting basic information on local action group (LAG) characteristics including budget, roles/tasks, membership and context.

A total of 118 responses were received, of which 65 complete responses were used in the analysis. Many discarded responses had only completed few questions, and some respondents were not managing authorities. Such figures show a good level of representativeness, as there were a total 108 managing authorities implementing

⁽¹¹⁵⁾ ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

⁽¹¹⁶⁾ The managing authority survey was longer and more complex than the surveys for LAGs. This was to collect more data and qualitative information on the implementation of LEADER.

LEADER. However, degree of response was not equally distributed across Member States.

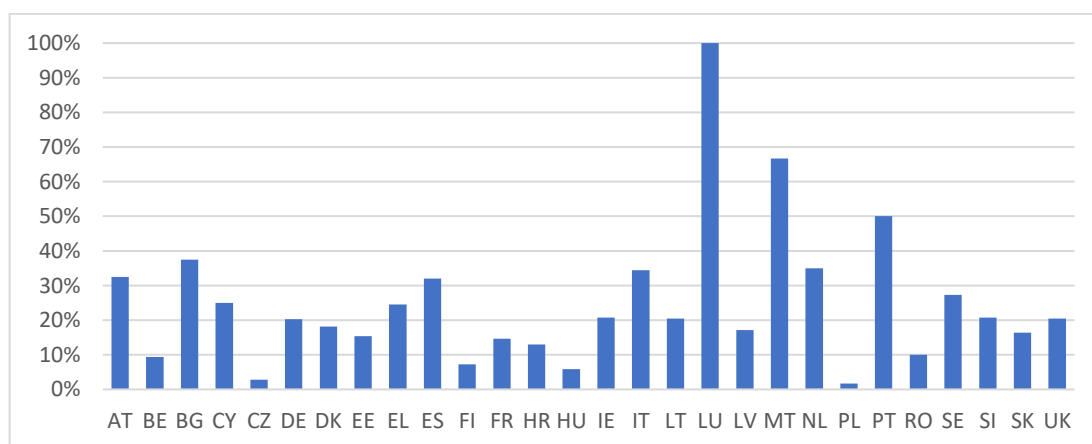
In most cases, a senior person in the managing authority completed the questionnaire. These individuals had an average LEADER experience of 10.5 years (ranging from 1 year to 30 years). An average of 28.7 LAGs were overseen by each managing authority in 2014-2020.

- **EU-wide online survey of all local action groups, gathering relevant quantitative and qualitative data**

An online questionnaire-based survey ran from 17 February to 12 May 2021. The LAG survey gathered information on LEADER from the people closely involved in its delivery: LAG managers. The LAG survey included 28 questions and was available in French, German, Spanish and English.

A total of 819 LAGs responded to the survey, of which 511 complete responses were used in the analysis. Some 212 LAGs did not complete enough answers to be included, and a further 96 responses were discarded due to internal inconsistency. Four questions could not be analysed due to ambiguous responses on the topics of LAG ‘age’, internal resources and funding sources. The highest number of responses came from Member States with larger numbers of LAGs: Spain provided 15.7% of the total responses, followed by Italy and Germany with 12.9% each. The fewest responses came from Member States with very small numbers of LAGs: Cyprus, Malta and Belgium. The share of LAGs (see Figure 30) that provided a complete response to the survey varied from 10% to 50% of the total in most Member States. Luxembourg had a 100% response rate, while Poland and Czechia had particularly low response rates. These outcomes should be borne in mind when interpreting the representativeness and significance of findings. 78.3% respondents were LAG managers, 21% other LAG staff, and 0.4% LAG board members.

Figure 30: LAG survey: Percentage of local action groups in each Member State responding in full to the survey



Source: Evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development.

- **Member States and regions case studies**

The objective of the case studies was to collect in-depth qualitative and quantitative data to: (i) complement findings from the documentary review; (ii) interpret results from surveys and related data analysis (statistical/econometric approaches) in order to answer the evaluation questions; and (iii) identify causal links and understand the underlying mechanisms by which policies lead to impacts. These were a key part of the triangulation of information.

LEADER case studies covered 36 local action groups operating in 14 selected rural development programmes (RDPs) from 10 Member States: Austria; Belgium – Wallonia; Czechia; Germany – Rhineland Pfalz and Saxony; Spain – Castile-la Mancha and Extremadura; Italy – Veneto, Abruzzo and Tuscany; Ireland; Romania; Slovenia and Sweden. Case study LAGs and regions were selected using a stratified approach to ensure a representative spread of delivery models (multi-fund versus mono-fund approaches and number of tasks performed by the LAG). Other factors considered for selection of case studies were LAG budget size, experience, territorial coverage, and socio-economic context and needs.

Each case study included:

- detailed analysis of RDP texts and financial tables, RDP annual implementation reports (AIRs), and local development strategies (LDSs) and other policy and guidance documents from the selected LAGs, for each RDP;
- examination of related 2007-2013 RDP *ex post* evaluations, LEADER or individual LAG (self-) evaluations, and any other relevant documents produced by the selected LAGs/managing authorities since 2014, including mid-term evaluations where available.

In-depth interviews with key LAG and managing authority and/or paying agency personnel; local and regional/national stakeholders (national rural networks and other LAG network representatives) and beneficiaries.

To triangulate and validate the emerging findings of the study, findings were presented and discussed in two stages, in the analysis phase of the study:

- In RDP areas covered by a case study, online seminars with interview participants were used to play back and validate case study findings.
- A workshop was held with relevant Commission officials in DG AGRI and Interservice Steering Group members, to discuss and validate the emerging

conclusions of the study. The conclusions were then triangulated against desk officer experience from contrasting Member States in particular.

1.3. Secondary data

The main secondary data feeding the analysis required to answer the evaluation questions are the annual implementation reports (AIRs) and the financial execution declaration submitted by the managing authorities.

LEADER and RDP data used in the evaluation:

- (108) annual implementation reports (AIRs) submitted in 2019 and 2020 (data covering 2018 and 2019). The data are cumulative, so they covered the 2014-2019 implementation period.
- (108) declarations of financial execution of rural development programmes for the years 2015 to 2020.
- Rural population trends based on the degree of urbanisation (DEGURBA)

Main limitations of data and analysis

One of the main limitations was the low level of uptake of LEADER. By the time of the study, the average execution rate was 49% (for context: completion of the LAGs selection process was due by end-2016). Therefore, in most cases, only 2 or 3 years of implementation have been reported, meaning that a limited effect from LEADER can be expected.

Another crucial limitation faced during the study was the COVID-19 pandemic. Limitations on personal mobility made data collection, particularly through interviews, quite challenging (although not impossible). Use of IT tools was essential in order to overcome that limitation, but limited access to such tools influenced the ability to reach out to stakeholders and local actors.

At that time, there were gaps in the completeness of the information included in the AIRs, meaning that the figures presented did not give a very robust and complete picture of LEADER implementation across the EU-28. To overcome this limitation, 2019 AIR data were used to fill in gaps in the 2020 AIR data for some specific missing values. Overall, these will have a minor effect on EU totals for most indicators but there will be significant impacts when examining patterns at Member State or regional level.

It should also be stressed that there was limited indicator coverage. CMEF indicators provide results only on the number of jobs created, population coverage and the recording of project spending by EAFRD focus areas (FAs). LEADER aims to achieve economic, social and environmental benefits relevant to local development. Therefore results indicators should ideally include measures covering each of these goals. In this respect, despite some data on

secondary contributions of LEADER to other focus areas, the data were not reliable and were missing for most of the RDPs.

On quantitative analysis, indicator granularity posed a strong limitation to meaningful analysis of LEADER. LEADER actions are local, so the distribution of LAGs and LEADER funding against context, result or impact indicators should be assessed at local level. However, such indicators are only available for much higher territorial units than would be relevant for LEADER. Although evaluators explored the feasibility of DEGURBA data ⁽¹¹⁷⁾, which is one of the first outputs of valuable new geospatial analysis by the Commission's Joint Research Centre to overcome the limited detail offered by context indicators, a sound comparison was not possible due to the limited representativeness of the sample used in the JRC analysis.

To overcome the limitations for a robust and comprehensive quantitative analysis of LEADER impacts, a comprehensive collection of primary data through EU-wide surveys and case studies has been carried out.

2. Complementary support study on costs and benefits of LEADER (LEADER added value)

2.1. Literature review

Documentary research was conducted as a tool to complement the surveys, interviews and focus groups. The research gathered both qualitative and quantitative information through a review of the relevant literature and other relevant documents.

The literature review included documents from the EU, national and regional levels, from both scientific and technical sources. The desk research focused particularly on evaluation studies and aspects of LEADER added value (governance, social capital and LEADER effects and results). The desk research was based on a list of relevant sources covering academic and grey literature seeking to the study evaluation questions.

2.2. Primary data

- EU-wide survey of all managing and paying agencies (EU-27)

Data were collected through a questionnaire-based survey addressed to all managing authorities and paying agencies, as appropriate case by case. In the case of the managing authorities, the focus was on managers of LEADER measures and on managers of other rural RDP measures. Information was collected from January to March 2023.

The questionnaire consisted in 14 questions, most of which were closed questions aimed at collecting quantitative or easily quantifiable information, including administrative and monitoring data at the level of both managing authorities and

⁽¹¹⁷⁾ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/degree-of-urbanisation/data/database>

local action groups. To collect judgements and opinions, multiple-choice questions were widely used.

Out of the 89 responses received (representing 55 RDPs), 65 questionnaires were completed, giving a 61.3% response rate. In terms of representativeness, RDPs for which data collection was complete represented 77% of total allocated financial resources, 77% of total LAGs and 78% of the total population covered by LEADER at EU level.

- Case study Member States and regions

The objective of the case studies was to collect in-depth qualitative and quantitative information at both RDP area and LAG area levels. Data was collected through surveys, interviews and focus groups (this was also to triangulate the information collected).

Case studies covered 10 RDPs, of which 5 are regional programmes: Austria, Germany-Mecklenburg Vorpommern, Denmark, Spain-Catalonia, Spain-Navarra, Finland-Mainland, France-Auvergne, Italy-Veneto, Poland and Romania (the Finnish Mainland RDP is considered a national RDP). These RDPs accounted for 26% of the total financial allocation to LEADER at EU-27 level. Within the RDPs, 13 LAGs were selected.

The content of each case study is set out below.

