

TRANSNATIONAL
LEADER COOPERATION PROJECT
OUR COMMON FUTURE

WP5: Analysis of common European themes

Based on the Questionnaire for LAGs - Cooperation Project
“LEADER - Our Common Future”, October 2024



The European
Agricultural Fund for
Rural Development:
Europe investing in
rural areas



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1 INTRODUCTION

Background

The overall objective of the **Transnational LEADER Cooperation Project Our Common Future** can be understood as the (re)definition of the role of the LEADER approach and Local Action Groups (LAGs) in their relationship with the complex challenges of rural territories. The transfer of experiences at the European level regarding the added value of the LEADER approach is expected to contribute to the positioning and performance of LAGs as public-private partnerships with special competencies in the management of transformative processes towards sustainable and regenerative development.

Regarding Work Package (WP) 5, the identification of Common European Themes holds significant potential to demonstrate and fully realize the added value of the LEADER approach. By aligning local development strategies with shared priorities across Europe, it becomes possible to amplify the impact of LEADER initiatives, showcasing how local action can effectively contribute to broader European goals.

Moreover, this commonality allows for the exchange of best practices, fosters transnational collaboration, and highlights the unique strengths of the LEADER approach in addressing rural development challenges in a cohesive and coordinated manner. Ultimately, it reinforces the role of the LEADER approach in promoting regenerative, sustainable, inclusive, and innovative rural development.

Objective

This report aims to explore and define the Common European Themes for the LEADER approach, drawing on insights gathered from LAGs across Europe. The findings and analysis presented in this report are largely informed by the results of a comprehensive online questionnaire, which consisted of 81 questions and received responses from 444 LAGs. This provides a rich and relevant source of data, that reflects their on-the-ground experiences in rural development.

This report has a double purpose: to identify the themes that reflects both the specific needs of rural areas and the overarching goals of the European

Union (EU), particularly those outlined in the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA); and to offer strategic recommendations on how these themes can be integrated into the LEADER approach and in Local Action Groups intervention portfolio to enhance the contribution for sustainable and regenerative development of rural areas.

The insights derived from the questionnaire contribute for understanding the collective priorities of LAGs and to guide future policy discussions and decision-making processes.

Structure of the report

The report is divided into the following key chapters:

- **Introduction.** This section outlines the background, objectives, and methodology of the report.
- **Overview of the last programming period (2014-2020).** This chapter analyses the priorities, activities, and challenges faced by LAGs during the last programming period. It includes an assessment of the involvement of LAG members and rural communities in the development processes and examines how effectively LDS address key rural development challenges.
- **Empowering rural transformation: LEADER approach as a catalyst for implementing the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.** This section explores the potential alignment of the LEADER approach and future LDS with broader European Union priorities, particularly the LTVRA. It highlights common themes that could shape future rural development policies, as well as how LAGs can position themselves as key players in implementing the LTVRA, emphasizing roles.
- **Key findings.** The final chapter synthesizes the key findings from the report, highlighting the critical role of LAGs in driving rural development. It reflects on the alignment between local development strategies and broader EU goals, offering recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of the LEADER approach and local development strategies in future programming periods.

2 OVERVIEW OF THE LAST PROGRAMMING PERIOD (2014-2020)

This part of the Report provides a comprehensive overview of the last programming period, focusing on the key priorities set by LAGs, the involvement of LAG members and the local community in decision-making processes, and the major challenges and opportunities encountered faced in the implementation of their strategies for local development.

2.1 Priorities for rural development in the Local Development Strategies

The questionnaire results provide a vision into how LAGs prioritized various aspects of rural development through their Local Development Strategies (LDS). The distribution of the financial allocations across different areas of intervention, reflects the strategic focus of LAGs and highlights the areas where they are investing the most resources to drive rural development.

It is important to note that this topic (priorities) is heavily influenced by the choices made by each Member State (MS) and the subsequent programmatic and regulatory frameworks established at the national or regional level. For instance, and exemplifying with the case of Agriculture and farming:

- In PT (Mainland), it is mandatory for LDS to include an allocation to agriculture (the results of the questionnaire indicate that, in most cases, this allocation ranges between 30%-40%, with some few LAGs reporting allocations exceeding 50%).
- LAGs from other MS may either allocate no financial resources to agriculture or have allocations up to 50% (e.g., AT, GR, RO, SK, SP).
- In contrast, some MS have a majority of LAGs that allocate no funds to agriculture, with only a few reporting allocations in the 5%-10% range (e.g., DK, FI, DE, LV).
- The respondents from EE and PL indicated that no allocation is made to agriculture.

Similarly, other priorities may be either required or restricted in different MS based on their specific regulations and frameworks.

This regulatory conditioning means that the LDS do not always fully reflect the development priorities identified by the rural territories themselves. Instead, they may be shaped or constrained by external programmatic requirements imposed by the MS (or region), potentially limiting the flexibility of LAGs to address the specific needs and aspirations of their communities.

Table 1. Priorities for rural development based on financial allocation in LDS

Priorities for rural development	No allocation	0-10%	10-30%	>30%
Agriculture and farming	25.9%	25.0%	20.0%	16.2%
Environmental sustainability	9.0%	30.6%	32.0%	14.2%
Infrastructure development	6.5%	18.0%	33.3%	30.2%
Education and skills development	15.1%	37.2%	20.7%	7.9%
Economic diversification and employment	4.3%	12.6%	34.7%	39.0%
Cultural preservation and tourism	3.6%	18.5%	41.7%	26.1%
Social inclusion and wellbeing	13.5%	30.2%	30.0%	12.8%
Rural youth	20.0%	34.9%	21.2%	8.6%

Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The financial allocations within LDS reveal a strategic focus on fostering economic diversification and employment and also cultural preservation and tourism and improving infrastructure. However, the moderate financial support for environmental sustainability social and educational initiatives highlights potential areas for further investment to ensure that rural development is inclusive and addresses the needs of all community members.

Agriculture and farming. Despite being a traditional cornerstone of rural economies, appears to receive relatively modest financial support from LAGs. The fact that more than a quarter of the LAGs (25.9%) allocated no funds to agriculture suggests a support towards economic diversification and that traditionally farming support relies on other (than LEADER) funding sources.

Environmental Sustainability. Received varied financial support, but it can be recognized as a priority, with strong financial allocation from many LAGs (in the 10-30% range by 32.2% of LAGs). This indicates a commitment to integrating sustainability into rural development, however, balanced with other development priorities.

Infrastructure development. Represents a high priority for many LAGs (with 30.2% of LAGs allocating more than 30%) reflecting the ongoing need to improve basic facilities and services in rural areas. It demonstrates the importance of building a physical foundation and basic services to other development efforts, enabling economic growth.

Education and skills development. Although education and skills development are recognized as essential for long-term rural prosperity, the financial allocations are generally low (with 15.1% of LAGs allocating no funds and 37.2% allocating less than 10%). This could mean that the investment made to address gaps in human capital is commonly small, which could limit the potential for innovation and economic diversification in rural areas.

Economic diversification and employment. Received the highest financial support (with 39.0% of LAGs allocating more than 30% of the financial resources), revealing that these are clearly top priorities for LAGs.

This reflects a strong focus on creating new economic opportunities and reducing dependency on

traditional sectors as agriculture, which demonstrate less and less ability to secure attractive jobs, with LAGs actively working to foster entrepreneurship, attract investment, and create jobs, which are critical for the sustainable development of rural areas.

Cultural preservation and tourism. The significant financial allocations (with 41.7% of LAGs allocating 10-30% and 26.1% allocating more than 30%) indicate that cultural preservation and tourism are seen as key drivers of rural development, particularly in regions where rich cultural heritage or tourism potential could be considered as important assets for economic diversification and growth.

The significant investment reflects a strategic approach to leveraging unique local assets to maintain community identity, attract visitors and generate income.

Social inclusion and wellbeing. The balanced financial resources (with 30.0% of LAGs allocating in the range of 10-30%), suggest that social inclusion and wellbeing are recognized as important areas for ensuring that rural development benefits all community members, including vulnerable and minority groups and, thus, targeted initiatives to ensure that social inclusion is adequately supported within local development strategies.

Rural youth. While some LAGs are investing in youth-oriented initiatives, addressing issues like outmigration and youth unemployment, the relatively low overall financial commitment (with 20.0% of LAGs allocating no funds, and 34.9% allocating less than 10%), suggests that rural youth wasn't considered important to rural development.

However, this theme has been a focus in the most recent years, realizing that youth is critical for the long-term vitality of rural communities, and the current financial allocations may need to be reassessed to better address the needs of this group.

