

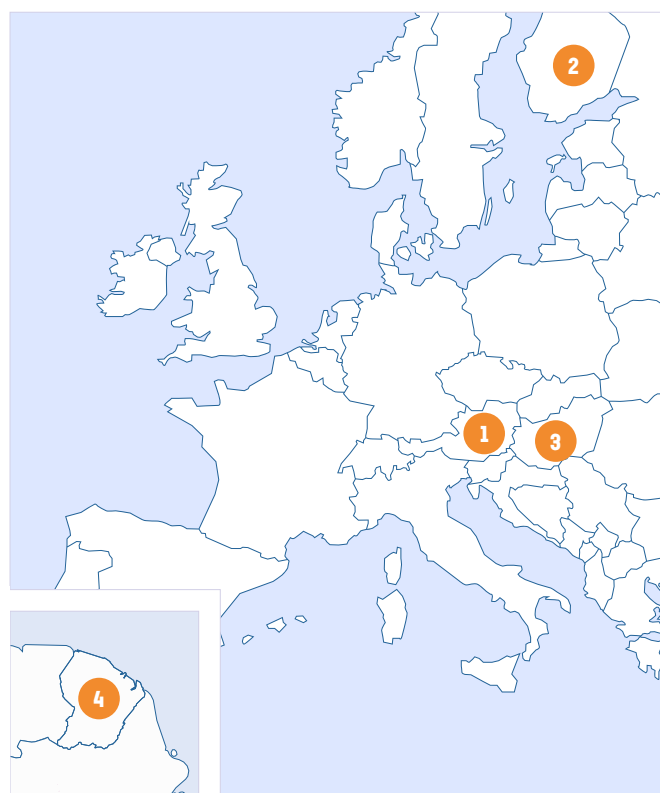


# CAP Evaluation Expert Insights - LEADER

## EXPERT INSIGHTS

LEADER stands as a vital cog in the CAP Strategic Plans machinery, reserving a noteworthy 5% of the entire European Agriculture Fund for Rural development (EAFRD) budget for its implementation. But, in evaluating LEADER, Member States find themselves facing a substantial challenge. It is not just about measuring LEADER's contribution to the CAP's Specific Objectives, but also uncovering the added value generated from the application of the 'LEADER method'<sup>1</sup>.

To help find a path forward, the [European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP](#) is working with experts to extract best practices from existing Rural Development Programme (RDP) evaluations. In this edition, *María Coto Sauras*, an evaluator from Spain with 18 years of experience, appraised four LEADER evaluations from different Member States during 2014-2020. Together with *Costas Apostolopoulos*, a member of the Evaluation Helpdesk's permanent team, they identified steps to success and recommendations aimed at all LEADER evaluation stakeholders, including Managing Authorities, evaluators, researchers and Local Action Groups (LAGs).



1 - Austria: [Analysis of the potential of social innovation within the framework of LEADER 2014-20 \(2019\)](#)

2 - Finland: [Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 of Mainland Finland: Evaluation of the LEADER approach \(2020\)](#)

3 - Hungary: [Assessing the added value of the CLLD approach \(2020\)](#)

4 - French Guiana: [Mid-term evaluation of the PDRG2 \(Guyane RDP\) LEADER \(2019\)](#)

<sup>1</sup> The [LEADER method](#) is the combined application of its seven principles: area-based local development strategies; bottom-up approach; public-private partnerships (in the form of local actions groups - LAGs); integrated and multi-sectoral strategy; innovation; networking; territorial cooperation.

The proper implementation of these principles generates an added value compared to centrally managed interventions. This added value is mostly measured by the improved governance, the improved social capital, and the enhanced results brought about by LEADER implementation. However, evaluators at Member States may choose other ways of assessment, based, for example on the level of implementation of LEADER principles.





The appraised evaluations had as defined objectives the assessment of the added value of LEADER - through the analysis of the application of the LEADER principles, as well as the role of LEADER in local development. Some examples of the findings of the appraised evaluation are summarised below.