Documentary research was conducted by geographical experts to gather information mainly about the design of LEADER in the different RDPs, the delivery mechanism and the type of governance.

Survey and interviews were conducted with managing authorities, paying agencies and LEADER experts at RDP level. The survey was an 'enhanced' version of the survey described above. The aim was to collect precise information on administrative information, operations supported by non-LEADER measures comparable to LEADER-supported projects and other data relevant to the evaluation questions. In total, 25 respondents from the 10 selected RDPs contributed to the survey and 12 LEADER experts were interviewed.

In-depth interviews were conducted with LAG managers and members. These were aimed at collecting detailed information about: (i) the cost of implementing LEADER, also in comparison with similar projects implemented under the RDP (i.e. non-LEADER projects); (ii) cost drivers and the administrative burden, (iii) structure and composition of LAG partnerships; (iv) governance models; (v) social capital; (vi) cooperation; (vii) innovation through LEADER projects; and (viii) LEADER added value, including better and more sustainable results. Interviews were held with 17 members of the 13 LAGs selected.

- Focus groups with LAG members and stakeholders.

These were conducted at local level. The groups were composed of 8-12 people, drawing on a balanced representation of the various types of actors, including those who submitted project applications to the LAG that ultimately were not financed. This was to ensure broad representation of stakeholders affected (directly or indirectly) by LEADER and to ensure that the opinions collected were not biased. In total, 12 focus groups were held (in one case it was not possible to organise the focus group), covering a total of 112 participants.

2.3. Secondary data

The evaluation study also drew on secondary data. The aim was to complement the analysis of primary data collected in the field at the level of RDPs and of LAGs. LEADER and RDP data used in the evaluation comprised:

- (108) annual implementation reports (AIRs) submitted in 2022 (data for 2021). These data are cumulative, so they covered the 2014-2021 implementation period.
- (108) declarations of financial execution of rural development programmes for the years 2015 to 2022.
- DG AGRI's delivery costs survey to managing authorities in 2021. The survey collected information on the cost of controls of rural development measures. The information was used to triangulate primary data on the administrative costs of LEADER and other relevant RDP measures for comparison purposes.
- Regional statistics, so that relevant data could be analysed at NUTS2 and NUTS3 levels, including data from Eurostat and national/regional statistical units.
- The European Network of Rural Development's database of local action groups.

Main limitations of data and analysis

The aim of the study was to assess the costs and benefits of LEADER, providing information on LEADER added value and how far LEADER's additional costs are compensated by its additional benefits. The analysis used as its basis the concept of LEADER added value described above.

However, the concept of LEADER added value includes intangible benefits such as social capital and governance, for which there is no robust and widely accepted methodology. In terms of methodology, comparing LEADER costs against such benefits is a major challenge. Therefore, findings from methods used to assess LEADER added value ⁽¹¹⁸⁾ should be taken as

⁽¹¹⁸⁾ See Section 3.4 of the study: LEADER Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., 'Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'.

a reference and seen as providing an informative evaluation rather than performance or impact analysis.

In line with the limitations of the previous evaluation study, the level of uptake posed a challenge when it came to capturing LEADER effects at the local level ⁽¹¹⁹⁾. To mitigate this limitation, case studies were selected among national and regional RDPs with financial absorption above 70% for Measure 19.2 (LEADER projects) ⁽¹²⁰⁾. Despite potential bias due to selection of the ‘best among the best’, the aim was to compare LEADER with non-LEADER measures and the local context in the same RDP. In this way we can assume that this risk of bias would be somehow mitigated.

As mentioned before, an important limitation was the availability of adequate data to assess the effect on LEADER added value of improved governance and social capital. Monitoring requirements do not include systematic collection of information related to local governance or social capital in the LAGs. In terms of LEADER results, and in line with limitations in the first study, CMEF indicators are collected at RDP level and are not enough to assess LEADER results.

To overcome data gaps and limitations, the evaluator collected primary data from RDP managing authorities and paying agencies and from LAGs. Moreover, the evaluation team also developed specific indicators to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of LEADER, as well as governance and social capital ⁽¹²¹⁾. In addition, indices to assess participation, inclusivity and level of trust were developed to quantify such intangible benefits, enabling comparison with relevant references or benchmarks. However, the level of detail on different types of data from administrative costs to project results also varies among case studies. Therefore, the results of the analysis often refer to a limited number of observations and cannot be generalised to the wider LEADER implementation and LAG area.

Regarding data on administrative costs at managing authority and paying agency level, primary data were triangulated with secondary data from the study ‘New assessment of ESIF administrative costs and burden’ ⁽¹²²⁾ and from DG AGRI’s delivery costs survey of managing authorities in 2021 ⁽¹²³⁾. Cost ratios were calculated to ensure fair comparison of LEADER with

⁽¹¹⁹⁾ Less than 60% at the time of the study. However, financial execution has been affected by the transitional period that extended the implementation period by 2 years, from 2020 to 2022.

⁽¹²⁰⁾ Total eligible expenditure / total eligible cost of projects selected on Sub-measure 19.2 > 70%.

⁽¹²¹⁾ See indicators for study evaluation questions 6 and 7 in Annex III.

⁽¹²²⁾ Spatial Foresight and t33, *New assessment of ESIF administrative costs and burden*. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4f4b7bcc-e18f-11e8-b690-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

⁽¹²³⁾ The delivery cost survey reports full-time equivalents employed for checks by the paying agency and, where applied, by delegated bodies (DB) and managing authorities, but not personnel costs in euro. Information on full-time equivalents is suitable for direct comparison for specific issues but constitutes a limitation when it comes to the monetary assessment of management and control costs in relation to overall expenditure on RDP measures.

other RDP measures. However, such ratios do not reflect the actual administrative costs as they do not include costs on controls and some overheads.

Also, there was only limited differentiation between animation and running costs within Measure 19.4, which is key to assessing resources devoted to strategic planning and the mobilisation of local actors, was limited. Only some Member States and regions reported a breakdown of this kind. Similarly, not all case study LAGs were able to provide separate cost figures for running and for animation. However, a rough estimate was used to overcome the limitation, using data reported by managing authorities as a reference.

Another important limitation was the comparability of LEADER and non-LEADER projects. Most RDPs do not allow the same types of operations to be activated under other RDP measures and under LEADER. Therefore, outcomes from comparisons between measures should be taken with caution. For example, comparison between Measure 16 (cooperation) might be more relevant for governance and social capital, while Measure 7 (basic services) would be a better reference for results.

Finally, there were some limitations from surveys and interviews. Another challenge was posed by the precision of surveys and interview responses, and whether the questions are understood in the same way by respondents. This was due to the different ways in which LEADER governance systems are structured across different Member States and local contexts, and the somewhat broad definitions of what constitutes governance and social capital. Evaluators tried to mitigate such limitations, developing common concepts and providing support to experts and respondents to better understand the questions. In addition, there was a risk of self-selection bias and response bias for the LAGs agreeing to collaborate in the case studies, for the local actors agreeing to participate in the focus groups and for managing authorities answering the RDP survey.

3. Further sources of evidence

- 3.1. Synthesis study of the Member State answers to RDP common evaluation questions in 2019 ⁽¹²⁴⁾
- 3.2. Synthesis of the online public consultation on the long-term vision for rural areas. The study synthesised evidence collected through open public consultations ⁽¹²⁵⁾. The representativeness of the answers at EU level cannot be guaranteed as the responses are subject to self-selection bias

⁽¹²⁴⁾ Evaluation Helpdesk, ENRD, ‘Synthesis of the Evaluation Components of the Enhanced AIR 2019: Chapter 7’. https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/evaluation/publications/summary-report-synthesis-evaluation-components-enhanced-airs-2019-chapter-7_en.html.

⁽¹²⁵⁾ Ecorys, *Synthesis of the Online Public Consultation on the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas*. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2762/638538>.

- 3.3. ECA Special Report 10/2022: LEADER and community-led local development facilitates local engagement, but additional benefits are still not sufficiently demonstrated ⁽¹²⁶⁾
- 3.4. Evaluation support study on the impact of the CAP on territorial development of rural areas: socioeconomic aspects ⁽¹²⁷⁾
- 3.5. Joint Research Centre evaluation study on the impact of the CAP. Although the study did not assess LEADER as such, it provides useful evidence of the potential impact of rural development measures, including LEADER, in comparison with other CAP measures ⁽¹²⁸⁾.

⁽¹²⁶⁾ European Court of Auditors, 'Special Report 10/2022'.

<http://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/Report.aspx?did=61355&TermStoreId=8935807f-8495-4a93-a302-f4b76776d8ea&TermSetId=49e662c4-f172-43ae-8a5e-7276133de92c&TermId=5f6589a2-5a2e-4ae8-8cc6-e05bf544b71f>

⁽¹²⁷⁾ ADE s. a, *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of the CAP on Territorial Development of Rural Areas*.
<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2762/541389>.

⁽¹²⁸⁾ Joint Research Centre (European Commission) et al., *An Evaluation of the CAP Impact*.
<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/72177>.

