

LEADER-CLLD post 2027: redefining the place of the EU in local development

Authors: Raquel Pastor Carretero, Rural and Territorial Development Expert (AEIDL); Serafín Pazos-Vidal, Senior Expert Rural and Territorial Development (AEIDL)

The **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034** proposal presented in July 2025 introduces a reconfiguration of financial instruments by establishing a **unified framework through the new “Single Fund”**: the European Fund for Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, Agriculture and Rural, Fisheries and Maritime, Prosperity and Security.

The proposed single fund stands as a new financial architecture that groups together, and **simplifies the different lines of intervention**—independent in previous programming periods—and whose functions will be articulated through the new [National and Regional Partnership Plans \(NRPP\)](#).

For rural development, the new framework goes further than in 2021–2027. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) – which has traditionally complemented CAP farm subsidies with broader rural development measures, including LEADER, which must receive at least 5% of EAFRD funding – has already been integrated into the CAP Strategic Plans, replacing the former regional Rural Development Programmes.

From 2028–2034, this integration deepens within the National Regional Partnership Programmes (NRPPs), where **the EAFRD will formally cease to exist as a separate fund**. This shift changes the programming and governance of a fund that has long had a dual role: supporting agriculture while promoting rural economic diversification, services, and infrastructure. This casts doubt on [whether the rural development dimension will receive the same support under the new NRPPs](#), because these will operate **under shared management with the European Commission and align with strategic priorities in cohesion, climate and the digital transition, agriculture, fisheries, and security**. Their default governance model will be more centralised than that of the CAP Strategic Plans and the post COVID National Recovery and Resilience Plans, which form the basis for the new NRPPs post 2027.

This approach has raised [concerns](#) across several sectors and stakeholders, including the European Parliament, which has stressed that **the new financial architecture must keep cohesion as a core priority**. While the Commission emphasises complementarities between the [CAP and Cohesion Policy](#), **worries remain that merging these instruments may reduce political and budgetary visibility and ultimately weaken support for less developed regions**. At present, rural development activities beyond farming account for €70.2bn: [€45.6bn](#) funded by Regional Policy and [€24.6 billion](#) in CAP (8% of overall CAP). On paper, the NRPPs could therefore help close long standing gaps, overlaps and inconsistencies across policies and departmental silos.

A key question is whether there should remain any practical distinction between Community Led Local Development (CLLD)—which grew out of the LEADER approach and has been the foundational grounds of [AEIDL’s work for more than 35 years](#)—and the original LEADER model. **CLLD was designed to apply the LEADER method** (Local Action Groups, EU funding, bottom-up local development strategies) **across multiple funds**, notably the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), and the Maritime and Fisheries Fund. The new architecture raises the issue of whether these approaches will be streamlined or risk losing their identity within the NRPP framework.



Source: AEIDL.

Table 1. Rural Development features. EAFRD and Cohesion Policy

	EAFRD	Cohesion Policy
Main objective	Reinforcement of agriculture and agricultural zones through sustainable investments. Concentrates on the rural fabric, supporting the agrarian base and rural diversification.	Impulse of social, economic, and territorial cohesion throughout the EU.
Focus	Mainly agriculture, forestry, and rural development.	Cross-cutting: economy, employment, environment, innovation, tourism, infrastructure.
Type of investments (examples)	Productive: Investments directly linked to agricultural activity on farms. E.g., renewable energy on farms, modernisation of machinery, water efficiency infrastructure... Non-productive: Ecosystem restoration, landscape conservation, biodiversity, or promotion of Operational Groups.	Productive: Investments directly linked to agricultural activity on farms. E.g., renewable energy on farms, modernisation of machinery, water efficiency infrastructure... Non-productive: Ecosystem restoration, landscape conservation, biodiversity, or promotion of Operational Groups.
Territory covered	Mainly rural and remote areas	All areas of the EU, including urban, rural and peri-urban
Main beneficiaries	Farmers, rural communities, legal entities, Local Action Groups (LAGs).	Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), local authorities, community initiatives, or mixed sectors.
Rural development orientation	Strong weight on agriculture and the territorial development of rural areas.	Supports territorial cohesion but with a broader view of the territory and sectoral diversification.
Synergies	Collaboration with other policies linked to the rural sphere acting in the agricultural sector.	Cohesion policy complements the EAFRD and diversifies the rural economy and environmental protection.