2.2 Involvement of LAG members and rural communities

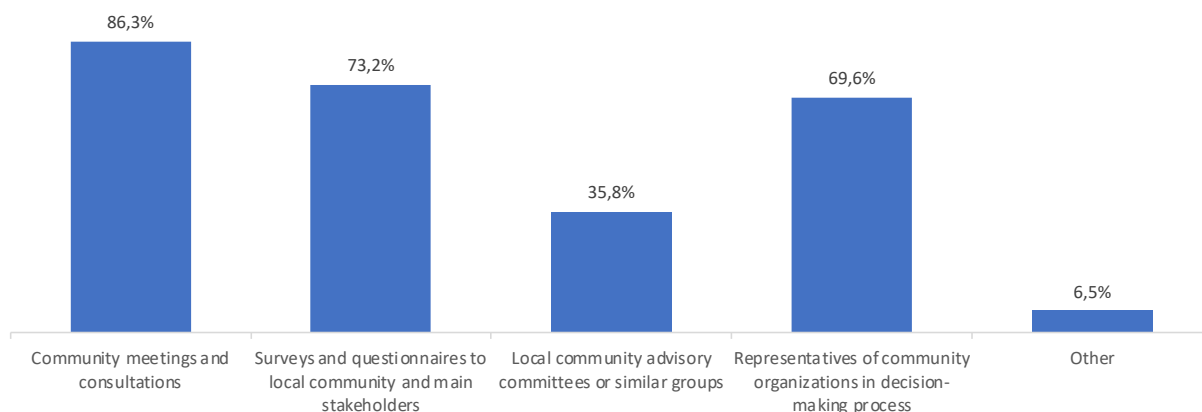
The priorities for rural development were identified by LAGs through inclusive processes that involved local communities. The engagement of the com-

munity is a cornerstone of the LEADER/CLLD approach, ensuring that development strategies are reflective of local needs and aspirations. The results from the questionnaire provide insights into the methods of community involvement, the perceived effectiveness of this engagement, and the transparency of the decision-making process.

Rural communities' involvement in identifying needs and setting priorities

The questionnaire results reveal that a significant majority of LAGs utilize a variety of methods to involve the community in identifying needs and setting development priorities.

Figure 1. Methods used for the involvement of the local communities during LDS design



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The most used method for engaging local residents are community meetings and consultations (86.3%), underscoring the importance of face-to-face interactions in gathering input and fostering a sense of ownership among rural communities.

Surveys and questionnaires, used by 73.2% of LAGs to collect feedback from the local community and key stakeholders, allows for broader participation, including those who might not attend meetings to still have their voices heard.

Additionally, 69.6% of LAGs involve representatives from community-based organizations in decision-making processes, ensuring that the LDS are grounded in experience, with local organizations playing a key role in shaping the direction of rural development.

These methods demonstrate LAGs' commitment to participatory democracy, which is central to the LEADER approach. The reliance on multiple methods for gathering input suggests that LAGs are aware of the need to engage different segments of the rural communities and ensure that a wide range of voices is included in the decision-making process.

Regarding the perceived effectiveness on the overall community engagement and involvement, the majority of LAGs rated it as "Good", which can be interpreted as relatively effective.

This positive assessment suggests that the methods used to involve the community are working well, though there is room for improvement, particularly in reaching those underrepresented groups and ensuring that communities feel their input is valued and taken into consideration.

Transparency and communication in decision-making is highly regarded, with 77% of respondents rating it as "Very transparent and clear". This is an important aspect for rural communities to feel confident that their contributions are heard and considered. This level of transparency likely contributes to higher levels of willingness in participating in future planning processes.

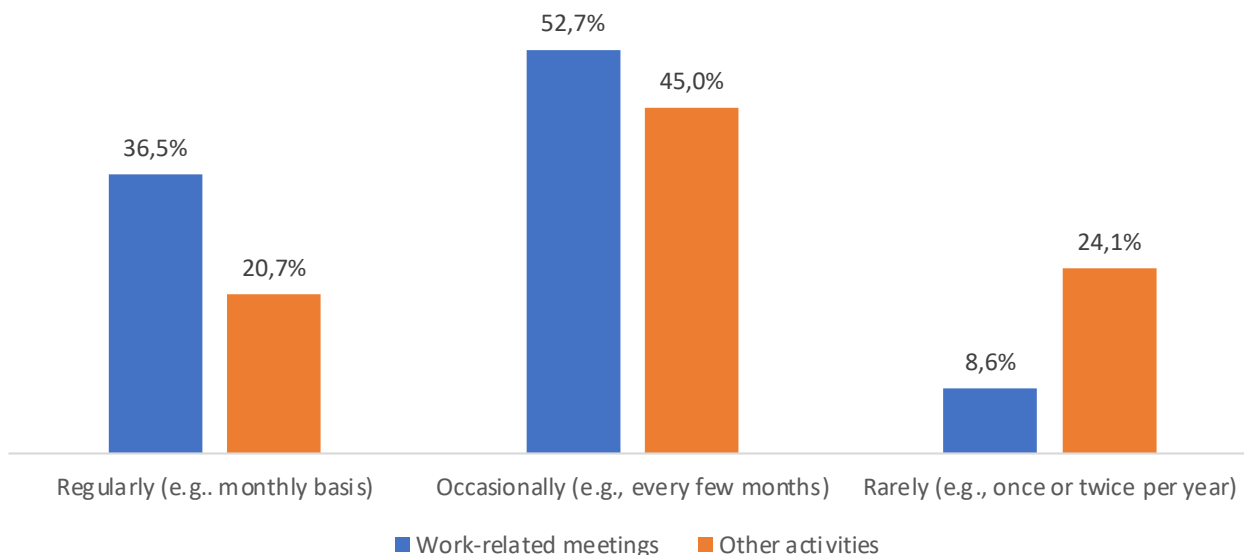
Overall, LAGs consider that they are effectively engaging communities in the LDS design process, maintaining the core values of the LEADER/CLLD approach. Continued focus on inclusivity, transparency, and community involvement will be crucial for sustainable rural development.

Involvement of LAG members

The involvement of LAG members is crucial for the success of the LEADER approach and effective

implementation of LDS. Questionnaire data reveals varying levels of engagement among LAG members in activities like work-related meetings and other activities.

Figure 2. Level of involvement of the members of the LAGs



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

A significant portion of LAGs (36.5%) indicated that their members regularly attend work-related meetings, while a majority (52.7%) give the indication of an occasional participation. This suggests a core group actively involved in daily operations, with others engaging primarily during major decisions or specific issues. Only a small percentage of LAGs (8.6%) mention that their members participate rarely, suggesting that most members are somewhat engaged, though there is room to increase regular participation, especially among less active members.

The Involvement of LAG members in other activities, such as community events, training, providing expertise and guidance or project running, is less frequent. While 20.7% of LAGs indicate that members are regularly involved, a larger portion references an occasional (45.0%) or rare (24.1%) participation.

This suggests that while work-related meetings are prioritized, broader engagement by LAG members in diverse LAG activities could be improved to enhance overall effectiveness.

When it comes to project planning and execution, the participation of LAG members is relatively strong, with 91.9% of respondents indicating some

level of involvement. Notably, 40.1% of respondents indicated an extensive involvement of their members. However, the remaining respondents indicate that their LAG members participate only to some extent, possibly reflecting a division of efforts where certain members take on more active roles while others contribute in specific areas.

Overall, the data highlights a generally positive level of involvement, with strong engagement in project execution but occasional participation in other activities. This suggests opportunities to enhance effectiveness by encouraging more consistent and broader member participation.

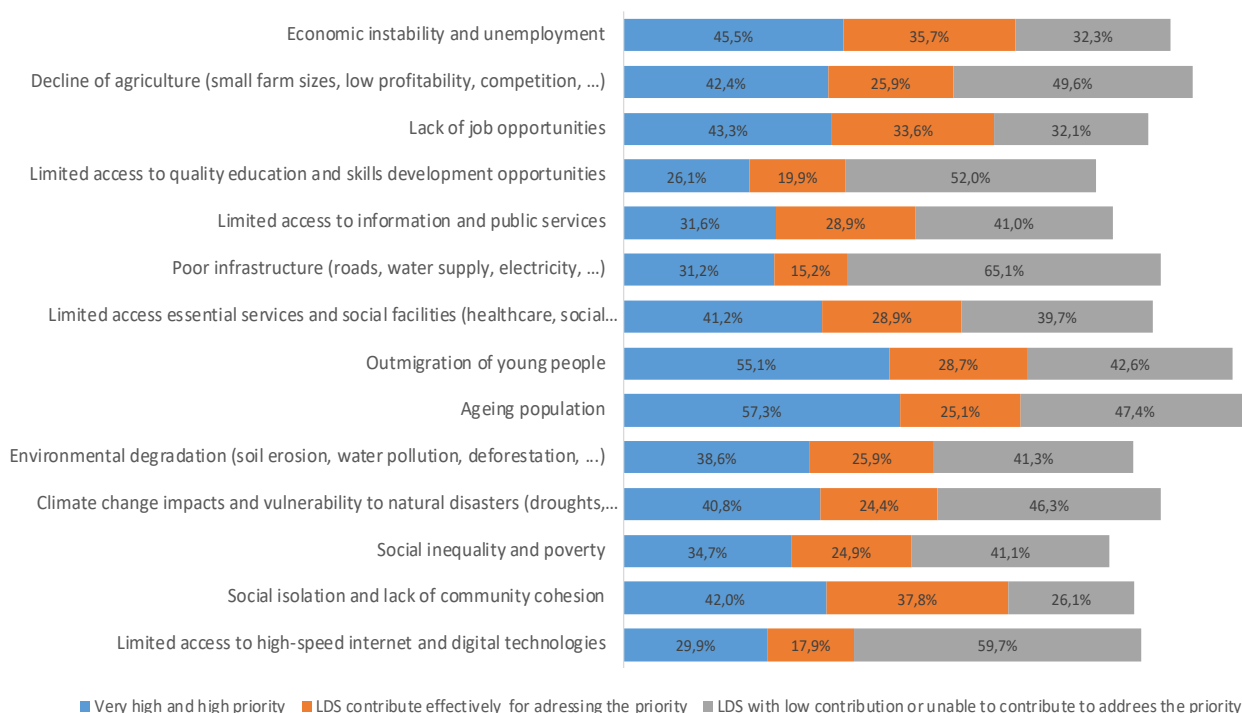
To maximize LAG impact, strategies could be explored to increase regular participation, such as offering more meaningful engagement opportunities, providing additional training, or better leveraging members' skills and interests. A more consistently active membership could strengthen LAGs capacity to address challenges and LDS effective implementation.