Annex III. Evaluation matrix and, where relevant, details on answers to the evaluation questions (by criterion)

Table 9: Evaluation matrix on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
<i>Effectiveness</i>	To what extent has LEADER been effective promoting local development?	<i>1. To what extent have LEADER measures, local development strategies and LAG activities effectively addressed needs for local development and in which fields have they been more effective?</i>	Local development strategies (LDSs), LEADER measures and LAG activities contribute to local development	Qualitative information on the extent of contributions to local development	EU-wide survey of LAGs EU-wide survey of MAs Case study LAG self-evaluation reports Case study LDS: SWOT analysis, focus of strategy, programmed activities Case study interviews with LAG personnel, beneficiaries Literature and documentary review Annual implementation reports (AIRs)
				Qualitative information on types of contributions to local development	
				Qualitative indicators of MAs' and LAGs' perceived correspondence between LAG activities and local needs	
				CMEF output and result indicators related to LEADER	
			LDSs, LEADER measures and LAG activities achieve their set objectives	Qualitative indicators of the extent to which LEADER measures and LAG activities meet local needs	
				Qualitative indicators of local, regional/national stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which LAGs meet their objectives	
				Qualitative indicators of LAG's perceived success in meeting set objectives	
	Qualitative information on governance mechanisms that influence implementation				

⁽¹²⁹⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., 'Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'; ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			<p>The LEADER programme and LAG activities are more effective in some areas (fields of action, specific contexts or time periods) than in others, which can be identified</p>	<p>Qualitative information on where LEADER activities and support have been most effective</p> <p>Qualitative information on local, regional and national stakeholder perceptions of where the LEADER programme and LAGs are most effective</p> <p>Qualitative information on LAGs' and MAs' perceived effectiveness in different thematic areas</p> <p>CMEF output and result indicators related to LEADER</p>	
		<p><i>2. To what extent have activities under LEADER addressed social inclusion and poverty reduction in rural areas, and been able to involve vulnerable groups?</i></p>	<p>MA decisions on LAGs have targeted social inclusion and poverty reduction</p>	<p>Qualitative information on the role of MAs on LAGs' social inclusion and poverty reduction actions</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of beneficiaries' perception of the role of MAs on LAGs' social inclusion and poverty reduction actions</p>	<p>EU-wide survey of LAGs</p> <p>EU-wide survey of MAs</p> <p>Case study reports – Interviews with LAG staff, beneficiaries and MAs</p> <p>Documentary evidence and beneficiary interviews in case studies</p>
		<p>LAG activities have addressed the social inclusion issues in the local area</p>	<p>Share of LAGs addressing social inclusion</p> <p>Number of LAGs supporting projects driven by or for vulnerable groups</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAGs', MAs' and beneficiaries' perceived contribution of LEADER to social inclusion</p>		
			<p>Share and number of LAGs addressing poverty reduction</p>	<p>Share and number of LAGs addressing poverty reduction</p>	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			LAG activities have addressed the poverty issues in the local area	Qualitative indicators of LAG personnel views of perceived contribution of LEADER to poverty reduction	
			LAG measures supported local actions incorporating vulnerable groups into the wider community	Proportion and/or number of LAGs engaging vulnerable groups in community activities Qualitative indicators of LAG personnel on perceived contribution of LEADER to inclusiveness of vulnerable groups	
	To what extent has LEADER method created added value?	<i>3. To what extent have the activities carried out by the LAGs or supported under the local development strategies improved local governance, stimulated innovative approaches in addressing local, national and EU challenges and fostered structural changes in the communities?</i>	The activities carried out by the LAGs or supported under the local development strategies have improved local governance	Number of members and groups of LAG partnership and evolution over time Qualitative information on relations between public and private actors over time Qualitative information on relations of LAG partnership and decision-making processes with other stakeholders in the community Qualitative information on relations of LAG with national/regional/municipal institutions	EU-wide survey of LAGs EU-wide survey of MAs Case study interviews with LAG personnel Case study interviews with beneficiaries LAG self-evaluation reports Literature review Annual implementation reports (AIRs)
			The activities carried out by the LAGs or supported under the local development strategies	Number of activities to support new products and services Qualitative information on animation methods	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			have stimulated innovative approaches including social innovation	Number of activities to support integrated projects Qualitative information on communication methods Qualitative information on LAG criteria utilised in project selection Qualitative information on organisation of LAG technical structure Qualitative information on self-evaluation methods	
			The activities carried out by the LAGs or supported under the local development strategies have fostered structural changes in the communities	Qualitative information on stable cooperation agreements/contracts Number of alternative food chains created Qualitative information on durable business enterprise networks Qualitative information on durable networks with other areas (including territorial cooperation) Number of durable non-agricultural associations, rural-urban networks, service networks created	
		<i>4. To what extent have LAGs' activities and support provided under local development strategies leveraged additional resources?</i>	Additional resources have been leveraged via LAG's activities	Type and amount of additional resources leveraged Qualitative information on leveraged resources utilisation Qualitative indicators of perceptions of the factors affecting leverage of resources	EU-wide survey of LAGs EU-wide survey of MAs Case study interviews with LAG personnel Case study interviews with beneficiaries

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			Additional resources have been leveraged through support provided under local development strategies	Type and amount of additional resources leveraged Qualitative information on leveraged resources utilisation Qualitative information on stakeholder perceptions of the factors affecting leverage of resources CMEF output and result indicators related to LEADER	LAG self-evaluation reports Literature review Annual implementation reports (AIRs)
			Leveraged resources represent a significant element in total LAG resources	Type and amount of LAG resources Qualitative information on LAG personnel's perception of additional resources	
		<i>5. What have been the impact of the LEADER approach and its implementation by LAGs on social, economic and environmental capital of local communities and on their socio-economic cohesion?</i>	Application of LEADER features has resulted in improvements in social, economic, and environmental capital within local communities	Qualitative indicators of LAG and MA perceptions of LEADER improvements in social, economic, and environmental capital Expenditure on LEADER projects targeted at economic, social and environmental improvements Qualitative information on social, economic, and environmental capital improvements CMEF output and result indicators related to LEADER	EU-wide survey of LAGs EU-wide survey of MAs Analysis of expenditure and output indicators from DG AGRI data and in case studies, in more depth Case study interviews with LAG and MA personnel, and beneficiaries Annual implementation reports (AIRs)
			Application of LEADER features has resulted in improvements in socio-economic cohesion	Qualitative indicators of LAG perceptions of LEADER improvements in socio-economic cohesion	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			within local communities	<p>Expenditure on projects targeted at strengthening socio-economic cohesion</p> <p>Case study examples of enhanced socio-economic cohesion</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG and MA personnel's perception of LEADER improvements in socio-economic cohesion</p> <p>CMEF output and result indicators related to LEADER</p>	
			Effective approaches resulting in improvement to economic, social and environmental capital are based on strong application of the LEADER features	<p>Qualitative information on improvement of economic, social and environmental capital linked to application of LEADER features</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG personnel perceptions of improvement of economic, social and environmental capital linked to application of LEADER features</p>	
			The effectiveness of LEADER features varies in relation to differing models of delivery and levels of LAG autonomy	Qualitative indicators of LAG and MA perception of the influence of LEADER delivery models and levels of autonomy on the improvement of economic, social and environmental capital	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				Qualitative indicators of local actors'/stakeholders' perception of the influence of LEADER delivery models and levels of autonomy on the improvement of economic, social and environmental capital	
		<i>6. To what extent LEADER implementation brings additional benefits in terms of improved governance and social capital at local level?</i>	The implementation of LEADER led to the establishment of an effective multi-level governance system between the MA, PA and LAG to facilitate the smooth implementation of LEADER	Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on improved coordination between different levels of governance	Survey data of RDP MAs / desk officers for M19 Interviews and focus groups in case study LAGs Expert interviews Documentary research Annual implementation reports (AIRs)
			LAG's legal/organisational form contributes to: inclusive governance, inclusive partnership composition The possibility for the general population to take part in governance (appointed or elected partners) Mobility in the decision-making group	Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on organisational aspects of the LAGs Qualitative information on organisational aspects of the LAGs	
			The implementation of LEADER improved the	Indices of the LAGs' structural social capital	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			social capital of the LAGs	Indices of improvement in the LAGs' normative social capital	
				General indices of change in the LAGs' social capital	
			The implementation of LEADER improved the social capital of the LEADER areas	Indices of structural social capital in LEADER areas	
				Indices of improvement in social capital in LEADER areas	
				General indices of change in social capital in LEADER areas	
			The implementation of LEADER improved the social capital among LEADER areas within a Member State (inter-territorial cooperation) and among Member States (transnational cooperation)	Share of cooperation projects operationalised via M.19.3 of the selected LAGs	
				Network Diversity Index of inter-territorial and transnational cooperation projects in the selected LAGs	
				Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on capacity of inter-territorial and transnational cooperation projects to create added value for the LEADER area	
				General indices of change in social capital among LEADER areas within a Member State and among Member States	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			The implementation of LEADER improved the linkages with actors external to the LAGs (other LAGs nationally or transnationally, business organisations, MAs etc.)	<p>Number and types of animation activities undertaken in cooperation with other regional business, social, cultural, environmental organisations and public authorities</p> <p>Number of and qualitative indicators of LAG, MA and other stakeholder perceptions of LAG linkages with established national and European networks and LAG, MA and other stakeholder participation in related organised activities/events</p>	
			The implementation of LEADER gave power to the local population beyond what is achieved in nationally administered schemes and created new platforms for change	<p>Number of projects from actors who have not applied before (for LEADER as well as for non-LEADER measures)</p> <p>The number of platforms for change that have been developed/consolidated/sustained</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on how LEADER brings the EU closer to citizens</p>	
		<i>7. To what extent LEADER funded projects bring additional benefits in terms</i>	The support provided to LAGs for the implementation of	Implementation and degree of support for the design of local development strategies	Survey data of RDP MAs / desk officers M19