Source: Commission (2025) Staff Working Document – Impact Assessment report. Own elaboration.

In response to the growing [scepticism](#), the European Commission [wrote](#) in November 2025 and [January](#) 2026 to the co-legislators ([Council](#) of the EU and European Parliament) suggesting [changes](#) to its original proposal, with additional [guarantees](#) for LEADER and crucially an earmarked **10% for rural objective** in the NRPPs. This ring-fencing is separate and additional to the already guaranteed funding of CAP farm payments, the Common Fisheries Policy, and the Social Climate Fund. The coming months will determine if this percentage is comparable to the weight the EAFRD held in previous periods, amounting to around [25% of CAP expenditure and 10% of the overall MFF](#).

All these proposals affect not only the budgetary distribution in the new framework but also the established governance mechanisms. As pointed out [in the AEIDL Policy Brief, Multi-level governance at the breaking point, in November 2025](#), **the shift of decision-making power towards the Member States challenges established multilevel governance and raises important questions about the role that regions and local communities will play in the new system.** Initiatives traditionally characterised by strong decentralisation—such as LEADER—risk losing influence unless safeguards are strengthened to secure their participation in the local dimension.

In this context, it is essential to reflect on the implications of the new architecture and address key strategic questions:

- **What role will regional and local actors have in designing, implementing and monitoring interventions?**
- **How will this new model affect rural development and the LEADER approach?**

LEADER in the next Multiannual Financial Framework post-2028

LEADER (*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*), launched in 1991, was conceived not only as an institutional innovation but as a [significant shift](#) in European governance. It introduced a **bottom-up approach grounded in public–private cooperation**. Over the past three decades, LEADER has evolved from an experimental pilot initiative into a mainstream CAP instrument, subject to the same rules and procedures as other interventions.

This [evolution](#) has produced a substantial **body of experience**: lessons learned, criticisms, recommendations for improvement, and well-established practices. Together, these form a unique reservoir of institutional capital within the European Union. Local Action Groups (LAGs) have been central to this process, promoting community participation in the design of interventions and ensuring that decisions reflect local needs, opportunities, and territorial realities.

LEADER	2028-34 (Proposal)
Budget	No min allocation but mandatory support ' <i>at least in rural areas with disadvantages defined by the MS in the NRP Plans</i> ' (Article 18, COM (2025)560).
Beneficiaries	More focus on farmers and non-implementing actors in the NRPPs under CAP regulation (change in direct beneficiaries' definition).
Activities	Removal of core LAG functions: ability to launch calls, select projects, and set support levels.
Simplification - Simplified Cost Options	SCOs Mandatory by default for a wide range of operations below specific thresholds (Article 35(1) interventions, unless state aid), e.g. mandatory use of SCOs for the costs of operation of LEADER LAGs (Article 77(a) COM (2025)565).
Simplification - Finance not Linked to Costs	Explicitly established as a primary option for public support not exceeding 400.000€ (Article 78 of COM (2025)565). Focus on results/outputs.

Source: own elaboration.

Despite numerous [evaluations confirming the added value of LEADER](#), it is often overlooked that LAGs have enabled a unique, **first hand experience of local democracy**—something not replicated in any other CAP or Cohesion Policy instrument. Nevertheless, in the MFF 2028–2034 proposal, and **despite clear coherence between LEADER's original objectives and those of the new Fund, no specific budgetary ring fencing is foreseen**, unlike in previous programming periods.

This omission creates uncertainty about the continuity and influence of the LEADER approach. Without a protected budget, LAGs risk a significant weakening of their role, **shifting from agents of territorial change to mere service providers**, with diminished capacity to deliver multi sectoral strategies.

"This raises a central question: why not draw on the well-established LEADER structures and experience to advance the objectives of the new framework—including the protection and reinforcement of democracy?"

Several [organisations](#) have already advocated for a guaranteed LEADER budget, including through proposed [amendments](#) to the new MFF regulations. However, this AEIDL analysis argues for going further: **not only securing dedicated funding, but also safeguarding LEADER's core features**, which make it a distinctive and valuable instrument within the EU. Preserving these elements is essential to ensuring coherence between new European ambitions and local aspirations.

The methodological DNA of LEADER: What makes Local Action Groups different in 2025?