2.3 Priorities for rural development and LDSs capability to address them

The questionnaire results offer an overview of the challenges and priorities for rural development as identified by LAGs, along with their perceptions on the extent to which the LDS are likely to contribute to address them.

The blue bars in the graph represent the percentage of LAGs ranking as very high and high the given priorities. The orange bars represent the percentage of LAGs that believe their LDS effectively contribute to addressing the given challenge. In contrast, the gray bars represent the percentage of LAGs that feel their LDS contributes very little or is unable to address the identified challenges.

Figure 3. Priorities for rural development and the extent to which the LDS are able to address them



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

Economic Priorities and Challenges

- Economic instability and unemployment: identified as a top priority by 45.5% of LAGs, but only 35.7% believe the LDS effectively addresses this, while 32.3% see its contribution of their LDS as low or negligible.
- Job creation: while 43.3% of LAGs see lack of job opportunities as central challenge, only 33.6% feel the LDS can effectively tackle this issue.
- Decline of agriculture: rated as a top priority by 42.4%, but only 25.9% of the LAGs believe

the LDS is effectively addressing this challenge and 49.6% perceive the LDS's contribution as low or negligible.

Social and demographic concerns

- Aging population and youth outmigration: these are top priorities for 55.1% and 57.3% of LAGs, respectively. However, only about a quarter of respondents believe the LDS is effectively addressing these issues. About 45% of the LAGs view the contribution of their LDS as low or negligible.
- Social isolation and community cohesion: identified as an important priority by 42.0%. In

this case, 37.8% of the LAGs believe that their LDS are effectively able to address this challenge.

- Social inequality and poverty: identified as an important challenge by 34.7% of LAGs, but only about a quarter believe the LDS can effectively contribute to address it (24.9%).

Access to essential services

- Healthcare and social facilities: rated as an important priority by 41.2% of LAGs, but only 28.9% see the LDS as effectively addressing this, while nearly 40% view the contribution as negligible.
- Education and skills development: although a moderate priority, the LDS is perceived as having limited impact in this area, with 52.0% believing it can't address these needs effectively.
- Access to information and public services: is seen as a relevant priority by 31.6% of LAGs, but a large part doesn't believe that LDS can address this issue effectively (41.1%).

Environmental and climate challenges

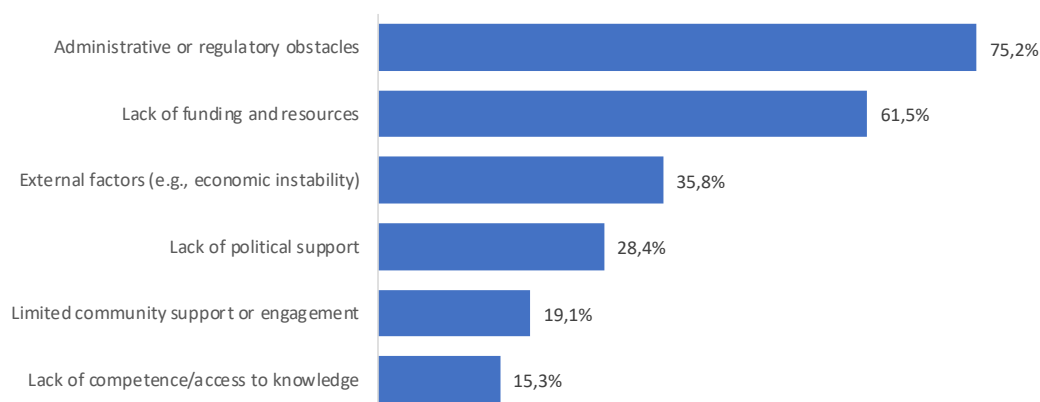
- Environmental degradation and climate change: identified as priorities by 38.6% and 40.8% of LAGs, respectively, but with low confidence in the LDS's ability to address these issues (41.3% and 46.3%).

Connectivity and infrastructure

- Poor infrastructure: rated as a significant priority by 31.6%, but only 15.2% believe the LDS can effectively address it.
- Digital connectivity: although a high priority (29.9%), the ability of the LDS to address digital connectivity is seen as minimal, with only 17.9% believing it can do so effectively.

The results of the questionnaire provide an understanding of some of the key challenges and risks that LAGs perceive as potential barriers to the successful implementation of their LDS.

Figure 4. Main challenges or risks that may hinder the implementation of the LDS



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The most significant challenge identified by LAGs is **administrative or regulatory obstacles**, with 75.2% of respondents selecting this as a primary concern. This high percentage indicates that bureaucratic complexities, rigid regulations, and administrative burdens are seen as major limitations to the smooth execution of LDS. These obstacles could slow down project implementation, limit flexibility, and increase the time and resources needed to achieve the expected objectives.

The issue of administrative or regulatory obstacles has long been recognized by LAGs (as highlighted

in the Tartu Declaration, Brussels 2023, etc.), as well as by other rural stakeholders (through declarations by the European Rural Parliaments), and even by public administrations (European Commission, Member States, etc.).

Despite this widespread acknowledgment, there has been little or no progress in addressing these challenges. The data from the questionnaire further corroborates these longstanding concerns, reinforcing the perception that regulatory and administrative barriers continue to hinder effective and efficient rural development efforts.

The second most commonly mentioned challenge is the **lack of funding and resources**, selected by 61.5% of respondents. This highlights a critical concern among LAGs about the adequacy of financial and material resources necessary to implement their strategies effectively. And could constrain the ability of LAGs to undertake impactful projects and meet their development objectives.

This is confirmed when respondents were asked whether they believe their LAG has the necessary resources (funding, staff, etc.) to implement the LDS:

- Only 21.7% of respondents strongly agreed, while 37.5% agreed. This combined (59.2%) suggests that, while a majority of LAGs feel they have the resources needed, there is still a significant portion with reservations.
- 15.6% of respondents were neutral, and 25.2% disagreed and strongly disagreed. This indicates concerns about resource inadequacy to effectively implement LDS.

External factors, such as economic instability, were identified as a challenge by 35.8% of respondents. This reflects the vulnerability of rural development efforts to broader economic conditions, which can affect everything from project financing to community participation. Moreover, economic instability can lead to uncertainty, making it difficult for LAGs to plan and execute long-term initiatives.

Lack of political support was highlighted by 28.4% of respondents as a potential important barrier. This suggests that in some rural areas, LAGs may struggle to secure the necessary backing from local, regional, or national governments and policies, which are essential for the successful implementation of LDS (e.g., political support is crucial for securing funding, overcoming regulatory barriers, and fostering bottom-up development initiatives).

Regarding this, respondents were asked whether the identified priorities for rural development in their areas were aligned with regional and national development strategies or goals by adequate proceedings.

A significant portion of respondents (46.4%) indicated that the alignment has been established by

adequate proceedings. This is likely to facilitate better support from regional and national authorities, as well as improve access to funding and other resources.

- 43.2% of respondents stated that the alignment was established "to a certain extent" This suggests that while there is some degree of coherence and integration between local priorities and higher-level strategies, there may still be gaps or areas where further alignment is needed. In this case, LAGs may face challenges in fully leveraging regional and national support or in ensuring that their local initiatives are recognized and integrated into broader development agendas.
- A small percentage of respondents (4.0%) indicated that the alignment was poorly established or that was no alignment at all. These results emphasize a critical area for improvement, as it can lead to divergences between local and higher-level objectives, reduced effectiveness of the LDS, and potential difficulties in securing the needed support or funding.

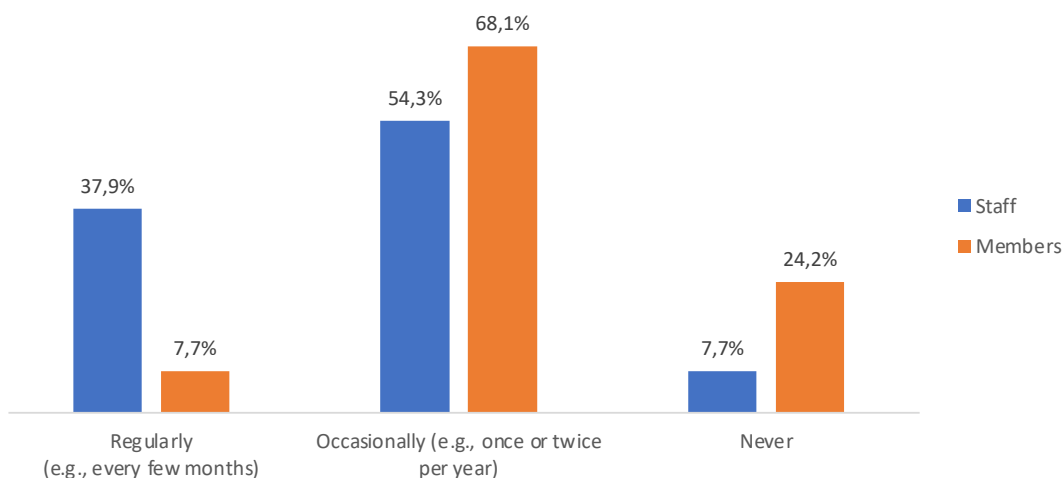
Overall, while a majority of LAGs have successfully aligned their identified priorities for rural development with regional and national strategies, there is still room for improvement.