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
		<i>of better results compared to analogous non-LEADER projects funded by RDPs?</i>	<p>LEADER and the application of a selection process influence the complexity and specificity of projects implemented under LEADER and enhance the added value</p> <p>LEADER projects include greater 'sustainability' of projects and jobs created compared to non-LEADER projects and affect the inclusion of</p>	<p>In the selection process of local strategies: importance given to criteria promoting strategies with potentially higher added value in terms of better results</p> <p>Number and share of LAGs implementing specific operations</p> <p>Number and share of LAGs implementing complex projects (multi-measure integrated projects)</p> <p>Number and share of LAGs implementing cooperation projects (e.g. M16.3, M16.9 or other types)</p> <p>Number and share of LAGs implementing inter-territorial and transnational cooperation projects (19.3)</p> <p>CMEF indicators on the contribution of LEADER to focus areas (FAs) other than FA 6B</p> <p>Average public expenditure of similar projects under RDP and under LEADER</p> <p>Judgement and % given by respondent of projects that survive without support in comparison to non-LEADER projects under RDP</p>	<p>In-depth interviews with selected RDP MAs/desk officer of RDP</p> <p>In-depth interviews with case studies LAG</p> <p>Focus groups</p> <p>Interviews with LEADER experts</p> <p>Annual implementation reports (AIRs)</p> <p>Eurostat/National official statistics - Context indicators</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			<p>women and young people in the job market</p> <p>The animation, networking and technical assistance provided by the LAG improve the performance of local enterprises in the area concerned; the projects use better local knowledge and address better specific local needs compared to non-LEADER projects</p>	<p>Average public expenditure for a new job created in comparison with analogous non-LEADER measures</p> <p>Results achieved by the LAG in terms of creation of sustainable employment opportunities</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on the capacity of the LAG to contribute to the integration of young people and women into the labour market</p> <p>LAGs (number and %) which report the use of voluntary work in projects financed</p> <p>LAGs (number and %) which report examples, or number of projects, for which ideas have been created in LEADER working groups</p> <p>LAGs (number and %) which report projects with improvements through – consulting within LAG</p> <p>The degree to which the animation, networking and technical assistance provided by the LAG have improved the performance of local enterprises in the area concerned</p>	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on the capacity of the LAG to continue the interaction with applicants of the supported projects	
			LEADER projects are more innovative compared to non-LEADER projects	Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on the innovativeness of projects under the LAG in comparison to non-LEADER projects under the RDP	
				Number of LAGs which have supported innovative products or innovative arrangements	
				Qualitative information on the main innovations supported	
				Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on the capacity of the LAG to promote innovation (i.e. new products, process, systems, working methods, and also social innovation)	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			<p>LEADER projects supporting the improvement of local production, and local assets can perform better compared to similar non-LEADER projects in the areas concerned</p>	<p>Number of LAGs in which an increase is observed in: (i) the added value of local products; (ii) the number of local products finalised (produced, processed and packaged); (iii) the margin of local product producers in the final price of local products; (iv) sales and new customers; (v) tourist flows; (vi) improved access to and usability of local services</p> <p>Number of LAGs in which an increase in tourist flows and visitors is observed</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on enhanced results compared to ordinary RDP measures</p>	
			<p>The implementation of the strategy as a whole produces structural changes in the dimensions in which the strategy intervenes and affects the socio-economic dynamics</p>	<p>Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on the capacity of the strategy to improve quality of life and social inclusion</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on the capacity to produce structural changes in the dimensions in which the strategy intervenes</p>	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				<p>Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on the capacity of the LDS to affect socio-economic dynamics</p>	
			LAGs are efficient, effective and capable in utilising resources necessary for implementing specific RDP measures	<p>Specific LAG input indicators:</p> <p>I.1 Number of hours devoted to individual training by the LAG staff</p> <p>I.2 Labour costs sustained for individual training offered by the LAG staff</p> <p>I.3 Number of hours devoted to collective training by the LAG staff</p> <p>I.4 Labour costs sustained for collective training organised by the LAG staff</p> <p>Specific LAG output indicators:</p> <p>O.1 Number of individual training</p> <p>O.2 Number of collective training</p> <p>O.3 Number of people individually trained</p> <p>O.4 Number of people collectively trained</p> <p>O.5 Number of people asking for general information but not trained</p>	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				<p>Specific LAG result indicators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> R.1 Number of applications R.2 Number of LEADER projects supported R.3 Average cost of financed projects R.4 Number of beneficiaries supported R.5 Number of newly established enterprises R.6 Number of jobs created R.7 Population benefiting from new or improved services <p>Efficiency ratios of the LAG:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I-I.1: Labour cost for 1 hour of individual training I-I.2: Labour cost for 1 hour of collective training I-O.1: Labour cost for one beneficiary individually trained I-O.2: Labour cost for one beneficiary collectively trained I-O.3: Labour cost for one collective training course organised 	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				<p>Effectiveness ratios of the LAG</p> <p>R-O.1. Rate of success of those who received individual training</p> <p>R-O.2. Rate of success of those who received collective training</p> <p>R-R.1. Rate of success of those who applied to the call for proposals</p> <p>R-R.2. Average number of beneficiaries supported by a project</p> <p>R-R.3. Number of new enterprises created thanks to a project</p> <p>R-R.4. Number of new jobs created thanks to a project</p> <p>Financial resources used by the LAG:</p> <p>R-R.5. Average cost of a financed project</p> <p>R-R.6. Project costs for a person benefiting from new or improved services</p>	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
<i>Efficiency</i>	To what extent has LEADER been efficient in promoting local development?	<i>8. To what extent are the implementation costs under LEADER different from the implementation costs of similar non-LEADER projects? To what extent (if any) do the governance choices of the LEADER approach at the RDP and LAG levels affect its administrative complexity?</i>	Implementing LEADER entailed additional costs in comparison with other RDP measures (based on operations under measures 16; 7.2; 7.4; 7.5; 7.6, 4.1, 4.2, 6.4).	General administrative costs for LEADER and non-LEADER implementation and specific costs for LEADER at RDP level: a) LEADER/non-LEADER: implementation costs, FTE / RDP staff & paying agencies (euro) b) LEADER/non-LEADER: the length of processing times for assessing funding applications (number of days) c) LEADER: specific costs associated with networking and technical assistance to LAGs (euro) d) LEADER: specific costs for selection of LAGs /LDS (euro, but not calculated because of missing data)	Survey of RDP MAs, interviews with MAs and PAs DG AGRI - Cost of control Survey 2021 Literature review AIRs - Financial execution data for 19.2 & 19.3 and non-LEADER projects AIRs - Financial execution data by sub-measure (19.1 -19.4) In-depth interviews in case study LAGs Interviews with LEADER experts

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				<p>Specific costs of LEADER at LAG level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) LEADER: Costs for M19.1 and use of LAG own resources (euro) and days for voluntary work (translated to euro) b) LEADER: Costs for M19.4: animation costs to improve human capital at local level (euro) c) LEADER: Costs for M19.4 (running costs of implementation and management of LDS projects 19.2 and 19.3 (euro)) d) LEADER: Costs for beneficiaries (hours for administrative management of project implementation), cost reduction because of LAG support in project application (percentage of time saving) e) Costs for LAG decision-making body (time of board members translated in euro) f) Outreach work needed to get new actors to apply for LAG funding (estimations from interviews) 	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
		9. <i>To what extent have the additional costs of implementing the LEADER approach been justified by its additional benefits?</i>	The assessment is based on the relations found between the added value features of the three added value elements as addressed under study questions 6 and 7 (improved governance, improved social capital and enhanced results) and the additional costs identified in study question 8		
		10. <i>To what extent have the LEADER approach and local development strategies been efficient in fostering local development, promoting social inclusion and poverty reduction and hence in contributing to the general CAP objective of balanced territorial development?</i>	<p>Programming and managing authorities have been efficient in programming and selection procedures</p> <p>The different delivery models of the RDPs influenced the efficiency of LAGs' implementation of LDSs</p>	<p>Time spent in designing Measure 19, and preparing and implementing selection procedures</p> <p>Percentage of EAFRD resources committed to M19 in relation to different RDP delivery types</p> <p>CMEF output and result indicators related to LEADER</p> <p>Resources (FTEs and budget) spent by type of measure and focus areas by delivery model and level of LAG autonomy</p> <p>Qualitative information on delivery models of LEADER</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG personnel's and key stakeholders' perception of MA's influence on LAG tasks</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of perception of efficiency by LAG personnel and key stakeholders</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG and MA personnel's perception of the adequacy of resources in terms of quantity and skills of staff</p>	<p>Analysis of LAG implementation data in case studies</p> <p>EU-wide survey of MAs</p> <p>EU-wide survey of LAGs</p> <p>Case study interviews with MA officials and LAG personnel; also beneficiaries</p> <p>Case study RDP evaluations 2007-2013</p> <p>LAG self-evaluation reports</p> <p>Annual implementation reports (AIRs)</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			<p>Paying agencies have been efficient in implementing payments and control procedures, and other roles in LEADER delivery, where relevant</p>	<p>Perception of efficiency by LAG personnel, MA and PA officials</p> <p>Percentage of EAFRD resources committed and paid under different delivery models</p> <p>Case study examples of changes in time and resource costs for delivery</p>	
			<p>LAG operations have been undertaken efficiently</p>	<p>Time spent in implementing payments and control procedures</p> <p>Running costs and animation costs per project</p> <p>Running costs and animation costs per job created</p>	
	<p>To what extent has LEADER reduced administrative burden?</p>	<p><i>8. To what extent are the implementation costs under LEADER different from the implementation costs of similar non-LEADER projects? To what extent (if any) do the governance choices of the LEADER approach at the RDP and LAG levels affect its administrative complexity?</i></p>	<p>The governance choices for implementation of LEADER affected administrative complexity and the administrative burden</p>	<p>Qualitative assessments of beneficiaries and LAG managers of administrative complexities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - extra administrative burden for project owners, - long selection procedures, - animation/help for beneficiaries provided by LAGs, which can improve accessibility to funding <p>Qualitative assessments of cost drivers</p> <p>Actions implemented to reduce administrative burden</p>	<p>Interviews in case study LAGs</p> <p>Documentary analysis</p> <p>Survey data of RDP MAs / desk officers M19</p> <p>Focus groups in case study LAGs</p> <p>Interviews with LEADER experts</p>
		<p><i>11. To what extent has the current implementation of</i></p>	<p>Resources at RDP and LAG level have been</p>	<p>Qualitative indicators of perception of the adequacy of</p>	<p>EU-wide survey of MAs</p> <p>EU-wide survey of</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
		<i>the LEADER reduced administrative burdens: a) at the level of the beneficiaries; b) at the level of the Member States' administrations and LAGs?</i>	<p>adequate for M19 design and implementation</p> <p>Complexity of LEADER delivery model has influenced administrative burden</p> <p>Delivery improvements have reduced administrative burden at LAG and beneficiary level</p>	<p>resources by MA, PA and LAG personnel</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of perception of resources adequacy by regional/national and local stakeholders</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, PA and LAG personnel's perception of administrative burden, by type of administrative task</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of complexity of the process and specific phases as perceived by MAs, PAs and LAGs</p> <p>Qualitative indicators on factors of administrative burden and degree of importance as identified by different stakeholders</p> <p>Qualitative information on administrative burden of different LEADER delivery systems</p> <p>Qualitative information on perception of differences in administrative burden when comparing between different delivery practices at LAG level</p> <p>Qualitative information on administrative burden between LAGs with different adoption of delivery improvements (e.g. SCOs)</p>	<p>LAGs</p> <p>Case study interviews with MA officials and LAG personnel</p> <p>Case study LAG self-evaluation reports</p> <p>Interviews with EC officials, ENRD and ELARD (European LEADER association for rural development)</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
<i>Coherence</i>	To what extent has LEADER been internally and externally coherent?	<i>12. How coherent are LEADER measures, LAGs' activities and support provided under local development strategies for local development with each other; and with other CAP instruments and measures?</i>	<p>LEADER sub-measures (M19) and LAGs' activities have been coherent with the local development strategies (LDS)</p> <p>LEADER measure has been coherent within Pillar 2 of the CAP in supporting local development</p> <p>LEADER has been coherent with the CAP objectives and other relevant CAP instruments</p>	<p>Qualitative information on the design of LDS</p> <p>Qualitative information of consistency of the operations selected by the LAGs within the LDS</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and stakeholder perception of complementarities and synergies between LEADER sub-measures and between LAGs' activities, both implemented under the LDS</p> <p>Qualitative information on complementarities, overlaps and synergies between the LEADER measure and other relevant RDP measures</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and stakeholder perception of complementarities and synergies between LEADER and RDP measures</p> <p>CMEF indicators on LEADER's secondary contributions to RDP objectives</p> <p>Qualitative information on complementarities, overlaps and synergies between LEADER and other CAP instruments</p>	<p>EU-wide survey of MAs</p> <p>EU-wide survey of LAGs</p> <p>Literature review</p> <p>Case study interviews with MA personnel</p> <p>Case study interviews with LAG personnel (coordinators)</p> <p>Case study interviews with NRN/RRN</p> <p>Interviews with EC officials</p> <p>Case study RDP analysis (e.g. Chapter 14, with information on complementarities)</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and stakeholder perception of complementarities and synergies between LEADER and other relevant CAP instruments and measures	
		<i>13. How coherent are LEADER measures, LAGs' activities and support with other relevant EU and national/regional policy initiatives?</i>	LEADER has been coherent with the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF: ESF, ERDF, EMFF) policies relevant for community-led local development (CLLD)	Qualitative information on complementarities, overlaps and synergies between LEADER and ESIF policies supporting CLLD	EU-wide survey of MAs EU-wide survey of LAGs Literature review Case study interviews with MA personnel Case study interviews with LAG personnel (coordinators) Case study interviews with NRN/RRN Interviews with EC officials Case study RDP analysis (e.g. Chapter 14, with information on complementarities)
	LEADER has been coherent with the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF: ESF, ERDF, EMFF) policies, supporting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in LAG areas		Qualitative information on complementarities, overlaps and synergies between LEADER and ESIF policies supporting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development		
	LEADER has been coherent with national/regional policy initiatives supporting social inclusion, poverty		Qualitative indicators of MA and LAG perception of complementarities and synergies between LEADER and ESIF policies supporting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development		
			Qualitative indicators of MA and LAG perception of complementarities and synergies between LEADER and ESIF policies supporting social inclusion, poverty		

