



**RSA Annual Conference 2019 - Policy Thursday
Special Session organised by LDnet
Background Paper**

Strengthening the impact of research on EU local development policies

Local development: an opportunity to bridge the gap between research and practice

Local development research requires cross-cutting, multi-disciplinary approaches bringing together regional economics, geography, sociology, political sciences and many other disciplines. It is increasingly recognised that the results of local development and the value added of this approach are not easily analysed with the traditional quantitative methods. This could perhaps explain why local development as a research discipline remains under-developed, or even neglected.

These are some of the conclusions from the last year's Special Session organised by LDnet at the RSA Annual Conference in Lugano¹ "What the Cohesion Policy needs (but doesn't get) from Research: The Case of Local Development".

In 2019, as the preparations for the next round of cohesion policy funding move forward, it becomes apparent that local development will continue to play an important role in EU policies, and it is expected to address some of the new challenges that Europe is facing. Thus, the need to bridge the gap between research and practice in local development, to help policy makers and practitioners learn what is happening – or can happen – on the ground, becomes even more acute. Two areas of particular importance are (a) **governance and participatory democracy**, and (b) **community resilience and innovation** (including social as well as technological/communication innovation).

In the section below we explain the challenges of local development in the next period and then propose some questions where a dialogue between policy makers and the research community can be particularly relevant.

Challenges of local development post-2020

One of the five key objectives of the European cohesion policy post-2020 is "a **Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives**"². The wording of this objective implies that (a) the **gap** between policy-makers and the average EU citizen is perceived to be **growing**, and that (b) it is therefore important to foster initiatives at the local level, and to **empower** the local communities in all kinds of areas, urban, rural and coastal. Can a place-based approach play

¹ See: <https://ldnet.eu/improving-the-interaction-between-research-policy-and-practice-in-local-development/>

² See draft Common Provisions Regulations, Art. 4.

a role in counteracting the recent rise of populism, disillusionment with mainstream policies, Brexit...³ – is this a realistic expectation?

Local development is systematically included in the EU policies at least since 1991⁴, i.e. the beginning of the **LEADER approach**⁵ as a Community Initiative. Starting as an experimental method applied in ca. 200 rural areas, it has grown to over 3000 local multi-sectoral partnerships across the EU, covering over 54% of rural populations and around 300 urban areas. It has also been successfully transferred to fisheries areas, where EMFF funding has helped to integrate the fisheries sector better within coastal communities. This approach is known since the 2014-2020 period as **Community-Led Local Development** (CLLD) and it can be funded from a variety of European funding sources.

Thus, the implementation of LEADER/CLLD in the EU has a history of nearly 30 years. Can we say that it has justified the expectation expressed in the draft EU legislation post-2020? In other words, can it really bring Europe closer to citizens?

There are **stories and case studies** from all over Europe that would seem to confirm that this bottom-up, integrated and partnership-based way of working indeed encourages the local people to take initiative, develop a sense of ownership, and enables them to finance what they (and not decision-makers in the capitals) think is important for their area. However, one cannot give a fully evidence-based answer to this question, because very little **systematic research** seems to have been carried out of this topic.

Starting from 2021 the European Commission is also proposing to Member States a **new instrument** applicable at the local level which – as LEADER – is going to be available first in rural areas. This new concept is called “**Smart Villages**”, and the EU Action for Smart Villages describes it as “rural areas and communities which build on their existing strengths and assets as well as on developing new opportunities. In Smart Villages traditional and new networks and services are enhanced by means of digital, telecommunication technologies, innovations and the better use of knowledge, for the benefit of inhabitants and businesses”⁶.

Smart Villages should not be seen as a rural version of “smart cities”, or reduced only to digital solutions (although overcoming the digital and communications divide can be among the challenges that the local community may choose to address). On the other hand, this concept draws largely on the various initiatives for social innovation⁷.

LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages therefore have many points **in common**: they can both be used to help the community respond to local challenges by unlocking its potential in a creative and collaborative way. There are also certain important **differences**: Smart Villages focus mainly at a very local (village) level and on one specific topic or challenge, while CLLD usually covers around 10.000 – 150.000 inhabitants and attempts to address a broader range of issues through an integrated, long-term strategy. Also, Smart Villages explicitly look for solutions that are new, out-of-the-box, while in CLLD innovation is more something that is expected to (and often does) emerge as a result of the method, and not its main focus. But

³ See two inspiring papers recently published on this theme: one by Yves Champetier “[Europe: a major player in the development of territories](#)”, the other by Pietro L. Verga: “[Overcoming EU Discontent in ‘Places That Don’t Matter’ through the Community-Led Local Development](#)”.

⁴ Some authors claim that it started with the action learning programme LEDA (Local Employment Development Action) in 1986.

⁵ For more information see for example: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld_en

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/rural-development-2014-2020/looking-ahead/rur-dev-small-villages_en.pdf

⁷ See for example: <https://ldnet.eu/social-innovation-clld-and-the-future-of-rural-development/>.

perhaps the most important difference is the fact that LEADER/CLLD has become “institutionalised” in EU policies, while smart villages are still largely informal initiatives without a clear format or administrative framework.

This “institutionalisation” of LEADER/CLLD has both positive and negative aspects: **positive**, because there is a wealth of experience, a clear definition of the methodology, and a dedicated source of funding; **negative**, because in many places the approach has become dominated by bureaucracy, restricted by national and regional priorities and implementation rules, and – after nearly 30 years – some of the initial enthusiasm of this experimental approach has in many places been lost⁸.

It is also becoming increasingly difficult to talk about one “LEADER/CLLD approach”, as the differences in what the local partnerships can and cannot do, or the extent to what the funding is accessible for local initiatives, vary greatly between Member States. LEADER/CLLD, no longer a Community Initiative implemented in a similar way across the EU as in the 1990s, is strongly influenced by the national and regional rules and procedures (delivery systems). A similar situation is observed also with CLLD under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. This is likely to happen with Smart Villages, where each Member State will have to design an appropriate delivery framework that would translate the broad concept into practical action on the ground.

There is, however, a lot of scope for these two approaches to support and complement each other in the next EU funding period. Indeed, many Smart Village initiatives already under way have been started or supported by LEADER/CLLD. There is also significant scope for transfer of experience and joint learning. In this, the support of researchers to **draw lessons** from LEADER/CLLD and see how they can be applied to the smart villages concept would be of key importance.

Possible questions policy makers and researchers might want to discuss

The discussion between practitioners, researchers and policy makers at the “Policy Thursday” during the RSA Annual Conference in Santiago de Compostela could therefore focus on the following questions:

- ✓ how to provide **strong evidence on the results** of LEADER/CLLD, especially those less tangible ones, e.g. bringing Europe closer to citizens or strengthening social capital? How to measure its contribution to innovation or local governance?
- ✓ how to assess the **impact of national delivery systems** on the results of LEADER/CLLD?
- ✓ how to **harvest the lessons** from LEADER/CLLD in a way that could help in the implementation of Smart Villages across the EU, and to ensure **transfer of experience** between the two types of instruments?
- ✓ how to ensure a **systematic exchange** between experts, researchers and practitioners of local development, to facilitate an improved design and implementation of EU policies? Would there be scope for creating a “community of experts”?

⁸ This is perhaps why some of the strongest support for this approach comes from new EU Member States, where its implementation started much later, in mid-2000s.