Though community engagement is a basis of the LEADER approach, 19.1% of respondents identified **limited community support or engagement** as a challenge. This indicates that in some areas, there may be difficulties in mobilizing the local population to participate in development initiatives, which can hinder the effectiveness of the LDS.

Finally, 15.3% of respondents pointed to a **lack of competence or access to knowledge** as a barrier. This suggests that in some LAGs, there may be gaps in the technical expertise or information needed to design and implement effective development strategies. This could impact the quality of projects and the ability to innovate or respond to emerging challenges.

On this issue, the questionnaire assessed the extent to which LAGs provide training and support to enhance the skills and capabilities of their staff and members for the effective implementation of the LDS.

Figure 5. Training and support provided by LAGs to their staff and members



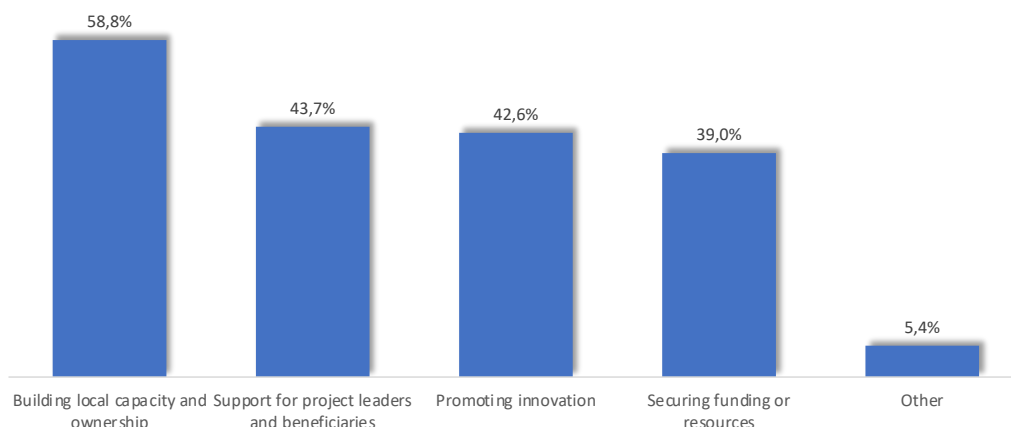
Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The findings suggest that, although many LAGs are committed to developing their staff's skills, a significant portion may lack regular training opportunities. In addition to staff, LAG members may also receive training to support in the implementation of the LDS. However, only 7.7% of LAGs provide regular training to members, indicating limited capacity-building activities. This shows there is

room for improvement in capacity-building to both staff and LAG members.

According to the results of the questionnaire, LAGs put in place measures to ensure the sustainability and continuity of the initiatives they support, which is decisive for maximizing the impact of LDS, and ensuring that the benefits of supported projects persist and, desirably, expand.

Figure 6. Measures used to ensure the sustainability and continuity of the initiatives supported by LAG



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The most frequently indicated measure for ensuring sustainability is the focus on building local capacity and ownership (58.8% of respondents). This emphasis indicates that LAGs recognize the importance of empowering local communities and stakeholders to be involved in (and to lead) development initiatives, as local actors are more likely

to maintain and build upon the initiatives they have a stake in.

Providing special support and capacity building for project leaders and beneficiaries is another key measure (indicated by 43.7% of respondents). This involves equipping those directly involved in projects with the skills, knowledge, and resources

they need to ensure long-term success and, this way, to sustain and expand their initiatives.

About the same portion of LAGs (42.6%) are also promoting innovation as a key measure for allowing projects to be adaptable to new challenges and changing circumstances (e.g., economic shifts, environmental changes, and technological advancements), ensuring their relevance and sustainability over time.

Another important measure, indicated by 39% of LAGs, is securing long-term funding or resources, as financial sustainability is the basis for project continuity, and it represents an issue if LAGs whether are actively seeking ways to ensure that adequate resources are available to support ongoing initiatives (this approach is particularly important in light of the earlier findings that highlighted funding constraints as a significant challenge for many LAGs).

In this regard, the questionnaire results offer important insights into the funding context for LAGs, particularly concerning the diversity of funding sources mobilized to address their development priorities.

During the 2014-2020 programming period, 14 Member States (plus UK) implemented multi-funded LEADER/CLLD models, allowing for the automatic mobilization of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) – European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and/or European Social Fund (ESF). In some cases (AT, AT, DE, GR, IT, PL) the multi-fund model was applied only in specific regions. Meanwhile, 13 MS continued to implement CLLD exclusively through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).¹

The use of other funds is optional, depending upon MS decision. Each MS establishes its own configuration of LEADER/CLLD, employing different funding sources with varying weights in the total allocation and targeting different types of areas and beneficiaries. This depends on the particular management and implementation mechanism.

Based on the questionnaire, the following table provides a systematic summary of the results.

Table 2. Funding sources mobilized by LAGs

Mono-funded CLLD	297 LAGs
<p>MS represented among the questionnaire respondents: AT (<i>except Tirol</i>), BE, HR, EE, FI, FR, GR (<i>except Central Macedonia, Peloponnese, Crete</i>), HU, IE, IT, LU, MT, NL, PL (<i>except Kujawsko-Pomorskie</i>), RO, SP, DE</p>	<p>136 LAGs (45,8%) received funding or support from sources beyond the EAFRD. Most commonly accessed additional funding sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESF: used by 30% of LAGs. • Municipal Funding: 24% of LAGs. • ERDF: used by 11% of LAGs. • ERASMUS: accessed by 11% of LAGs. • Recovery and Resilience Funds: used by 6% of LAGs. • Interreg: also used by 6% of LAGs. <p>50% of the LAGs that accessed funding beyond EAFRD drew from two or more funding sources.</p>
Multi-funded CLLD	147 LAGs
<p>MS represented among the questionnaire respondents: AT (<i>region Tirol</i>), BG, DK, GR (<i>regions Central Macedonia, Crete, Peloponnese</i>), LV, LT, PL (<i>region Kujawsko-Pomorskie</i>), PT, SK, SI, SE.</p>	<p>16,3% used other funding sources than EAFRD, ESF and ERDF, being the most relevant Municipalities and ERASMUS.</p>

¹ Multi-funded CLLD: Background paper and outcomes of workshop in Slovenia, CAP Implementation Contact Point, February 2024.

Regarding funding sources other than the EAFRD, although not requested, the respondents provided some examples. Below is a summary of the key funding sources identified as well as some examples of their use.

European Social Fund (ESF). Utilized for projects including social inclusion, employment support, education, and skills development. Some examples include increasing citizen participation in the formulation of the LDS, management and monitoring of local policies for tourism development, supporting vulnerable groups (e.g., promoting social innovation and employment services).

European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Used particularly for infrastructure development, economic diversification, and environmental sustainability. Examples range from support for SMEs, tourism development, to environmental conservation initiatives.

Erasmus. Mentioned for funding educational and youth engagement projects, including international exchange programs, skills development and life-long learning initiatives.

Municipal and Local Administration funding. Source of co-financing and support for local development projects, particularly in infrastructure, social services, community engagement and cultural projects.

National and regional government programmes. Particularly aimed at supporting employment and social inclusion initiatives.

Interreg. Support for engaging in cross-border and transnational cooperation projects, addressing common challenges, facilitating knowledge exchange, and foster cooperation between regions.

Recovery and Resilience Funds. Relevant for post-pandemic recovery, with a focus on employability (e.g., for rural women), digital skills.

Donor funds. Some LAGs have secured funds from private entities, foundations, and philanthropic organizations for a variety of projects, including entrepreneurship and social inclusion projects, and related to and innovate green energy projects.

Other EU Programmes. Specific mentions of programs like LIFE (environmental conservation, Horizon (research and innovation), and the European Solidarity Corps, used for environmental conservation, innovation, and community-based projects.

The questionnaire results show that, while many LAGs in monofunded CLLD MS continue to rely primarily on EAFRD, a substantial portion (45%) is mobilizing diverse funding sources beyond EAFRD. By tapping into various national, regional, and EU-level funds, LAGs enhance their capacity to implement effective LDS and to pursue a broader range of projects. This diversification is particularly important in addressing complex rural development challenges that may require more specific or wider scope initiatives than what is available through the EAFRD support alone.

Furthermore, the ability of LAGs to combine two or more funding sources demonstrates their capacity to manage and integrate different financial streams, thus enhancing the scope and impact of their development projects. However, the fact that a significant portion of LAGs still operate solely with EAFRD suggests that more support and guidance could be provided to encourage further diversification of funding sources.

To enhance the effectiveness of the LDS and ensure that LEADER can contribute to the broader EU objectives for rural development, it will be important for those LAGs currently dependent on EAFRD funding to explore and secure additional sources of support. At the same time, is essential that EAFRD provide the necessary resources to drive meaningful and sustainable change in rural areas.

However, while promoting multifunded approaches remains a valuable opportunity for all MS, it is important to note that in the 2023-2027 programming period, the number of MS applying multifunded CLLD models has decreased from 15 to 11.