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			reduction and economic development in LAG areas	poverty reduction and economic development	
			LEADER has created synergies with other relevant EU instruments and programmes (notably LIFE and INTERREG)	Qualitative indicators of MA and LAG perception of complementarities and synergies between LEADER and national and regional policies supporting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development	
			Multi-funded CLLD approach has been more coherent than LEADER mono-fund with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	Qualitative information on complementarities and synergies between LEADER and other relevant EU instruments and programmes	
			Multi-funded CLLD approach has been more coherent than LEADER mono-fund with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	Qualitative information on coherence of LEADER mono-fund approach with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	
			Multi-funded CLLD approach has been more coherent than LEADER mono-fund with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	Qualitative information on coherence of LEADER multi-fund approach with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	
			Multi-funded CLLD approach has been more coherent than LEADER mono-fund with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	Qualitative indicators of MA and LAG perception of coherence between LEADER mono-fund approach with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	
			Multi-funded CLLD approach has been more coherent than LEADER mono-fund with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	Qualitative indicators of MA and LAG perception of coherence between LEADER multi-fund approach with relevant ESIF and national/regional policies	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
<i>Relevance</i>	To what extent has LEADER been relevant to local development of rural areas?	<i>14. To what extent have the LEADER measure and local development strategies been relevant for local economic development, promoting enhanced employment and rural vitality?</i>	<p>Local development strategies and LEADER measures addressed local needs in relation to economic development</p> <p>Local development strategies and LEADER measures addressed local needs in relation to employment</p> <p>Local development strategies and LEADER measures addressed local needs in relation to local</p>	<p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which LDS met local needs related to economic development</p> <p>Qualitative information on relevance of LEADER measures and LDS to local needs related to economic development</p> <p>Number and qualitative information of LAG projects and activities that promote the local economy</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which LDS met local needs related to employment</p> <p>Qualitative information on relevance of LEADER measures and LDS to local needs related to employment</p> <p>Number and qualitative information of LAG projects and activities that promote employment</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which LDS met local needs related to local services and depopulation</p>	<p>Case study interviews with MA/PA personnel</p> <p>Case study interviews with LAG personnel</p> <p>Case study interviews with beneficiaries</p> <p>EU-wide LAG survey</p> <p>EU-wide MA survey</p> <p>LDS: SWOT analysis, needs assessment, <i>ex ante</i> evaluation, focus of strategy, activities programmed</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			services and depopulation	Qualitative information on relevance of LEADER measures and LDS to local needs related to local services and depopulation	
				Number and qualitative information of LAG projects and activities that provide local services and tackle depopulation	
			LAGs and LEADER resources were made proportionate to local needs on the local economy, employment and local services and depopulation	Qualitative information on MA approaches in LAG selection and support and local needs	
				Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and other regional/national stakeholder perceptions of how far LAG resources and locations have been adequate to meet local needs	
		<i>15: To what extent have the LEADER approach, local strategies and LAG activities been relevant in fostering the social fabric, promoting social inclusion and poverty reduction?</i>	The LEADER approach, local strategies and LAG activities have been adequate in supporting the social fabric in LAG areas	Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which LDS met local needs to support social fabric	Case study interviews with MA/PA personnel Case study interviews with LAG personnel Case study interviews with local stakeholders and beneficiaries EU-wide LAG survey EU-wide MA survey Context analysis in case study RDP areas
				Qualitative information on relevance of LEADER measures and LDS to local needs related to the strengthening of local societies	
				Qualitative indicators on social capital	
				Number and qualitative information of LAG projects and activities that support the social fabric	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			The LEADER approach, local strategies and LAG activities have been adequate in promoting social inclusion	<p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which LDS met local needs on social inclusion</p> <p>Qualitative information on relevance of LEADER measures and LDS to local needs related to social inclusion</p> <p>Qualitative indicators on local participation</p> <p>Number and qualitative information of LAG projects and activities that promote social inclusion</p>	
			The LEADER approach, local strategies and LAG activities have been adequate to tackling rural poverty	<p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which LDS met local needs on rural poverty</p> <p>Qualitative information on relevance of LEADER measures and LDS to local needs related to rural poverty</p> <p>Number and qualitative information of LAG projects on activities to reduce rural poverty</p>	
			MA decisions on LAG scale, coverage and priorities were appropriate for meeting social needs	Qualitative information on MA approaches in LAG selection and support to needs relating to the social fabric, social inclusion and poverty	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and stakeholder perception of how far LAG resources have been adequate to meet local needs on social inclusion and poverty reduction	
		<i>16. To what extent have the LEADER approach, local development strategies and LAG activities been relevant for promoting sustainable and balanced territorial development?</i>	The LEADER approach, local strategies and LAG activities have been relevant in addressing environmental needs in LAG areas	Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which LDS met local needs related to the environment	Case study interviews with MA/PA personnel Case study interviews with LAG personnel Case study interviews with local stakeholders and beneficiaries EU-wide LAG survey EU-wide MA survey Context analysis in case study RDP areas
				Qualitative information on relevance of LEADER measures and LDS to local needs related to the environment	
				Number and qualitative information of LAG environment-related projects and activities	
				The LEADER approach, local strategies and LAG activities have been adequate to address needs for integrated territorial development in LAG areas	
				Qualitative information on relevance of LEADER measures and LDS to promoting integrated development	

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
				<p>Number and qualitative information of LAG projects and activities</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the extent to which delivery and governance model have been adequate to promote integrated development</p> <p>Qualitative information on relevance of delivery and governance models to promoting integrated development</p>	
<i>EU added value</i>	To what extent has LEADER made a difference as an EU instrument?	<i>17. To what extent have the LEADER approach and its implementation at national, regional and local levels created European added value?</i>	The LEADER approach has contributed to improving EU, Member State and regional policies acting on territorial development	<p>Qualitative information on the LEADER approach's contribution to the definition of EU policies and Member States' policy initiatives on territorial development</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the LEADER approach's contribution to territorial development policies in Member States</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the EU added value of LEADER</p>	<p>Literature review</p> <p>EU-wide survey of MAs</p> <p>EU-wide survey of LAGs</p> <p>Synthesis of other evaluation themes</p> <p>Case study interviews with MA personnel</p> <p>Case study interviews with LAG personnel</p> <p>Case study interviews with NRN/RRN and LAG networks</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			Condition of LAG areas had been worse without LEADER	<p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perceptions of the condition of LAG areas' economy, social issues, services provision and environmental issues without LEADER</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of MA, LAG and local stakeholder perception of added value in relation to the practical application of the principles of the LEADER approach</p> <p>Qualitative information on the LEADER approach's contribution to promoting local development in comparison with non-LEADER scenarios</p>	
		6. <i>To what extent LEADER implementation brings additional benefits in terms of improved governance and social capital at local level? (EQ 6 also served to assess key elements for EU added value)</i>	The implementation of LEADER improved the linkages with actors external to the LAGs (other LAGs nationally or transnationally, business organisations, MAs, etc.)	<p>Number and types of animation activities undertaken in cooperation with other regional business, social, cultural, environmental organisations and public authorities</p> <p>Number of and qualitative indicators of LAG, MA and other stakeholder perceptions of LAG linkages with established national and European networks and participation in related organised activities/events</p>	<p>Interviews and focus groups in case study LAGs</p> <p>Expert interviews</p> <p>Documentary research</p>

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation question	Evaluation support study question ⁽¹²⁹⁾	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Data source
			The implementation of LEADER gave power to the local population beyond what is achieved in nationally administered schemes and created new platforms for change	<p>Number of projects from actors who have not applied before (for LEADER and for non-LEADER measures)</p> <p>The number of platforms for change that have been developed/consolidated/sustained</p> <p>Qualitative indicators of LAG, MA, expert and other stakeholder judgments on how LEADER brings the EU closer to citizens</p>	

Annex IV. Overview of benefits and costs

The delivery model of LEADER (or Measure 19 under the EAFRD) has an impact on the level and distribution of costs between stakeholders. On the one hand, as the projects are managed at local level, it can reduce administrative costs for managing authorities. On the other hand, it requires resources to manage the large number of actors involved in and supporting LAGs and to handle the diversity of implementation options. The bottom-up selection process based on individual LDSs is considered more costly than a purely authority-led (top-down) process with general selection procedures and criteria. ⁽¹³⁰⁾

Managing authorities incur administrative costs in implementing LEADER measures at RDP level. These include:

1. staff costs relating to the selection of LDS and LAGs,
2. costs relating to networking and technical assistance for LAGs,
3. staff costs relating to the implementation of LEADER projects, including cooperation projects.

The evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits estimates the general administrative costs for managing authorities for Measure 19 at 5.5 cents per euro of committed expenditure, covering costs for in-house staff and external resources, excluding overheads. This corresponds to an average full time equivalent (FTE) of 10.8 in-house staff and 13.9 external resources per managing authority. Adding 25% for overheads, the total administrative costs for managing authorities are estimated at around EUR 60 million (i.e. 6.9% of committed expenditure). A study on the administrative costs and burden of EU funds estimates that approximately 68% of the total administrative costs for EAFRD measures are paid from the technical assistance budget. ⁽¹³¹⁾

Costs for controls (enforcement costs) are shared between managing authorities and paying agencies. On the basis of the survey on delivery costs conducted by DG AGRI among managing authorities in 2021, the evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits estimates the in-house staff for controls at 1.3 FTE per EUR 1 million of committed expenditure. The average cost of an FTE is estimated at EUR 54 520, calculated on the basis of an hourly rate of EUR 28.9. This corresponds to the one-in-one-out rate (including hourly wages, non-wage labour costs and 25% overhead costs) for ISCO 1-5 Non-manual workers ⁽¹³²⁾. Total enforcement costs are estimated at EUR 61.9 million (i.e. 7.1% of committed expenditure).

⁽¹³⁰⁾ Agrosynergie, Ecorys and Metis et al., 'Evaluation Support Study of the Costs and Benefits of the Implementation of LEADER'; ADE s. a et al., *Evaluation Support Study on the Impact of LEADER on Balanced Territorial Development*.

⁽¹³¹⁾ Spatial Foresight & t33, 'New assessment of ESIF administrative costs and burden', October 2018.

⁽¹³²⁾ The use of ISCO 1-5 is based on the assessment that the tasks require a mix of skills (legislators, professionals and clerks). To convert the hourly rate into the annual cost of an FTE, the rate is multiplied by the average annual number of hours worked and paid (1 824 hours according to Eurostat, Structure of earnings survey 2018, Mean monthly hours paid by

The administrative costs for LAGs are estimated in the evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits on the basis of interviews with LAGs and expressed as a percentage of committed expenditure for Measure 19.

- Costs for preparing of the LDS and launching the LAGs' work are estimated at EUR 9.1 million (i.e. 1% of committed expenditure). Over one third of these costs are funded under Measure 19.1, while the remainder use the LAGs' own resources.
- LAG animation costs are estimated at EUR 12.2.2 million (i.e. 1.4% of committed expenditure). These costs are funded under Measure 19.4.
- LAG running costs for implementation and management of LDS projects account for the largest share of LAG administrative costs and are estimated at EUR 99.6 million (i.e. 11.4% of committed expenditure). These costs are funded under Measure 19.4.
- Further costs borne by LAGs include networking costs (about EUR 2.6 million) and costs relating to decision-making processes within the LAGs (about EUR 6.1 million).

The costs incurred by beneficiaries could not be estimated owing to the diversity of LEADER projects and the resulting wide variation in the steps involved in submitting applications (e.g. the need to ask for a building permit). However, the evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits estimated that beneficiaries saved 34% of their time thanks to the support received from LAGs. Hassle costs for beneficiaries relate in particular to the time it takes to process and assess applications. The average processing time for funding LEADER applications, including administrative processing within the LAGs, is 147 days. This is below the processing time for other non-LEADER RDP measures.

The diversity of the projects, which are tailored to local needs, also results in a wide range of benefits, including intangible ones, contributing to local development. Therefore, there is limited scope for quantifying this broad range of benefits, and even less for monetising them. However, evidence shows that the benefits reached a large number of people between 2014 and 2022, with 61% of the rural population covered by LAGs and almost 59 000 jobs created through LEADER projects.

The evaluation support study on LEADER costs and benefits found that the administrative costs which are specific to LEADER helped to deliver additional benefits in terms of governance, social capital and enhanced results compared with other RDP measures. The analysis suggests that the greater the proportion of resources invested in animation and other specific costs the greater the potential to create added value for the LAG area.

sex, economic activity and collective pay agreement [EARN_SES18_33], NACE: Public administration and defence; compulsory social security, GEO: European Union - 27 countries (2020)).

Table 1. Overview of the costs and benefits identified in the evaluation

	Citizens/Consumers		Businesses: beneficiaries		Administrations		Local action groups (LAGs)		
	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	Quantitative	Comment	
Direct compliance costs: administrative costs									
General implementation costs: processing of applications, selection of LAGs, networking and technical assistance	recurrent	-	-	-	-	-	EUR 60.0 million	-	-
Preparation of the LAGs' local development strategy (LDS)	one-off	-	-	-	-	-	-	EUR 9.1 million	costs annualised over the programming period
Animation activities	recurrent	-	-	-	-	-	-	EUR 12.2 million	-
Running costs for implementation and management of LDS projects	recurrent	-	-	-	-	-	-	EUR 99.6 million	-
Networking activities	recurrent	-	-	-	-	-	-	EUR 2.6 million	-
Decision-making process within LAGs	recurrent	-	-	-	-	-	-	EUR 6.1 million	-
Administrative management of projects, including application for funding	recurrent	-	-	<i>not monetised</i>	-	-	-	-	-

Enforcement costs									
Controls	recurrent	-	-	-	-	EUR 61.9 million	-	-	-
Benefits									
Savings in administrative management of projects thanks to support from LAGs	recurrent	-	-	<i>not monetised</i>	~ 34% time savings	-	-	-	-
Contribution to local development, addressing local economic, social and environmental needs	recurrent	<i>Not monetised</i>	61% of rural population covered, almost 59 000 jobs created (2014-2022)	<i>not monetised</i>	idem	-	-	-	-
LEADER added value for governance, social capital and enhanced results	recurrent	<i>Not monetised</i>	-	<i>not monetised</i>	-	<i>not monetised</i>	-	<i>not monetised</i>	-

Annex V. Stakeholders consultation - Synopsis report

This annex provides an overview of the consultations that were carried out for this evaluation. It covers the public consultation on the long-term vision for rural areas (including the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development), the feedback received on the evaluation roadmap, and the opinions of the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions.

Objectives of the consultation

As a first step in the consultation process, an evaluation roadmap was published on 22 July 2020 to inform stakeholders and the public about the context of the initiative, the issues that it aimed to address, the basis for LEADER intervention, what results LEADER aimed to achieve and how it sought to achieve them. A public consultation on the long-term vision for rural areas was then launched on 7 September 2020. The consultation included a (optional) questionnaire on the impact of the CAP on balanced territorial development, including the impact of LEADER.

Public consultation on the CAP and balanced territorial development

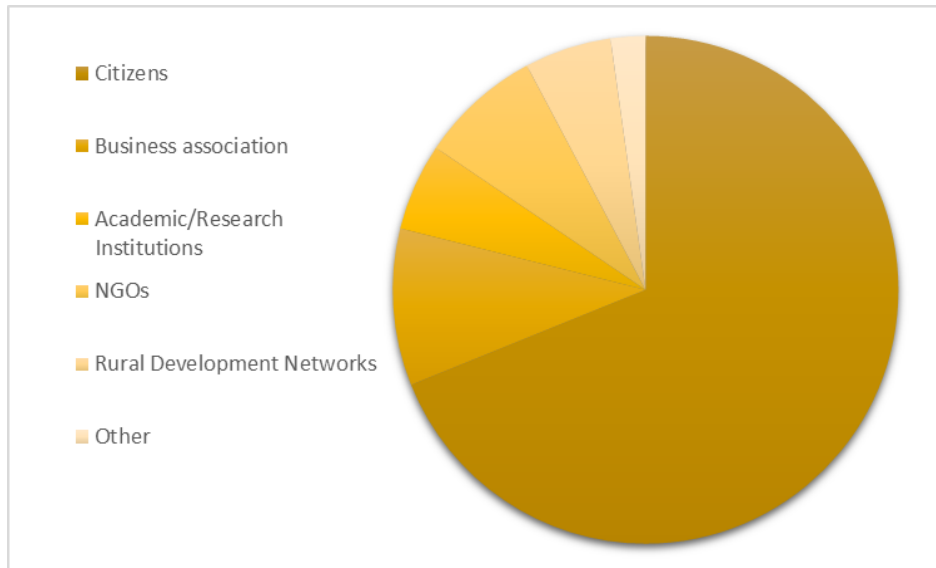
Timing: The consultation was open on [Have your Say](#) portal on the Europa website for 12 weeks, from the 7 September to 30 November 2020.

Target group: all stakeholders

Results: The public consultation on the long-term vision for rural areas received 2 446 contributions (including position papers and other documents on the roadmaps). The dedicated questionnaire on the CAP received 2 326 contributions from the following stakeholder groups: EU citizens (1 436), NGOs (206), public authorities (200), companies/businesses (125), academic/research institutions (111), business associations (47), environmental organisations (15), non-EU citizens (12), trade unions (7), consumer organisation (5), and other (162).

Although 60% of the respondents replied as ‘citizens’, the distribution of the respondents was not fully representative of the overall population of the EU, as participation in public consultations is based on self-selection.

Figure 31: Profile of respondents by stakeholder type

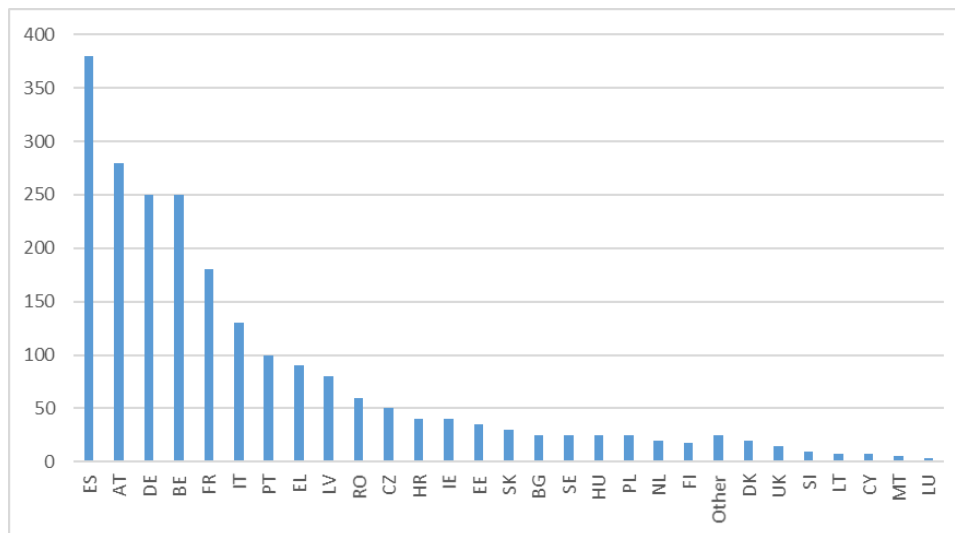


Source: Public consultation on the CAP and balanced territorial development (Number of respondents: 2 326).