While the LEADER approach only functions as a fully integrated governance model when all [seven principles](#) operate together, **a strategic review of each principle allows us to understand how they have evolved**—and what still remains. Given the uncertainty surrounding the post-2028 context, identifying the elements that remain

unique to LEADER is essential to building a strong case for its continued added value.

Within this framework, LAGs are far more than administrative managers. In most Member States they are the **only governance structures explicitly designed to operate at the local level with a mandate for cross sectoral integration**. Their ability to combine community participation, technical expertise and strategic vision gives them an institutional uniqueness that neither public administrations nor other organisations can replicate.

As shown in Table 2, **LAGs no longer hold exclusive ownership** of the principles on which they were originally founded. What was a disruptive institutional innovation in 1991—arguably a revolution in public policy design—has since **become part of mainstream territorial development practice**. This widespread adoption requires a recalibration of the arguments used to defend LEADER, particularly in relation to **three elements**:

First, the normalisation of the bottom-up approach. Although LAGs pioneered techniques of active participation, the bottom-up method is no longer their sole distinctive asset. With the emergence of open government and New Public Governance, many local and regional authorities, as well as territorial actors, now deploy stable mechanisms for public feedback and engagement.

Second, the diversification of innovation. The search for new rural development solutions is now driven by a wide range of actors. Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) since 2014–2020, Digital Innovation Hubs, and ERDF or ESF+ funded incubators all work with models of social and territorial innovation that closely resemble LEADER principles.

Third, the rise of the holistic standard. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have pushed administrations to move beyond sectoral silos and adopt integrated approaches to planning and implementation. What was once a distinctive methodological feature of LAGs is now a widely accepted technical norm.

Table 2. LEADER principles compared and exclusive status of LAGs in 2025

LEADER principles	Description	Exclusive/ Not exclusive in 2025
Bottom-up approach	The local population participates directly in defining the priorities of the Local Development Participatory Strategy (LDPS).	Mainstreamed. The LAGs were pioneers but have served as examples to define open government mechanisms and participatory budgets.
Integral and multisectoral	Promotion of new solutions (products, processes, organization, social innovation...) adapted to the territory.	Mainstreamed. The multisectoral approach has extended to the majority of Agendas (including urban ones) and strategic plans.
Innovation	Endogenous development based on a defined territory, with a shared identity and its own projects.	Mainstreamed. It has become a transversal element, although LEADER also links it to social capital.
Territorial strategies	The Groups integrate public and private actors in decision-making and fund management.	Partially exclusive. Other programs work with functional territories, but LEADER is a combination of identity, autonomy, and binding LDSP.
Public-private partnership	LAGs integrate public and private actors in decision-making and fund management	Exclusive to LEADER. No other entity of these characteristics possesses delegated decision-making capacity over European funds in the territory.
Cooperation	Joint projects between territories for shared objectives at regional, national, and European levels.	Exclusive to LEADER. The Groups cooperate among equals in a formalized network with specific funding regulated in different spheres.
Networking	Exchange of experiences and learning through rural, national, and European networks.	Exclusive to LEADER, as it counts on a consolidated infrastructure of more than 3,000 groups in the EU, unique in its scope and capillarity.

Source: own elaboration.

While this mainstreaming can be seen as a cultural victory for LEADER, it also risks diluting its identity. The strategic response is therefore not to reclaim ownership of the methodology, but to emphasise the unique value of its **delivery method**. LAGs are the only instruments established as public-private partnerships with delegated decision-making authority for project selection and the allocation of EU funds. This endows them with a unique capacity to adapt resources to local opportunities identified in their strategies, ensuring a precise fit between funding and territorial needs.

Looking ahead, efforts should focus on **safeguarding the exclusive features that make LEADER an irreplaceable instrument**. Protecting these competencies is essential to ensuring that LAGs remain agents of territorial transformation rather than being reduced to administrative managers. Achieving this will require targeted changes that recognise and reinforce their unique role within the EU policy architecture.

Five avenues to relaunch LEADER

After more than three decades of implementation, **LEADER has moved from an experimental initiative to a well-established instrument**, subject to [extensive evaluations](#) and audits. Yet despite this maturity, the methodology now faces critical scrutiny. Its future relevance is uncertain: **it risks losing its innovative edge** and becoming, at best, a procedural extension of existing administrative systems. The new MFF therefore opens a strategic window to address this uncertainty.