- Seven MS stopped using multifunded CLLD: DK, GR, LT, PT, SK, SE (and UK).
- Three countries started using multifunded CLLD: EE and RO (national level), FR (only the region New Aquitaine), IT (two regions

Puglia, Sicily stopped multifunded CLLD, while Sardinia will use it for the first time.²

The decline in the number of MS adopting this approach suggests there may be barriers or constraints limiting the expansion of multifunding, underscoring the need for further efforts to encourage the articulation and complementarity of EU funds at the national levels.

A broader implementation of this model across the EU could significantly benefit LAGs by enabling them to access a wider range of financial resources. This would be particularly advantageous in MS or regions where the programmatic options for LEADER are more restrictive or where financial availability is lower.

By diversifying their funding sources, LAGs would be better equipped to design and implement more comprehensive and impactful rural development initiatives.

The feedback provided by LAGs regarding the **achievement of milestones and expected outcomes** of recent projects and initiatives, allows to understand their overall satisfaction with the implementation of their LDS and the effectiveness of their efforts in driving rural development.

Over half of the respondents (54.1%) rated their recent projects or initiatives as "Very successful".

41.5% of respondents rated it as "Moderately successful".

A small portion, and yet relevant, of LAGs (4.3%) rated their projects as "Somewhat successful" or "Unsuccessful".

While the majority of LAGs rate their projects as successful, suggesting that LDS are generally effective in addressing the identified priorities for rural development, the 41.5% who view their initiatives as moderately successful indicate that there is still room for improvement (e.g., addressing some of the challenges identified earlier, such as securing additional funding, overcoming administrative obstacles, or enhancing community engagement).

The LAGs that indicated somewhat successful or unsuccessful projects, though in a low percentage, reflects difficulties in achieving milestones and results and suggests the need for ongoing support and the potential for further refinement of strategies.

² Multi-funded CLLD: Background paper and outcomes of workshop in Slovenia, CAP Implementation Contact Point, February 2024.

3 EMPOWERING RURAL TRANSFORMATION: LEADER APPROACH AS A CATALYST FOR IMPLEMENTING THE LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS

The previous chapter provided an overview of the 2014-2020 programming period, laying the foundation to shift the focus to the future, exploring how the LAGs can harness the principles of the LEADER approach to drive sustainable rural development.

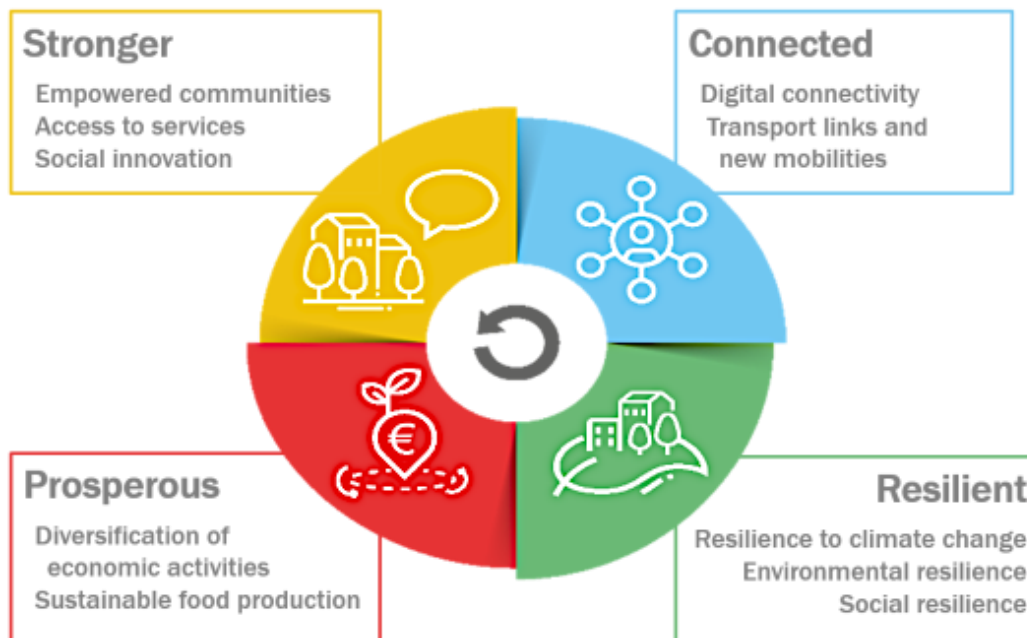
To effectively meet the challenges ahead, the most logical and coherent path forward is to align the LEADER approach, along with the roles and interventions of LAGs, with the EC's priorities. This alignment should specifically focus on the Long-

Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), which outlines the overarching priorities and strategic goals for rural development across Europe. By doing so, LEADER can continue to serve as a powerful catalyst in realizing an evident transformation in rural areas.

3.1 Securing synergy: aligning LEADER with European priorities

The added value of the LEADER approach and the role of LAGs in implementing rural development policies and achieving broader EU goals can be better understood by analyzing how LAGs' interventions could align their interventions for stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, with ten shared goals summarized by four complementary areas of action, as they are outlined in the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA). These sets the overarching priorities and strategic goals for rural development across Europe.

Figure 7. Main drivers shaping the future of rural areas for 2040 and the four complementary areas for action



Source: European Commission, Staff Working Document (2021) 166.

The integration of the LEADER approach with the areas of action outlined in the LTVRA is a promising way of ensuring that LAGs contribute effectively

to the wider objectives of the EU. This alignment is not just beneficial but essential, as it ensures:

- **Strategic coherence.** Aligning the LEADER approach with LTVRA priorities assures that LAG interventions are focused on addressing the most relevant challenges and opportunities identified at the European level. This strategic alignment is essential for integrating straightforward and efficiently LDS into the broader policy framework, providing clear orientation for LAGs in implementing policies at the local level toward common EU objectives. It ensures that local actions are in sync with the broader European agenda, thereby amplifying their impact.
- **Optimization of resources.** Effective rural development requires the careful allocation of limited resources – be it funding, time, or expertise. By aligning their efforts with the most pressing issues identified at the European level, LAGs can ensure that their interventions are not only relevant but also strategically focused. Moreover, this alignment helps LAGs to avoid duplicating efforts. By focusing on key areas identified by the EC, LAGs can leverage existing research, data, and best practices.
- **Effective communication and collaboration.** Rural development requires coordinated efforts across various sectors and stakeholders. For these to work together effectively, robust governance systems are crucial. Aligning

with the LTVRA's common priorities, helps to create a common framework and set of priorities that guide these collaborative efforts, ensuring that all parties are working toward shared goals.

- **Access to funding opportunities.** Compliance with European Commission priorities ensures that the LEADER approach and LAGs remain well-positioned to access financial support from various EU programmes and initiatives. This alignment not only opens doors to new funding opportunities but also reinforces the sustainability of LAG efforts by securing necessary financial resources to continue driving rural development forward

In essence, integrating the LEADER approach with the LTVRA could be considered as a strategic move that enhances the coherence, efficiency, collaboration, and financial viability of rural development initiatives. This alignment is critical for ensuring that LAGs can continue to foster thriving, resilient rural communities in line with Europe's long-term vision for its rural areas.

The results from the questionnaire provide a snapshot of the current awareness, understanding, and alignment of LAGs with the LTVRA.

Table 3. Snapshot of the current awareness, understanding, and alignment of LAGs with the LTVRA.

<p>Awareness and understanding of the LTVRA</p>	<p>Familiarity: only 13.3% of respondents are very familiar with the LTVRA, while 58.3% have heard of it but would like to know more. A significant portion, 28.5%, are not familiar with it at all.</p> <p>Knowledge level: when it comes to understanding the objectives and goals of the LTVRA, only 7.2% of respondents consider themselves very knowledgeable, and large segment (54.7%) have limited or no knowledge of the LTVRA.</p> <p>Proactive information seeking: only 8.0% of LAGs have extensively sought information about the LTVRA.</p>
<p>Relevance and alignment of the LTVRA with local needs and LAG roles</p>	<p>Perception of LTVRA's relevance: 58.2% of respondents strongly agree and agree that the LTVRA addresses key challenges and opportunities faced by rural areas. However, 26.7% are unsure.</p> <p>Alignment with LAG roles: the majority of respondents (65.7%) support a direct and clear alignment of LAGs with the goals of the LTVRA. Additionally, 48.5% strongly agree that the EC should recognize the critical role of LAGs in supporting LTVRA implementation.</p> <p>Commitment to LTVRA goals: while 64% of respondents support LAGs' commitment to achieving LTVRA goals, the others remain neutral or uncertain.</p>
<p>Confidence in LAGs' ability to contribute to LTVRA</p>	<p>Alignment with local priorities: only 16.2% of respondents believe that the LTVRA aligns very well with the priorities and needs of their LAG area and community, while 37.3% feel it aligns somewhat well. Notably, 28.4% are unsure about the alignment.</p> <p>Confidence levels: just 17.8% of respondents are very confident in their LAG's ability to contribute to the realization of the LTVRA goals, with 41.8% somewhat confident. However, 30.4% remain neutral, and 10.0% express low confidence.</p>
<p>Commitment to implementing LTVRA-aligned strategies</p>	<p>Strategic planning: while 25.6% of LAGs believe to have a detailed strategy aligned with the LTVRA, 28.7% acknowledge that their strategies are not yet detailed, and 10.6% are still in the process of developing a strategy. A significant 35.1% do not have a strategy in place, with 17.3% expressing a need for support to develop one.</p>

Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The data suggests that while there is a general awareness of the LTVRA among LAGs there is a lack in deep understanding and proactive engagement with the LTVRA. This highlights a critical challenge: for the LTVRA to be effectively implemented, it must be perceived as relevant and adaptable to the specific needs of diverse rural communities.