Half of the responses came from 5 countries (Spain, Germany, Austria, France, and Italy). In other countries (Lithuania, Cyprus, Denmark, Luxembourg, Malta) participation was very low. A small number of stakeholders from non-EU countries also participated in the consultation.

Additionally, among individual respondents, women, young adults, and elderly were under-represented.

Figure 32: Country of residence of respondents



Source: Public consultation on the CAP and balanced territorial development (Number of respondents: 2 326).

Furthermore, the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate where they lived. Many participants clearly had a direct link to farming, more people living in rural areas responded than people living in or near a city.

Evaluation roadmap of the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development

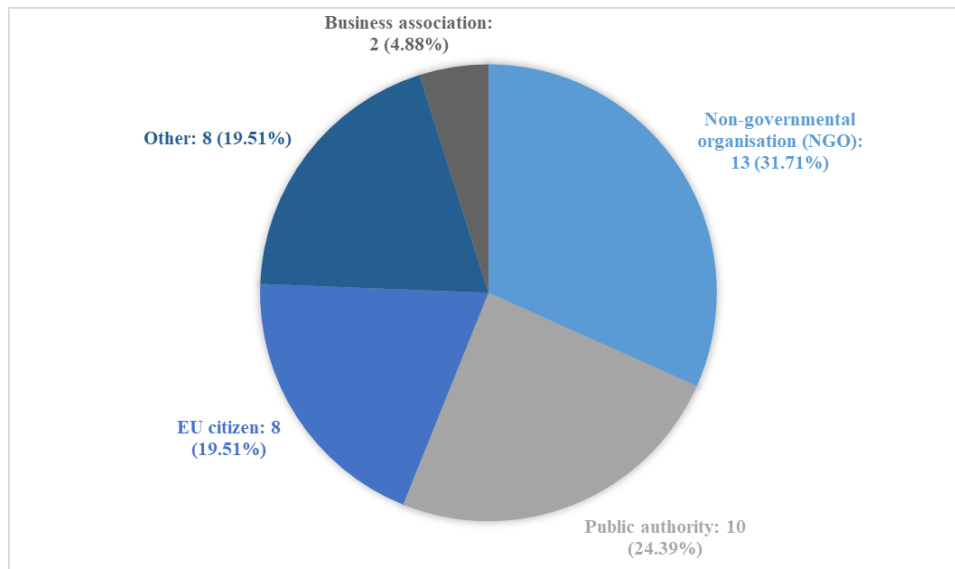
An evaluation roadmap was published online in September 2020 for 4 weeks. The aim was to inform citizens and stakeholders about the Commission’s work and collect their feedback on the context, purpose and scope of the evaluation of the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development (in terms of its effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, EU added value and coherence with other CAP measures and EU/national policies).

Timing: The evaluation roadmap was published on the [Have your Say](#) portal on the Europa website from 22 July to 13 October 2020.

Target group: all stakeholders

Results: The consultation received 41 contributions from the following stakeholder groups: NGOs (13), public authorities (10), EU citizens (8), and other (8). The uneven participation of different stakeholder groups should be borne in mind when reading the results.

Figure 33: Feedback by category of respondents

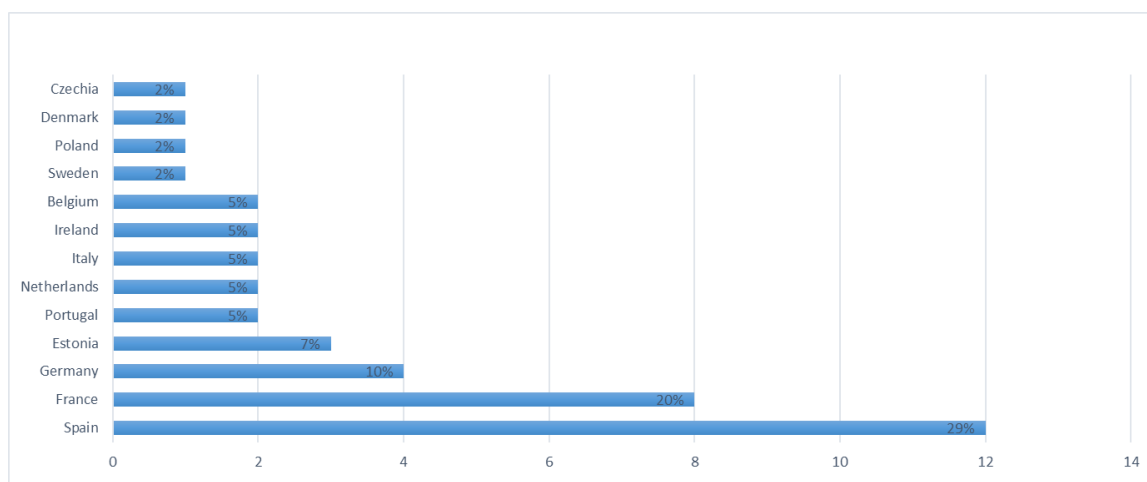


Source: Public consultation on the evaluation roadmap of the impact of LEADER (Number of respondents: 41).

Stakeholders came from 13 EU countries, The country with the largest number of respondents was Spain (12). Only EU countries provided feedback on the roadmap.

In addition, some respondents submitted position papers on LEADER, stressing the crucial importance of the bottom-up approach and the need to tailor measures to the local context for rural communities facing sustainability challenges and balanced territorial development. Respondents saw LEADER as a model for future policy design and a key means of triggering socio-economic development in all types of territory (rural, urban, peri-urban and coastal).

Figure 34: Feedback by Member State



Source: Public consultation on the evaluation of the impact of LEADER roadmap (Number of respondents: 41).

Synthesis of the results of the consultations by evaluation criteria

a. Effectiveness and efficiency

Respondents see LEADER as the most effective CAP measure for supporting local communities. In particular, the distributional differences across stakeholder groups show that NGOs and rural development networks are those reporting higher percentages (more than 50% of them selected the option ‘to a very large extent’). Moreover, some of the position papers stressed that the bottom-up approach involving LAGs contributes to the effectiveness of LEADER.

Stakeholders recognised that LEADER provides considerable support for local areas, helping to address biodiversity and forge solid relationships between different actors.

The positive aspects mentioned in the contributions include the use of LEADER to increase the attractiveness of rural areas for tourists and to foster women’s active participation in the labour force, thereby supporting social inclusion in general.

Additionally, while some respondents acknowledged LEADER’s capacity for adapting to administrative rules and democratic processes, others suggested that its effectiveness and efficiency could be undermined by the low level of resources allocated and unnecessary red tape. If bureaucratic hurdles are reduced, funds could be made available more quickly and directed to where they are urgently needed most.

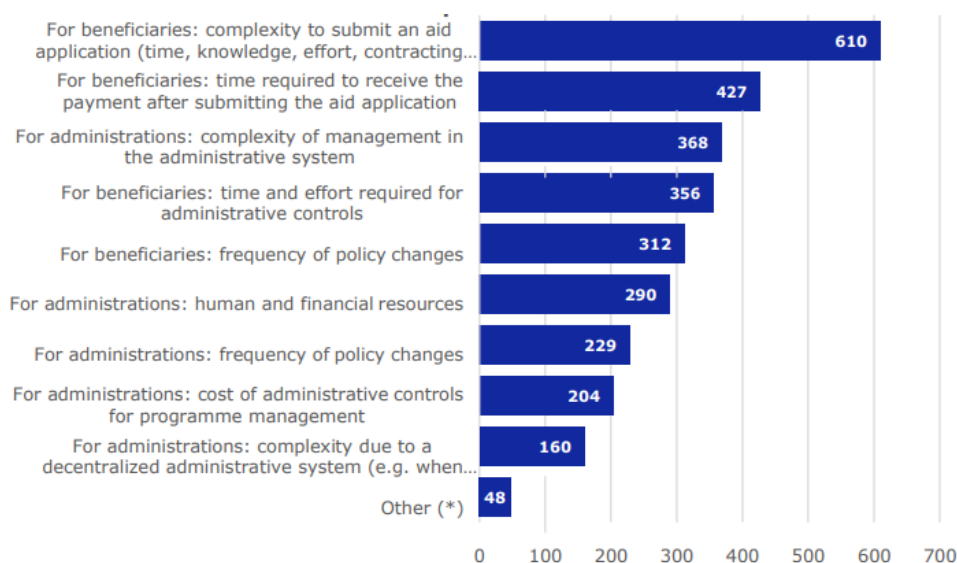
Respondents also stressed that excessive bureaucracy and multi-level planning made projects submitted by promoters with the fewest resources more burdensome and challenging.

To address this structural weakness, some respondents proposed expanding the role of LAGs by upgrading them to regional development agencies and innovation brokers. Among other possible solutions to improve the efficiency of LEADER, most position papers suggested simplifying bureaucratic procedures, including streamlining control procedures and delivery models to fully exploit the programme’s potential, and making the programme more simple and user-friendly.

On the financial side, although LEADER is obligatory only under the EAFRD, it is widely appreciated that its financial capacities have been boosted since the 2014-2020 planning using the multi-fund approach. However, some position papers state that the financial resources allocated are still not always proportionate to local development needs, and remain too limited for territorial animation, training for local actors and the empowerment of local communities.

To further strengthen the synergies between different funds, LEADER should take a more harmonised approach to the multi-funding of CLLD, such as the lead fund approach suggested in the Commission’s cohesion policy proposals for 2021-2027. Nonetheless, in terms of how it addresses economic issues in rural areas, the synthesis of the public consultation points out that LEADER is generally delivered at a satisfactory level of efficiency.