### **LEADER added value: analysis of the application of LEADER principles**

Evaluators in Finland found that principles, such as the area-based and bottom-up approaches, public-private partnership and multisectoral local strategies, have been applied more widely than others - including innovativeness and networking. Multilevel governance arrangements and local governance capacity of the LAGs strongly affect the level of realisation of LEADER principles and therefore the potential to generate added value.

### **LEADER added value: generation of enhanced results**

Another group of findings relates to the enhanced results stemming from the implementation of LEADER. These were manifested by:

- > the significant proportion of socially innovative projects (AT);
- > the identification and motivation of project promoters who would have not had the chance to implement their projects without the support from LEADER and especially from LAGs (HU); and
- > the implementation of projects tailored to the local needs (HU, FR-Guiana).

However, in French Guiana, the scope of the local strategies has been assessed as overly broad - decreasing the potential of effectively targeting the already limited financial and human resources, and increasing the risk of scattering of funding.

### **The role of LEADER in local development**

Regarding the role of LEADER in local development, evaluators in Hungary found that it has supported the creation of new jobs and, in some cases, at a lower unit cost of job creation, compared to other RDP measures.

### **The role of the LAGs and their animation activities**

Animation activities performed by LAGs were found to be crucial, encouraging the emergence of territorial integrated projects and facilitating access to support (HU), especially for project promoters whose activities were small or not typical <sup>2</sup> (FR-Guiana).

<sup>2</sup> In the sense of going beyond what is usually funded under LEADER i.e. tourism, processing of agricultural products, small infrastructure or services.

## **Crystal clear concepts**

Clarity of concepts is of paramount importance for every evaluation. In LEADER evaluations, this gets more challenging due to the need to define elusive concepts like innovation, and especially social innovation, as well as the concept of LEADER added value.

In French Guiana, the evaluators approached the assessment of project innovation going beyond the binary field of 'yes' or 'no'. They have constructed a typology, classifying the projects financed under LEADER as:

- > experimental innovation project;
- > new concept/idea - a project that brings innovation and can be demonstrative;
- > new at the local level - a project that is new in the territory, but is based on a classic proposal; and
- > not innovative or not classified.



Pivoting to Austria, the evaluation formulated a concept of social innovation within LEADER implementation. Social innovation is defined as transformative actions that enhance human connections and living conditions through new collaborations between public, economic and civil society actors. The study not only described the various social innovation models, but also shed light on the pivotal role played by LAGs in fostering social innovation.







Finally, in Finland, the concept of LEADER added value has been approached from multiple angles. Firstly, it has been researched through the lens of the seven principles of the LEADER method. This involved a thorough examination of each principle, through intense discussions in the evaluation steering group, followed by an assessment of their level of implementation. Additionally, the governance model and LEADER-financed projects were analysed, focusing on how the governance model can either bolster or undermine the implementation of the principles. Lastly, the concept of social capital was viewed as accumulated knowledge about local needs and ways of working together towards a common objective, as well as networking of local actors.



### Recommendations from the appraisers to improve LEADER evaluations:

1. Before starting to clear up concepts relevant to LEADER evaluation, try gaining a clear understanding of how LEADER is coordinated. This entails comprehending the delivery mechanism and the framework within which the LAGs operate, as well as the overarching local and national strategic objectives.
2. Try setting-up a diverse and comprehensive steering group that involves LAG staff, members of the LAG decision-making body, other members of the LAG, regional representatives, the Managing Authority and Paying Agency. Use this group to discuss and clarify each concept and create a common understanding, focusing on the LEADER principles and especially innovation in the context of the LAG area, and to the components of LEADER added value (improved governance and social capital, enhanced results).

### Setting the scope through the right evaluation question

In LEADER evaluations, at least two complementary approaches can be followed. One path focuses on assessing LEADER added value, the benefits from the implementation of the LEADER method and, especially, the pivotal role of LAGs in it. Another approach examines the contribution of LEADER interventions to local and broader rural development objectives, and, as such, is more aligned to the evaluations of impacts from other CAP interventions.