Meeting this challenge requires **simultaneous action on two fronts**:

- **Externally**, at the institutional level, political commitment is needed from European, national and regional authorities to move from a model focused on fiscal control to one based on mutual trust. This demands more than presenting LAGs as pre existing tools for territorial cohesion; it requires the creation of continuous communication channels and simplified reporting systems.
- **Internally**, within the LAGs themselves, organisational change is key. Groups must assess whether their added value lies merely in passive management, or whether they are willing to embrace the risk and responsibility of becoming territorial leaders in the post-2028 landscape.

The current context calls not just for defending LEADER, but for **reactivating its original disruptive ambition**. This renewal should be structured around **five axes of action**:

1. Driving systemic transformation.

A clear commitment is needed to reshape structural conditions while preserving LEADER's core competencies in cooperation and collaboration. LAGs must be given the space and resources to act as architects of community structures and interactions. Funding should prioritise stable, interdependent networks capable of surviving beyond public support, rather than short term, ad hoc collaborations.

2. Grounding of territorial competitive advantages.

Innovation must be rooted in each territory's specific strengths. Cooperation projects—whether local, regional or European—should serve as vehicles for knowledge transfer and the validation of successful models, not as ends in themselves. Strengthening internal and external networks will help identify niche specialisations that might otherwise remain hidden.

3. Concentrating resources strategically.

To counter the fragmentation of resources into disconnected microgrants, funds should be channelled through supra municipal flagship projects. These “umbrella initiatives,” focused on two or three priority themes, would reinforce territorial identity, create economies of scale, and guide animation efforts toward objectives aligned with broader EU ambitions, including the resilience and prosperity goals of the [Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas](#). This approach would also simplify access for small beneficiaries.

4. Consolidating social capital and redefining the LAG's role.

This represents the final stage of territorial maturity, where LAGs must resolve whether they serve as administrative counters or as transformative agents. Following the [2022 recommendations](#) of the European Court of Auditors, Groups should shift toward a catalytic role—acting as connectors of diverse interests, facilitators removing barriers for private and civil initiatives, mobilisers capable of attracting additional resources, and drivers of innovation willing to take risks through pilot projects.

5. Building institutional trust through accountability.

Trust cannot be demanded; it must be earned. LAGs should move from mere publicity of aid to a more robust accountability strategy. This means establishing ongoing technical dialogue with Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies, relying on transparency and demonstrated competence rather than purely accounting based compliance. Improved communication—supported by impact assessments and accessible reporting—will help demonstrate not only how funds are spent, but what they achieve.

While this roadmap provides a strategic framework, its implementation is not without challenges. LEADER operates across a highly heterogeneous landscape, marked by diverse territorial realities. Differences in institutional maturity among LAGs across Europe, and variability in their relationships with Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies, add further complexity. The Spanish case illustrates this vividly: its decentralised system has led to the coexistence of 17 distinct regional management models—each with its own regulations, legal instruments and administrative ecosystem—creating a particularly [intricate operating environment](#).

Faced with this scenario, a central question emerges: **is it feasible to pursue this strategic transformation while keeping it adaptable to territorial specificities and the regulatory constraints of each regional context?**

The starting point must be to **secure the minimum budgetary threshold** guaranteed in previous programming periods. Only once this financial floor is assured can attention shift to complementary funding sources. Crucially, resources must be treated as a structural requirement to ensure the long-term viability of LEADER. A multi fund approach, as applied in Poland or highlighted as a best practice in the Czech Republic, offers one possible avenue. However, in this analysis, the complexity of a multi-fund model is not addressed in the terms known so far, and, given the new proposed changes for the 2028–2034 period, adopting a multi-fund model is not considered a goal in itself.

Instead, the aim is to encourage LAGs to **diversify their financing base beyond traditional streams**. Lessons from 2014–2022 in Portugal and Sweden show that, although strategically advantageous, the administrative burden has driven a return to mono fund models. This demonstrates that political will alone is insufficient: structural improvements in human resources—both in number and technical competence—are required within LAGs and Managing Authorities alike.

In a future context potentially marked by fund consolidation, the challenge will be not only staffing levels but also **raising technical capacity** to ensure sound financial management and accountability. Broadening the financial outlook and attracting competitive direct management funds—such as Horizon Europe or LIFE—also generates critical intangible assets, including expanded knowledge, stronger connections to excellence networks, and enhanced access to innovation.