Figure 35: Main aspects of administrative cost/burden in addressing balanced territorial development of EU rural areas



Source: *Consultation on CAP and balanced territorial development* ⁽¹³³⁾.

b. Coherence

Overall, the results of the consultation show that, in terms of its ability to mobilise local resources and improve cooperation between different actors, LEADER is considered to be coherent and complementary with other EU funds and national policies that contribute to balanced territorial development. As LAGs are able to pool resources and expertise, LEADER creates synergies with national social inclusion programmes, increasing cooperation between the different levels.

In terms of local specificities, LEADER seems to complement other EU funds by extending and improving support for to categories of beneficiaries that are often excluded from the typical pool of beneficiaries of EU structural funding.

The results also stress its complementary role in improving access to services, especially in less dynamic areas, and in promoting rural tourism and preserving cultural heritage.

⁽¹³³⁾ Synthesis of the online public consultation on the Long-term Vision for Rural Areas: [Rural development – long-term vision for rural areas \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0001).

Nonetheless, respondents to the public consultation call for more coordination between different authorities at the national and regional level, as some stakeholders, such as NGOs still perceive LEADER as somewhat inconsistent with regional and local policies. As the scope of CLLD is mainly limited to implementing projects at the local level, it seems that there is still a weak complementary relation between CLLD and national mainstream policies.

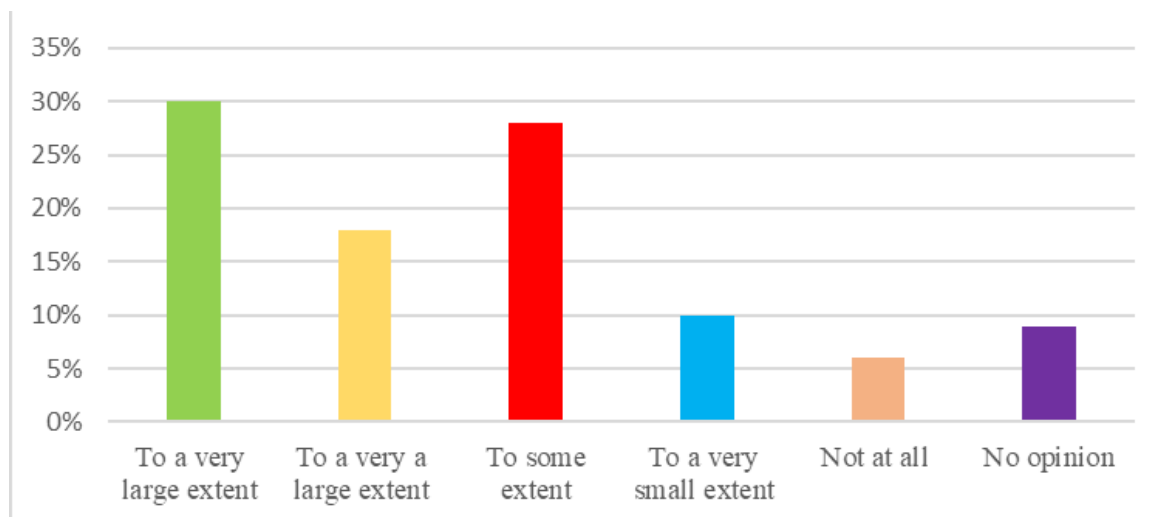
c. Relevance

Almost 80% of the respondents to the public consultation consider LEADER to be particularly relevant to balanced territorial development. Indeed, stakeholders stress the social and economic aspects of issues faced by rural communities. Access to social services and transport are identified as the biggest social issues among those listed in the study, followed by outmigration, poverty and unemployment. In economic terms, the most pressing needs are to reduce income disparities between less and more urbanised areas, boost employment and tackle land abandonment. Investing in innovation and research is also acknowledged as a priority, although less pressing than the others.

In addition, respondents identified other governance/policy priorities that were considered crucial in the analysis of LEADER’s relevance. These include in particular the need for enhanced political cooperation between different actors at local, regional, national and international level, and the need for an area-based approach that addresses development challenges in rural areas. The creation and strengthening of a multi-level governance process is another essential need to be addressed.

Overall, several needs and challenges identified by the stakeholders are inherently linked to the seven principles of LEADER: bottom-up approach, area-based approach, local partnership, an integrated and multi-sectoral strategy, networking, innovation, and cooperation. This suggests that LEADER is highly relevant in addressing the policy needs of rural communities and the challenges they face.

Figure 36: Views on the extent to which LEADER contributes to the balanced territorial development of EU rural areas



Source: Consultation on CAP and balanced territorial development.

d. EU added value

LEADER's capacity building activities on the governance of rural areas are cited as the main example of how EU-level objectives can be aligned with the needs of local communities. Thus, respondents recognise the EU added value that LEADER brings to achieving balanced territorial development.

Consequently, LEADER's potential to promote bottom-up and multi-level governance is highly appreciated by respondents (public authorities and NGOs).

The results of the public consultation also show how LEADER plays a vital role in the territorial planning and preservation of the rural landscape and in providing key infrastructure for rural economies.

The biggest way in which LEADER generates EU added value in terms of social inclusion and social benefits is through its specific approaches and principles, which allow support to be tailored to local needs and enable local intermediary bodies to be involved. For example LAGs have expanded the capacity of rural communities across Europe to resolve problems in a bottom-up way through innovation and cooperation, thereby generating EU added value. Moreover, transnational cooperation within LEADER creates EU added value and is supported by the activities of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) at EU level.

The consultation revealed that LEADER also brings considerable EU added value through its innovative ability to reach the local people of rural areas and to support social aspects.

The overall conclusion that emerges is that LEADER is seen as particularly well-placed to address the current needs of the rural population and tackle future challenges in the agricultural sector.

Other contributions mentioned some additional benefits of LEADER.

- Some public authorities said LEADER had made a significant contribution to the economic and social development of rural areas and had been instrumental in pioneering new innovations to support bottom-up decision-making.

The region of Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes (FR) pointed out that LEADER played a key role in financing certain projects that received little attention from other EU financial programmes.

Consorci Intercomarcal d'Iniciatives Socioeconòmiques (ES) said LEADER had made a particular contribution to the application of the Sustainable Development Goals through the LAGs' strategies.

One ministry of agriculture (CZ) stated that LEADER also had a positive impact on non-agricultural activities such as education.

An anonymous respondent stated that the complexity of the rural environment required its own vision for services to ensure a balanced services provision not based solely on economic efficiency, as is the case of LEADER.

Some NGOs proposed improvements.

One NGO (Ireland) suggested mainstreaming EU local development policy as a central pillar of the European Green Deal. While there were many positive aspects to existing LEADER policy, there were also limitations in terms of the thematic and geographical scope of CLLD and its accessibility to many people and communities that did not have the capacity or resources to navigate bureaucratic processes.

Another NGO (Spain) advocated the setting-up of new interrelation mechanisms to enable people to link their rural projects to the rural environment. For this reason, the NGO proposed an existing model at the sectoral level, such as the ‘incorporation of young farmers’ or the ‘Asturian rural ticket’, in which a contract is drawn up between people who want to develop their business and a vital project in rural areas, thus serving their personal needs and those of the rural community itself.

Some NGOs believed that this evaluation of LEADER would be published too late to serve as a new basis for upcoming political decisions and influence the new implementation of the CAP and other policies that affect CLLD. Therefore, these NGOs proposed an earlier evaluation – in addition to the one suggested – that would examine the mid-term evaluations of the LAGs across the EU in order to make policy proposals for the 2021-2027 programming period.

To conclude, the feedback received underlines the relevance of LEADER on multiple levels and confirms that it is considered the most effective CAP measure for supporting local communities. LEADER is described as a relevant financial tool for urban and rural areas that provides opportunities for producing a local development strategy in a bottom-up manner. However, the main problem with LEADER remains the red tape involved in submitting aid applications and in preparing and checking documents, which generally involves disproportionate effort given to the amount of funding available. Furthermore, all the relevant groups criticised the administrative burden, with similar patterns for beneficiaries and public authorities.

Input from other sources

Information report of the European Economic and Social Committee

In April 2021, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted an [information report](#) ⁽¹³⁴⁾ evaluating the impact of the CAP on the territorial development of rural areas, with a focus on socio-economic aspects.

LEADER was found to be the most effective of all CAP measures because it had helped to diversify the economy in rural areas, create new governance mechanisms, preserve historical and cultural heritage and support entrepreneurship.

While acknowledging its great potential, the report pointed out that there were limitations to LEADER and made suggestions for improvement. Firstly, roles were clearly shared between national and regional authorities, so implementation of LEADER required more coordination between the two levels than other mechanisms, for LEADER to be more effective at local level and had higher level of implementation.

⁽¹³⁴⁾ Evaluation on the CAP’s impact on territorial development of rural areas (Information report), European Economic and Social Committee (europa.eu)

Secondly, the report stressed that there was a lack of coherence between agricultural and rural projects, despite the existence of collaborative decision making and co-creation structures (LEADER, national rural network, etc.). To address this problem, the report suggested giving more attention to real local needs and to the actual involvement of the local population in the CLLD instrument, which would create better synergies between the CLLD and LEADER.

Some stakeholders also said the lack of real coordination between operational programmes and regional development programmes created major monitoring problems.

Lastly, the EESC information report pointed to bureaucratisation of the funds, which limited the use of the multi-fund options. It suggested there was a clear need to increase resources and reinforce the partnership concept while reducing the complexity and bureaucracy of LEADER/CLLD.

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions.

Another valuable complementary source of information is the [opinion of the European Committee of Regions \(CoR\)](#) ⁽¹³⁵⁾ on the EU strategy for rural revival, adopted at the Committee's plenary session held in December 2020.

The CoR's factsheets highlight the positive role of LEADER as a targeted initiative in supporting the revival of rural areas and increasing the role of local and regional levels in the development and governance of rural policies.

However, the involvement of LAGs in deploying this type of governance must be increased, as they have the capacity to represent local areas and implement development policies tailored to the requirements and needs of areas that are depopulated or at demographic risk.

To this end, the CoR calls for greater engagement of rural stakeholders and the rural population through bottom-up initiatives like LEADER/CLLD.

⁽¹³⁵⁾ European Committee of the Regions (December 2020), 'Opinion – EU Strategy for Rural Revival' <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/OpinionTimeline.aspx?opId=CDR-1066-2020>.