In the first arena, the implementation of LEADER principles is scrutinised against its ability to generate social capital, foster improved governance and yield enhanced results. The second arena demands a closer inspection of the effectiveness and efficiency of LEADER interventions. It explores the coherence of these interventions with other initiatives in rural areas and probes the LEADER delivery mechanism and its achievements vis-a-vis the corresponding needs.

In this context, formulating the right evaluation questions can be central to defining the scope of LEADER evaluations and guiding evaluators toward deeper insights.



In Hungary, the focus is on the added value of the LEADER method. The overarching question was formulated as: “to what extent the implementation of LEADER has resulted in added value that would not have been generated through a centrally managed, top-down implementation?”. To answer this question, evaluators assessed the implementation of each of the seven principles that make up the LEADER method.

The evaluation at the RDP level, conducted in French Guiana, posed interesting evaluation questions to capture both the added value of LEADER implementation and its contribution to local development objectives. Evaluators approached the assessment of LEADER added value through specific questions linked to the application of the LEADER method (bottom-up approach, innovation, cooperation and collective approaches). In addition, questions were posed related to the topics listed in the following table.





Topic	Questions posed
Multi-level governance	To what extent does the current organisation and management circuit allow for the efficient implementation of the LEADER programme?
Leverage effect	To what extent has LEADER had a leverage effect on actions in the LAGs?
	Would the projects have been carried out without LEADER support?
LEADER contribution to local development/ effectiveness	What are the achievements and projects supported through the LEADER approach?
	To what extent do LEADER interventions support local development in rural areas?
Relevance to local strategies	Are the actions funded relevant to the strategy and objectives of the LEADER measure?
Effect on youth and community life	Have LEADER's achievements fostered the emergence of local strategies in terms of support for youth and community life and support for creation and access to employment?

In the Finnish evaluation, there was a similar focus, but evaluators went even further to carry out a comparative study, looking at differences in the application of the LEADER method among different LAGs and how these may have affected the achievements and added value of LEADER (What are the differences between regions and LEADER groups in implementing the LEADER principles? Is there a difference in the functionality of the LEADER principles, as well as in the results and added value of LEADER, based on the type of region?). Even more interesting, evaluators tried to assess the relevance of the LEADER method and implementation for future needs, expected to arise from administrative reforms (What potential impact does the regional government reform and the self-government of the counties have on the implementation of LEADER?).



#### Recommendations from the appraisers to improve LEADER evaluations:

1. Decide whether the assessment of LEADER added value will revolve around its core elements - social capital, improved governance and enhanced results - or also explore the application of LEADER principles. Formulate the evaluation questions accordingly.
2. Pay specific attention to the territorial analysis of the supported projects (Which part of the territory are they developed? Do they cover the whole territory or only a part of it? Do they reinforce the territorial identity?).
3. Another analysis that would be interesting to examine in greater depth is the comprehensive nature of the projects (Do they include actions linked to various productive sectors? Do they link various types of agents to the same objectives? Do they generate synergies with other projects and initiatives?).





## The alchemy of methods

The mix of methods for LEADER evaluation depends on its scope as it is shaped by the specific evaluation questions. The assessment of the contribution of LEADER interventions to the objectives requires more quantitative approaches. On the other hand, the assessment of LEADER added value, because of its inherently intangible outcomes and the lack of relevant quantitative data, requires mostly qualitative social research techniques, such as the use of surveys, interviews and focus groups.



As the LEADER evaluation of the French Guiana RDP shows, it is important to combine qualitative techniques with the appropriate use of quantitative information. In this case the evaluators used a smart combination of:

- literature review (strategies defined, documented actions, etc.);
- analysis of monitoring data of the financed LEADER projects (financial balance sheet, extraction of output indicators and result indicators);
- a project typology, according to three dimensions (thematic, individual or collective scope, degree of innovation, partnership dimension); and
- in-depth interviews of approximately forty stakeholders (Managing Authority (CTG) and Rural Network, LAG technical teams, programming committees and beneficiaries).