Notwithstanding the varying levels of awareness, there is a relatively strong belief among LAGs that their work should align with the LTVRA's goals, reflecting a recognition of its relevance to rural development and a strong support for the integration it's goals into local development agendas.

This suggests that there is still significant work to be done to build full commitment and confidence across all LAGs on their ability (capacity and resources) to contribute to the LTVRA's realization, namely, practical challenges in turning this commitment into actionable LDS.

3.2 Common themes for future rural development policy

In an effort to assess the strategic focus of LAGs for the coming years, the questionnaire asked respondents to rate the level of priority they assign to specific themes and the areas of intervention within the potential contribution of LDS for the four complementary areas of action outlined in the LTVRA:

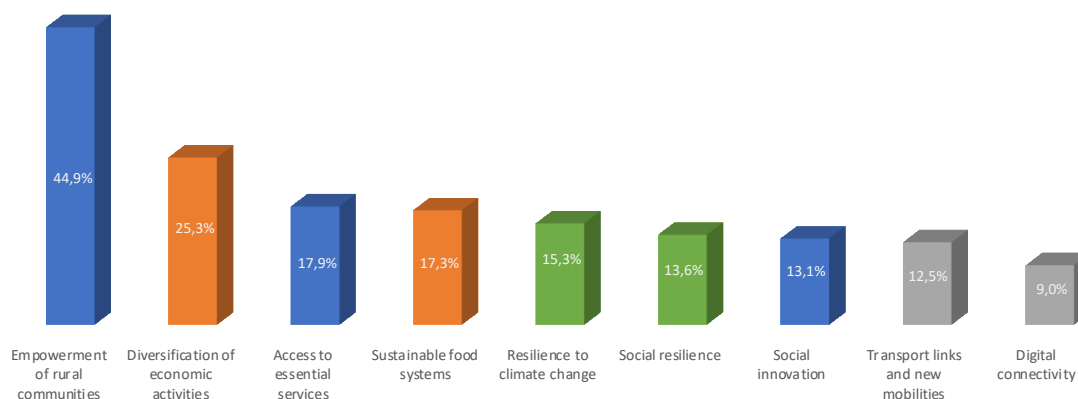
- **Stronger:** focus on empowering rural communities, improving access to services and facilitating social innovation;
- **Connected:** to improve connectivity both in terms of transport and digital access;
- **Resilient:** preserving natural resources and greening farming activities to counter climate change while also ensuring social resilience through offering access to training courses and diverse quality job opportunities;

- **Prosperous:** to diversify economic activities and improve the value added of farming and agri-food activities and agri-tourism.

LTVRA, the order of importance is shown below. A detailed analysis with a focus on country-specific trends based on averages indicates different strategic focuses across Member-States.

Regarding the relevance of specific themes within each of the four areas of action for shaping the future of rural development in alignment with the

Figure 8. Areas/themes that the LAG could plan to focus in the coming years



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

Top priorities

- **Empowerment of rural communities** stands out as the clear highest priority, with 44.9% of respondents rating it as the most important. This highlights the significant emphasis placed on strengthening the capacity of rural communities, enabling them to take an active role in the development and implementation of LDS. The findings reaffirm that empowering local communities is fundamental to fostering regenerative, sustainable and inclusive rural development.
- The analysis reveals that, on average, the highest priority was observed in countries such as IT, LU and IE. Conversely, in countries like FR and SI, this priority was ranked lower.
- **Diversification of economic activities** comes as the second priority, highlighting the need to create new opportunities by encouraging new businesses and services that can sustain rural economies in the long term and, thus, foster economic resilience. When comparing priorities across countries, DK and PT stand out, while in IT and DE this theme gathered lower average scores.

Moderate priorities

- **Access to essential services**, as an important area to keep ensuring that rural communities have access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and social services. This priority highlights the recognition that with the adequate access to these services, rural areas may succeed to possible to retain and attract residents.
- A closer look at the data indicates that the average priority level is higher in RO, BG and SI, while LU, NL and FI reported this area as of relatively lower concern.
- **Sustainable food systems** indicating a commitment of LAGs to promote environmentally and socially responsible agricultural practices and supporting local food production. This focus aligns with broader EU objectives related to environmental sustainability and food security. Countries like NL and SI showed a higher priority for this theme, whereas DE and IE indicated a lower priority.
- **Resilience to climate change** is also moderately prioritized, showing a growing awareness of the importance of protecting rural areas from the adverse effects of climate change. This priority could reflect an understanding of the need to integrate climate adaptation and mitigation approaches into rural development strategies. There are differences

between Member-States, with NL and LT showing higher priorities, while IT and LU showing a lower priority.

Lower Priorities

- **Social resilience**, while still important, is ranked lower compared to other areas. This could indicate that these aspects are not prioritized within the EAFRD framework and, so, the regulatory and funding structures in place do not encourage or provide sufficient resources. Consequently, in many MS, including PT, LAGs may lack the incentive to focus on social issues.
- The survey results demonstrate LV and NL with a higher emphasis in this theme. Meanwhile, GR, IE and PT rated this priority lower on their development agenda.
- **Social innovation** is seen as a way to address complex social challenges, though it ranks lower than other priorities. In addition of the above mentioned, there is an added challenge related to risk aversion. Innovation processes naturally involve a certain level of uncertainty and risk, which can make decision-makers to hesitate supporting innovative solutions, especially within the limitations of traditional funding mechanisms.

- There is a clear gap in prioritization between countries like LU, LT and RO, where this priority is scored relatively high, and IT and DE where the focus on this priority areas was comparatively lower.
- **Transport links and new mobilities** and **Digital connectivity**, are ranked lower in priority, suggesting that the need for significant investments should come from other sources as government or private sector actors to address these issues effectively.
- The data shows that BG and RO placed a higher prioritization in transport links and new mobilities, in contrast with NL, PT and SI. Regarding digital connectivity, there is a higher prioritization in PL, RO and ES, and lower in NL and IT.

The questionnaire results provide valuable insights into the intentions of LAGs to include initiatives in their LDS within the four key areas of action identified in the LTVRA. Respondents were asked whether they planned to include initiatives within these areas and to prioritize them in terms of importance. The results are systematized below.

Table 4. Initiatives within the four areas of action of the LTVRA and order of importance

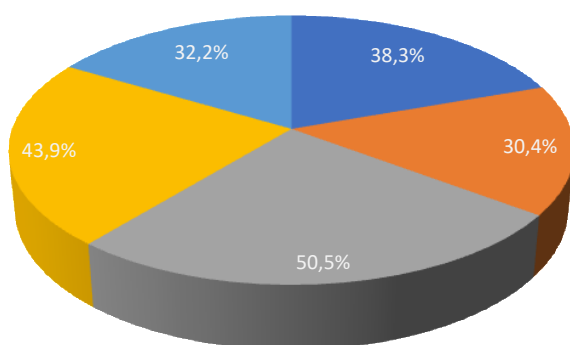
Areas of action of the LTVRA	Intention to incorporate in LDS	Type of initiatives (by order of importance)
<p>Stronger Empowering rural communities, improving access to services and facilitating social innovation</p>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote social innovation and support creative solutions to enhance rural communities' well-being 2. Emphasize participatory democracy, effectively involving local communities in decision-making 3. Strengthen mechanisms to empower communities to play a central role in shaping local development strategies 4. Build and expand governance systems through initiatives carried out by the LAG 5. Collaborate with stakeholders to address gaps in essential services (e.g., healthcare, education, and culture), and support initiatives for enhancing access to those services 6. Reduce gender gap or imbalance
<p>Prosperous Diversify economic activities and improve the value added of farming and agri-food activities and agri-tourism.</p>	<p>Yes: 73.1% Possibly: 16.3% No: 10.6%</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote economic diversification by supporting the development of new businesses and services 2. Develop local economy that creates sustainable jobs opportunities 3. Encourage innovation and entrepreneurship to create knowledge-based jobs and contribute to economic development 4. Promote and support sustainable agriculture practices, agroecology, and local food systems 5. Support youth and female entrepreneurship to foster economic development 6. Attract investment and talent to rural areas to support economic growth and prosperity 7. Inspire and support the establishment of innovation hubs that foster collaboration between local businesses, research institutions, and entrepreneurs
<p>Resilient Preserving natural resources and greening farming to counter climate change while ensuring social resilience through access to training courses and diverse quality job opportunities</p>	<p>Yes: 61.4% Possibly: 21.3% No: 17.3%</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Foster community engagement, inclusivity, and support initiatives addressing demographic challenges (ageing population and out-migration) as well as social cohesion and well-being 2. Support initiatives linked with biodiversity/ecosystems' preservation and conservation 3. Support initiatives that mitigate the impact of climate change and promote climate resilience 4. Promote sustainable land use practices to enhance climate resilience and environmental conservation
<p>Connected Improve connectivity both in terms of transport and digital access</p>	<p>Yes: 37.4% Possibly: 29.1% No: 33.4%</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support projects that leverage technology for agricultural innovation, business development, and community services 2. Promote the use of smart technologies to improve efficiency and service delivery in rural areas 3. Support capacity building for digital transformation in local businesses and organizations 4. Develop initiatives to improve transport links and support innovative mobility solutions to reduce social isolation 5. Develop initiatives towards digital literacy and encourage technology uptake for economic and social development

Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

3.3 Strategic rural development: LEADER and LAGs role in shaping future opportunities

In light of the common themes identified by LAGs for future rural development policy, this chapter explores into the strategic potential roles that LEADER and LAGs, by aligning with the LTVRA, can play in addressing emerging challenges and opportunities. Respondents were asked to select up to three roles they believe their LAGs could effectively take on to help make the LTVRA a reality.