A second priority is for LAGs to **consolidate their catalytic role**, not only through fund integration but through strengthened collaboration across sectors. This requires building synergies with civil society organisations, philanthropy, universities and research centres. Adopting a pragmatic approach—recognising that LAGs alone cannot resolve structural challenges such as demographic decline, connectivity gaps or climate pressures—allows them to maximise multiplier effects through community animation and strategic alliances. Comparative experience offers compelling examples, such as Finland's [Smart Countryside](#) initiative, where LAGs act as rural laboratories, funding high risk pilots that can later scale up through regional innovation programmes.

To operationalise such strategies without losing territorial reach, **umbrella projects** can serve as an effective tool. By grouping multiple micro initiatives under a single LAG managed administrative file, this mechanism simplifies access to funding and technical assistance for actors with limited administrative capacity. Its effectiveness is demonstrated by initiatives such as Sweden's [Small Projects, Great Leverage](#) (Leader Mitt i Småland) and the Luxembourgish [LAG Miselerland](#), used successfully in 2014–2022 and renewed for 2024–2029. From operating cost justification to grant allocation, this model can enhance project promotion and boost territorial attractiveness.

These efforts must be complemented by instruments that **attract and retain talent in rural areas**, such as the application of [Simplified Cost Options](#) (SCOs)—included in Article 77 of the draft Regulation for 2028–2034. A practical reference is the [Ticket Rural](#) lump sum scheme pioneered in Asturias during 2014–2022, subsequently replicated across Spanish regions and recognised by the EU CAP Network Helpdesk as a best practice contributing to population retention and job creation.

Challenges in multi-level governance and the LEADER monitoring system

The ideas outlined above must be grounded in the work carried out in previous programming periods on LEADER's added value and on how its core elements have evolved across cycles. Crucially, future proposals must assess whether earlier recommendations for improvement were taken into account—and, where they were, document how they were implemented.

Following the above-mentioned 2022 Special Report of the European Court of Auditors, the European Commission conducted an evaluation of LEADER's contribution to “balanced territorial development.” The evaluation concludes that LEADER is best understood as a method for mobilising local resources and capacities—enhancing participation, improving governance and strengthening social capital—rather than as a vehicle for funding large capital investments. This distinction highlights LEADER's contribution in supporting local economies, improving services that enhance quality of life, and addressing social challenges. Despite operating with relatively modest budgets, the initiative has demonstrably increased social capital, empowering communities and reinforcing the local social fabric.

Yet several persistent issues must be addressed in future proposals.

The indicator disconnect: measuring the intangible

A significant gap remains between the political ambition to promote LEADER's added value and the regulatory framework proposed under the 2028–2034 MFF. While the Commission encourages Managing Authorities to integrate this added value into strategic planning, the draft regulation does not reflect the multidimensional character of the method. The new [Performance Framework](#) contains only one intervention field associated with CLLD/LEADER, centred solely on a 40% climate contribution marker.

This reductionist approach ignores LEADER's broader contributions—such as climate mitigation, environmental management and social inclusion. By limiting the intervention logic to a single environmental indicator, the regulation renders the “social return on investment” effectively invisible.

The qualitative paradox in LEADER funding

The Commission's evaluation also notes that LEADER carries higher administrative and running costs (up

to 25% of total funding) compared with top-down measures (typically 5–10%). The Court of Auditors recognises that this difference is justified by the costs of “animation”—a necessary investment in human capital to enable participatory governance. However, the monitoring system penalises this model: its exclusive focus on quantitative economic outputs (e.g. number of projects, jobs created) overlooks the qualitative value of the process. These indicators remain relevant from an evaluation standpoint, as they provide a minimum level of comparability with conventional rural development measures and demonstrate that LEADER generates measurable economic outputs, even if such metrics only partially reflect the programme's intended added value.

As a result, although LEADER reaches 64% of the EU's rural population, the report concludes that its benefits “have not yet been sufficiently demonstrated.” This is not due to an absence of impact but to the **absence of suitable indicators for social capital and democratic participation**.

The trap of gold plating and administrative risk aversion

Finally, concerns are growing about the progressive erosion of flexibility within LEADER. The [CAP Strategic Plans](#) show a strong emphasis on predefined sectoral priorities, significantly reducing the space for territorial experimentation. National authorities' fear of financial corrections has led to a culture of “gold plating”—adding national requirements beyond EU rules. This risk averse approach limits LEADER's capacity to support innovative or experimental activities and forces Local Development Strategies into rigid templates. Such constraints undermine the very function of LAGs as “rural development laboratories.”