A key aspect of this approach is that it shows how several questions linked to LEADER can be answered by using a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators, which do not require complex methodologies or many information sources. This allows Managing Authorities and LAGs to work on LEADER evaluations, taking into account the resources available for evaluations.

The case of the Finnish evaluation is a good example of a thorough and rigorous use of qualitative evaluation techniques. This evaluation developed its findings by conducting an extensive analysis of documents such as LEADER groups' strategies, websites and annual reports, documents related to the selection of LEADER groups, quality work manuals and selection criteria for LAGs. Another noteworthy aspect is the implementation of six different questionnaires, addressed to different actors:

- directors of LAGs;
- members of the LAG decision making level;
- local LAG stakeholders; management and development companies of municipalities and cities;
- municipal and city decision-makers; and
- regional authorities.

It is in-depth and precise work that allowed the understanding of perspectives from different stakeholders involved in LEADER management. Furthermore, the number of actors interviewed is particularly high and varied, ensuring representation of the different groups. Finally, the direct observation of the functioning of LEADER through the participation of the evaluation team in the 'LEADER workdays' is considered instrumental in achieving the objectives outlined in the evaluation. The study helped improve the understanding of the elements analysed by describing specific projects (good practices, exemplary cases, etc.), providing case studies, focusing on a specific issue and using quotes extracted from the interview process.







In Austria, the study also used a combination of qualitative techniques to assess social innovation in the implementation of LEADER. It included an extensive documentary analysis, reviewing the local development strategies and all available project descriptions. This was used to develop an algorithm that could be used to identify socially innovative projects with remarkable accuracy.

In addition, the evaluators used an interesting methodology for analysing social innovation, based on the so called '4i process' that consists of:

- **Idea** – the first step in the process is about ideas, products and services that provide new or better solutions to local challenges and problems and improvements to the local life situation.
- **Intervention** – the development and testing of new methods for processing and solving problems. Such new methods may, for example, consist of new combinations of existing practices.
- **Implementation** – the classification of a new intervention as social innovation is based on its successful implementation. It is considered social innovation only if it prevails after a successful test phase, as a new social practice that is generally accepted or accepted by certain target groups.
- **Impact** – the fourth and final phase of the 4i process concerns the level of effect of the emerging social practice. It closes the life cycle of social innovation. As soon as the new, socially innovative practice is recognised and widely applied, thus institutionalised, it loses its innovative character.

This framework served as the basis for conducting interviews and focus groups with stakeholders.

### Recommendations from the appraisers to improve LEADER evaluations:

1. Use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for LEADER evaluations. The appraised examples showed that a careful analysis of the monitoring data combined with well-designed interviews, focus groups or surveys, covering both local and regional or national stakeholders, can produce good quality evaluations within the available level of resources.
2. Clarity is key when it comes to data. To ensure evaluations are built on a solid foundation, explicit definitions must be provided (e.g. distinguishing committed from implemented projects), the time frame covered should be specified and the data sources meticulously detailed. Transparency about data gaps and how they are managed is equally essential.
3. The connection between the results of the analysis and the evaluation findings must be clear. The evaluation report must include a comprehensive view of how the methods have been applied, including clear descriptions of the steps taken in the quantitative analyses, and details on the application of qualitative methods, such as the criteria guiding the selection of case studies, and how survey target groups and participants in interviews and focus groups were defined. If necessary, evaluators may consider sharing scripts used for the interviews and focus groups, and presenting questionnaires employed in the surveys.
4. It is imperative to openly acknowledge the limitations of the methods. This transparency ensures that the findings are appropriately analysed and interpreted. Moreover, sharing the lessons learned from utilising various evaluation techniques enriches the depth of the insights.
5. Always try to opt for methods that can provide an estimation of the CAP support to the effects observed.
6. When using a combination of different methods, a cohesive narrative that draws from the strengths of each approach is necessary to give a complete and clear overview of the findings.

#### Do you have any questions on CAP evaluations or have an interesting study to share?

Please send them to the European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP:

[evaluation@eucapnetwork.eu](mailto:evaluation@eucapnetwork.eu)