Figure 9. Roles LAGs could play in making LTVRA a reality



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The results highlight the diverse ways LAGs envision contributing to this EU initiative, by order of relevance:

- **Collaborating with other stakeholders and partners.** This role received the highest endorsement, with over half of the respondents identifying it as crucial. It underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement and the recognition that effective rural development requires broad and close collaboration across different sectors and levels of governance.
- **Providing Guidance and Support to Local Communities.** Nearly half of the LAGs see themselves as central to empowering local communities by offering the necessary support to navigate and contribute to the LTVRA's objectives. This role is crucial to ensure that communities are well-equipped to express local needs (facilitating a bottom-up approach) and to engage with and benefit from rural development initiatives.
- **Key role of leading and coordinating efforts.** Many LAGs see themselves as leaders in the rural development process, taking on the responsibility of coordinating efforts to

align local actions with the broader LTVRA goals. This leadership role is vital for maintaining momentum and ensuring that all activities are strategically directed towards achieving the vision.

- **Promoting inclusive and participatory approaches.** This indicates that LAGs are seen as facilitators of more democratic and participatory processes in rural development. This aligns well with the LTVRA goals, which seek to create resilient and inclusive rural areas where everyone has the opportunity to contribute.
- **Leading by example and fostering innovation.** Although selected slightly less frequently, this role underscores the importance of LAGs to implement innovative projects and demonstrating best practices, and to inspire stakeholders to achieve LTVRA's objectives.

The responses suggest a robust and dynamic view of the role of LAGs in the implementation of the LTVRA. The emphasis on collaboration indicates a recognition of the interconnected nature of rural development challenges and the need for collective action. The significant support for providing guidance and leading efforts indicates a readiness among LAGs to take proactive and central roles in this initiative, ensuring that the strategies and actions align with local needs while adhering to the broader goals of the LTVRA.

In terms of **collaboration with the EC to facilitate the implementation of the LTVRA**, respondents were asked to choose up to three methods they believe are most effective for enhancing this collaboration, by order of importance:

- The most selected option (47.3%) is the **participation in transnational projects**, suggesting that LAGs find it a key way to collaborate with the EC. This approach not only facilitates learning and sharing of best practices across borders but also aligns with the EU's emphasis on cooperative and integrated rural development.
- 43.7% of the respondents believe that is having the **support and resources of the national/European LEADER Network/Association to advocate for policies that advance the LTVRA implementation.** This highlights the critical role of LEADER networks in bridging the gap between LAGs and the EC, sug-

gesting that LAGs see significant value in using established networks to advocate for policy changes and resource allocation that align with the LTVRA goals.

- **Engagement in EU-level working groups and committees** is seen as relevant by nearly 40% of respondents. Participation in these groups allows LAGs to directly contribute to discussions that shape rural development policies and strategies at the EU level.
- **Advocacy through national LAG networks and ELARD** shows the importance LAGs place on collective action and representation in dialogues with the EC (38.3%). This way underscores the need for a coordinated approach to influencing policy and securing funding that supports rural development.
- **Sharing best practices** and, this way, contributing to EU Decision makers' knowledge is recognized by about one third of the respondents (31.1%). This suggests a proactive approach to demonstrating what works in rural development, providing evidence-based insights that can guide EU decision-making.

The responses indicate various collaborative mechanisms among LAGs to engage more actively with the EC. The emphasis on using existing networks and associations for advocacy reflects an understanding of the power of collective voice and coordinated efforts in policy influence. Participation in transnational projects and EU-wide forums not only helps in learning and adapting successful strategies but also ensures that LAGs are integral to the policy-making process, making rural development more tailored and effective.

Since participation in transnational cooperation projects has been recognized as a key method for

collaborating with the EC to facilitate the implementation of the LTVRA, it is important to take a closer look at the questionnaire results related to this issue.

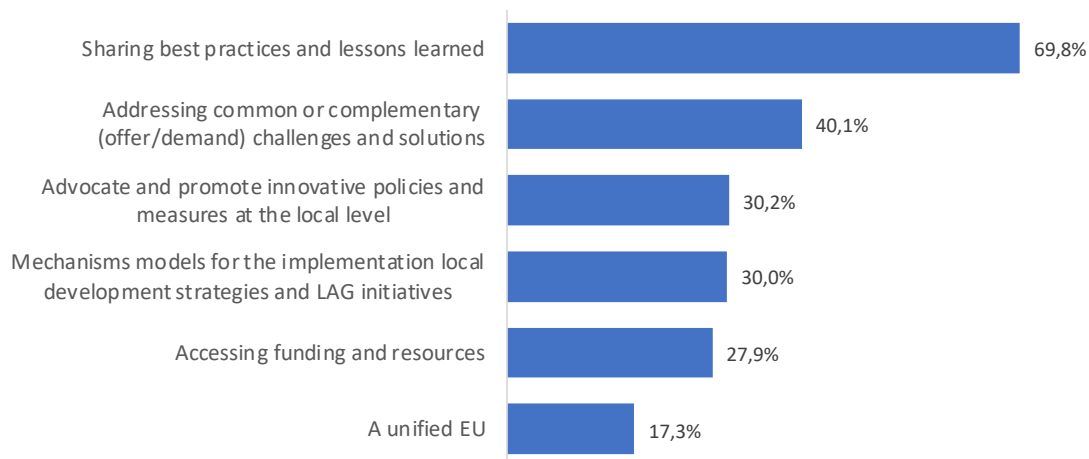
Regarding the perceived importance among LAGs for the successful implementation of the LEADER approach, an overwhelming majority of respondents (82.0%) identified transnational networking and partnerships as important or very important. This reflects a strong consensus on its potential role. This is in line with the principles of LEADER, which emphasize cooperation and networking as key drivers of rural development.

Concerning the perceived importance of transnational networking and partnerships for the successful implementation of the LEADER approach (Q.67), an overwhelming 82.0% of respondents indicated that they view these collaborations as important or very important. This strong consensus highlights the recognized value of such partnerships, aligning with the core principles of the LEADER approach, which emphasize cooperation and networking as essential drivers of rural development.

The recognition of the importance of these networks likely stems from the tangible benefits observed through past and ongoing projects where cross-border collaborations have led to enhanced resources, broader perspectives, and more effective solutions to common challenges faced by rural communities.

The survey questioned LAGs about the areas they believe would benefit most from transnational collaboration. The results are displayed in the graph below.

Figure 10. Areas LAGs believe could benefit the most from transnational collaboration



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

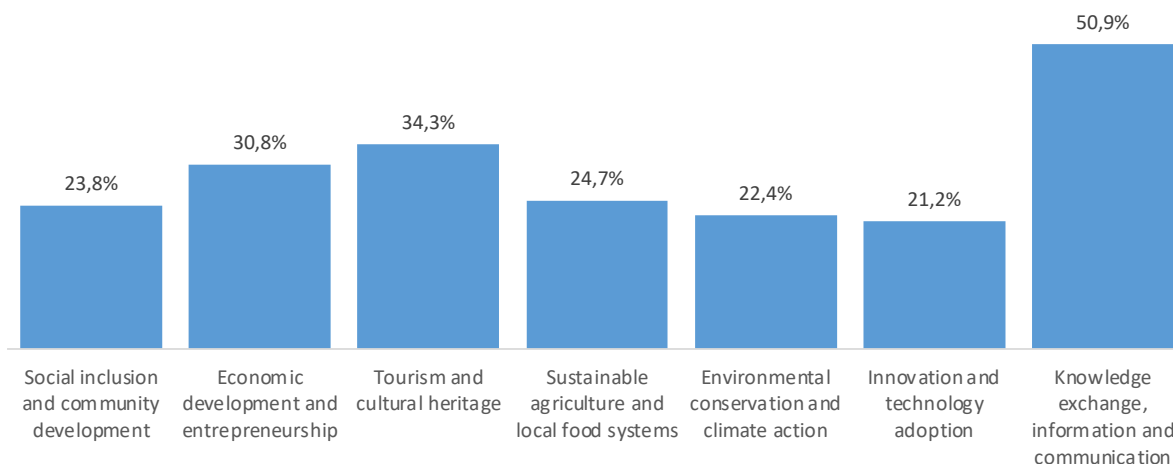
The strong preference for sharing best practices and lessons learned as the primary benefit of transnational collaboration stresses a widespread acknowledgment among LAGs of the relevance of knowledge exchange. This aspect of collaboration not only helps in problem-solving but also fosters a collective learning culture that can elevate the overall effectiveness of the LEADER approach across Europe.

The emphasis on addressing common challenges together and advocating for innovative policies

suggests that LAGs are looking beyond the borders of their own communities to find more effective approaches, and making them more effective advocates for rural development issues.

The questionnaire also asked LAGs to rate various thematic areas in terms of their relevance for transnational collaboration. The objective was to identify which themes LAGs believe could benefit the most from working together across borders. The results highlight the key areas shown in the figure below.