Final recommendations and take aways

As outlined in this brief, the transformations in the new MFF affect not only the budgetary architecture but the very capacity of local communities to influence decision-making. The question of their future role is not theoretical—it determines the efficacy of territorial cohesion in the next decade.

In a context of resource contraction, the challenge requires transcending the inertia of the last thirty years. It should require a functional resizing based on three strategic pillars:

Pillar 1: internal transformation. Reinventing the LAGs

- The continuity of LEADER demands a shift in LAGs' self-conception. With other entities now using similar bottom-up methodologies but with lighter structures, LAGs risk obsolescence if they remain mere aid distributors. They should need to decide **if they want to become a transformative development stakeholder working for and with the territory** or fade into an administrative extension.

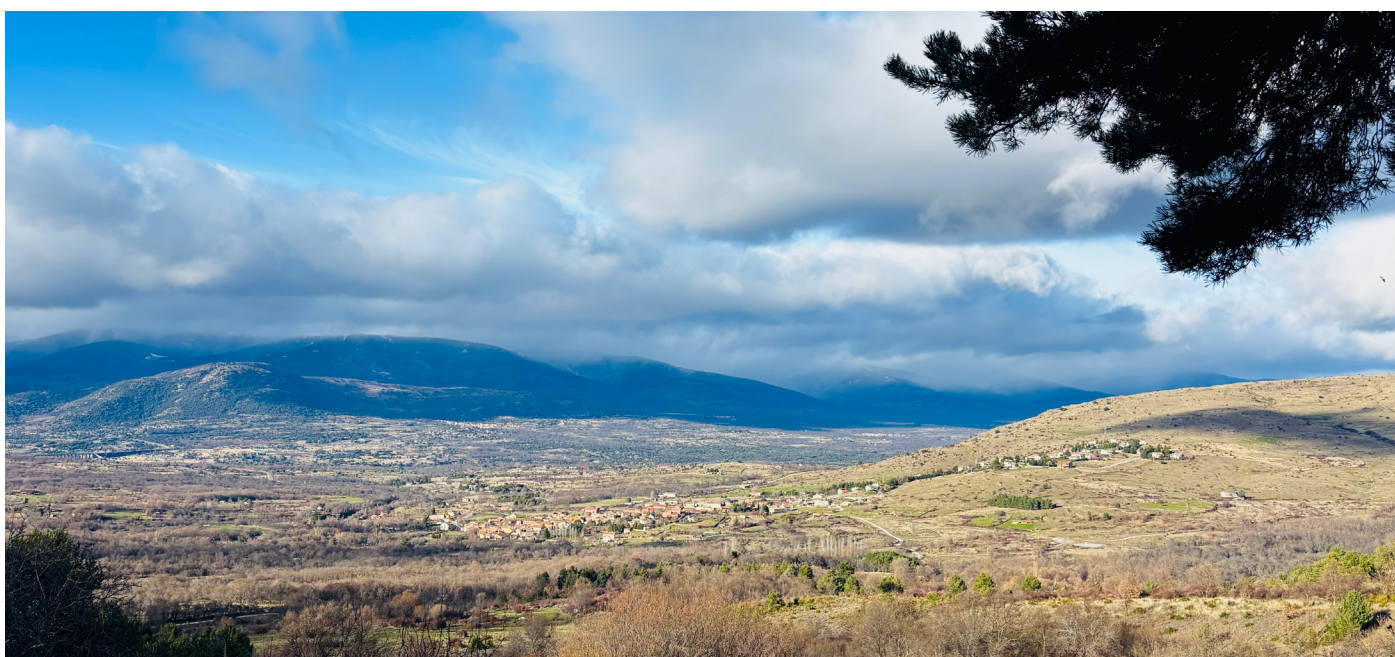
- Internal governance must shift focus from mere administrative compliance to demonstrating results. **LAGs need to professionalise their monitoring systems to capture “intangible” impacts** (social capital, governance), converting technical data into a narrative that justifies their added value to society and Paying Agencies.
- LAGs must evolve from being passive recipients of public funds to becoming architects of community structure. **This requires building stable, interdependent networks capable of operating and cooperating autonomously**, reducing dependency on the fluctuations of programming periods.

Pillar 2: Strategic focus. Concentration of efforts

- To maximize impact, it is suggested that LAGs must abandon the catch-all approach. **Resources would ideally be concentrated on clear priorities aligned with the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas:** making areas stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous.
- To avoid dispersion, formula of **“Umbrella projects” could be promoted from Managing Authorities and LAGs to include them in their LDSP** to group small initiatives under priority themes. As demonstrated by the Swedish *“Small projects, great leverage”* model and Luxembourg’s *GAL Miselerland*, this tool would simplify management for beneficiaries and amplifies territorial dynamism.
- To reclaim their role as rural laboratories, it is recommended that LAGs work towards overcome risk aversion. This would imply an internal organizational shift—both in LAGs and Managing Authorities—to identify, nurture, and finance experimental pilots. **The focus should be on prioritising learning and innovation transfer, rather than solely on safe, low-impact investments.**

Pillar 3: Systemic defence and safeguarding the LEADER’s DNA

- The singularity of LEADER lies in competencies that are difficult to replicate through standard administration: territorial animation, multi-level governance, and the creation of social capital. To prevent these functions from being diluted by bureaucracy, **it would be advisable for them to be explicitly recognised and protected in the new regulations.**
- Defending the model would likely require better evidence, not just better narratives. **It is suggested that the monitoring framework evolves to capture metrics on social capital, trust, and community engagement.** The sector would benefit from demonstrating that higher running costs are not administrative inefficiencies, but structural investments in democratic resilience. Without measuring these intangibles, LEADER might remain vulnerable to the “high administrative cost” critique.
- Communication could ideally shift from reporting activities to political advocacy. **LEADER networks are encouraged to reinforce their role** not just as learning platforms, but as spaces for dialogue and negotiation with National and European administrations in order to take part in the next definition of the NRPP.



Source: AEIDL.

Key LEADER–CLLD Improvements Still Needed in the MFF Regulations 2028–2034

Definitions & Territorial Targeting	- Insert clear legal definitions of rural, urban, CLLD, LEADER, and territorial tools by directly referencing the EUwide TERCET/DEGURBA Regulation (EU) 2017/2391, to ensure consistent territorial tracking and prevent Member State relabelling. - Require the NUTS 3 level as the minimum unit for programming allocations, territorial coding, performance reporting and monitoring of spending.
Financial Safeguards for LEADER	- Introduce a “comply or explain” obligation when a Member State allocates below the 2021–2027 equivalent of 5% EAFRD for LEADER. Member States should provide a justification, and the Commission should be empowered to request an increase. - Maintain current CAP cofinancing rates for LEADER within the NRPP structure: 65% EU cofinancing for operations, up to 100% for animation, running costs and cooperation. This avoids a de facto increase in national co financing caused by the new generic NRPP co financing rules.
Governance, Simplification & LAG Autonomy	- Make LEADER support mandatory in every Member State, ensuring continuity with previous programming periods and safeguarding rural innovation ecosystems. - Guarantee full territorial coverage of Local Action Groups (LAGs) across rural areas unless robustly justified. - Ensure that multifund CLLD strategies apply the full LEADER simplification package across all funds, including: - simplified cost options (SCOs), - a single rulebook, - unified procedures for project selection and reporting. This prevents fragmentation that would undermine CLLD integrated nature. - Enshrine in the Regulations that LAGs retain exclusive competence over core CLLD functions: - preparation of the Local Development Strategy (LDS), - community animation and capacitybuilding, - calls for proposals, - appraisal and selection of operations, - local cooperation actions, - monitoring, evaluation and communication. These tasks are essential to preserve the bottom up identity of CLLD. - Require that Managing Authorities provide tools, training and administrative support to LAGs—without encroaching on LAGs’ decisionmaking autonomy.

Source: own elaboration.

Ultimately, the post-2028 framework presents a significant choice: the potential for LEADER to gradually fade as a legacy instrument, or the opportunity to reactivate it as a primary engine for the rural development in Europe. However, this choice would not rest solely on the European Commission to ensure its continuity and recognise the method’s potential; **it would likely require**

a collaborative effort from all stakeholders involved in the methodology. This ranges from LAGs—embracing a new, more innovative operational approach—to Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies, strengthening the relationships and trust networks necessary to capture the added value of the methodology and the tangible impact of over 30 years of work.

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