Figure 11. Thematic areas LAGs believe that transnational collaboration could be particularly beneficial



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The results of the questionnaire clearly show that LAGs place the highest importance on **knowledge exchange, information sharing, and communication** as key areas for transnational collabora-

tion. This is followed closely by **tourism and cultural heritage, and economic development and entrepreneurship**.

This reflects the importance of disseminating best practices, learning from other LAGs, and sharing

perspectives that can drive effective rural development. Tourism and cultural heritage is seen as a significant area where transnational collaboration can add value, likely due to the potential for sharing practices and initiatives that can leveraged these assets, as well as economic development and entrepreneurship, where collaboration can foster innovation, business development, and economic growth strategies.

However, there are some challenges in transnational cooperation, and the LAGs have indicated the extent – from not a challenge to very significant – to which some aspects may influence the engagement in this type of projects.

The results indicate that **funding and resource constraints** along with **legal and administrative barriers** are the most significant challenges to engaging in transnational cooperation projects (77.3% and 75,0% rating them as either very significant or significant, respectively). These are the areas that require most attention to facilitate smoother and more effective collaboration.

Regulatory compliance and reporting and **complexity of project coordination** are also notable challenges that need to be addressed, with respectively 63.7% and 51.7% of respondents rating them very significant and significant.

While the other aspects are present, with LAGs rating them between 27.0% and 35.2% as very significant and significant, they are less critical but still

important for ensuring the success of transnational cooperation.

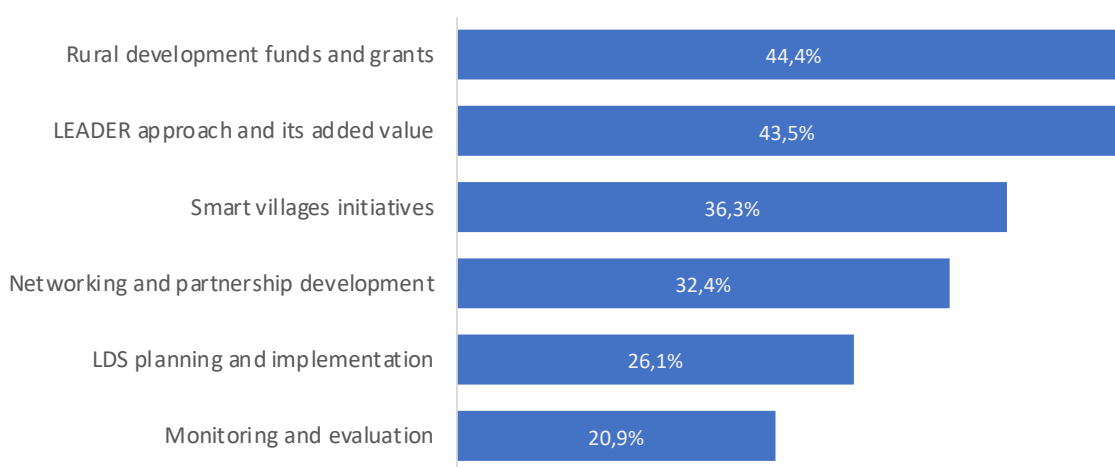
Additionally, the questionnaire sought to assess the interest among LAGs in receiving training or support to better integrate the objectives of the LTVRA into their current activities and future LDS.

- 52.6% of respondents expressed a definitive interest in receiving training or support to align more closely with the LTVRA objectives.
- 41.8% showed potential interest, suggesting that while they are open to the idea, their commitment might depend on the relevance, timing, or nature of the support offered.
- Only 5.8% indicated no interest in training, reflecting a small minority who may feel they already possess the necessary skills or resources, or who do not see the LTVRA as relevant to their operations.

This great interest (94.4% combined for definite and possible interest) demonstrates a significant demand for capacity building in the context of the LTVRA, suggesting that most LAGs recognize the importance of aligning their activities with broader EU rural development goals.

Respondents who indicated an interest in training were also asked to select the three most relevant areas – instruments and approaches – where they would benefit from additional support. The results are ranked by the percentage of LAGs identifying each area as crucial.

Figure 12. Areas LAGs would benefit support for integrating LTVRA objectives into their activities



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The most requested area for additional support, highlights the continued need for enhanced understanding and **access to funding opportunities**, in order to secure financial resources necessary to implement innovative and effective rural development projects.

Close behind, the interest in the **LEADER approach** indicates a desire to deepen understanding of its methodologies and potential impacts. This suggests that LAGs are looking to leverage the LEADER approach more effectively in their development strategies.

A significant interest in **Smart Villages** suggests a growing acknowledgement of the importance of these initiatives in rural areas. These are rural communities that create innovative solutions to address local challenges by leveraging their existing strengths and opportunities. Through a participatory approach, they aim to foster sustainable economic, social, and environmental development, often by adopting digital technologies. Smart Villages also benefit from cooperation with other rural

and urban communities and can build on existing initiatives, with funding from various public and private sources.

The area of **networking and partnership development**, being selected by more than 30% of respondents, reinforces the recognition of the value of collaborations and partnerships in achieving more comprehensive and sustainable outcomes in rural development.

Additional support in **planning and implementing LDS** suggests that LAGs are looking for ways to ensure that their initiatives are well-planned and effectively executed. The need for support in **monitoring and evaluation** indicates an interest in improving how outcomes are measured and analyzed, crucial for demonstrating the impact of rural development projects and for continuous improvement.

The following graph shows the specific thematic areas where LAGs feel additional support would be most beneficial.

Figure 13. Thematic areas of interest for additional support, by order of relevance



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

The area related to **sustainable practices** received the highest interest, highlighting a focus on sustainability among LAGs, suggesting the concern to adopt more environmentally friendly and sustainable practices (e.g., renewable energy, circular economy, biodiversity) in their initiatives.

Significant interest in **economic development** indicates a need for support in enhancing business

development and entrepreneurship within rural areas. LAGs are ongoingly looking for ways to stimulate economic growth and job creation, including the focus on promoting **tourism and developing tourism products**, recognizing it as a relevant economic driver.

Interest in **innovation and technology**, including digital transformation, reflects the importance of

modernizing rural areas through advanced technologies and innovative solutions.

Support in **community engagement** indicates a continuing need to find more effective means to foster community involvement and volunteerism and to enhance civic participation in rural communities.

Interest in **cultural diversity and heritage** and **environmental conservation** reinforces the high value LAGs attribute to promoting local traditions, heritage, and arts and natural environment as unique for the territorial identity, and integral to community cohesion and tourism.

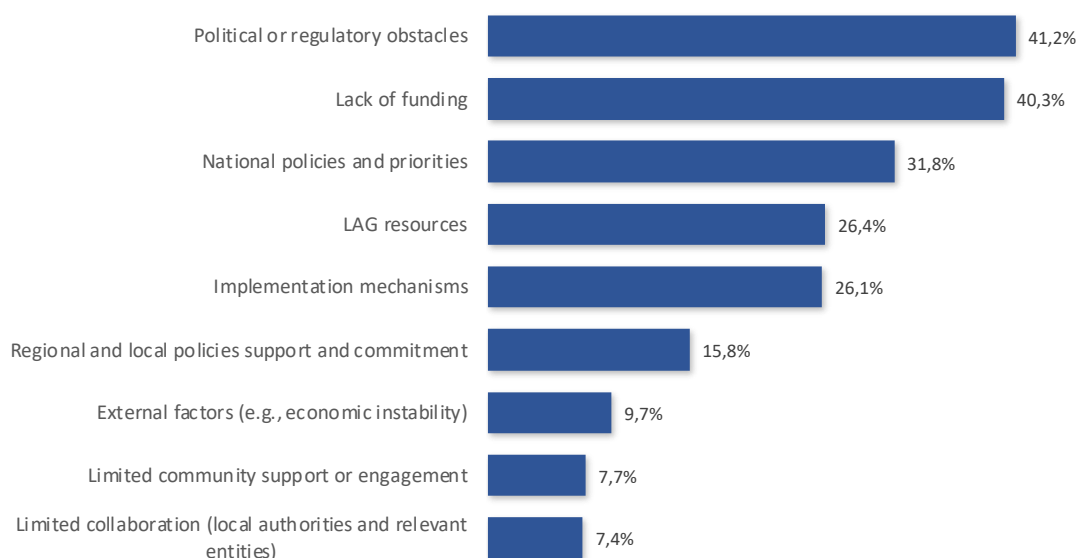
The lowest interest is given to areas such as **life-long learning** (e.g., support for skills development and training opportunities), **social inclusion** (e.g., inclusivity for disadvantaged social groups) and **health and well-being** (related, e.g., to promoting active lifestyles and improving healthcare services).

The strong interest in sustainable practices, economic development, and rural tourism as top priorities suggests that LAGs are particularly enthusiastic to advance in areas that promise impact on both the environment and local economies.

To effectively support LAGs in these efforts, tailored training programs and resources should be developed that address these specific areas. Partnerships with experts in sustainable practices, economic development and tourism could provide the necessary insights. Furthermore, funding opportunities should be aligned to support projects in these high-priority areas, ensuring that LAGs have the financial resources needed to implement transformative projects.

Additionally, the questionnaire also sought to identify the specific challenges or risks that could potentially hinder the successful implementation of the LTVRA at the local level. The respondents identified these challenges with varying degrees of concern, which provides an important insight into the areas where more attention may be needed.

Figure 14. Main challenges or risks that may hinder the successful implementation of the LTVRA at local level



Source: Data from the 'LEADER – Our Common Future' Questionnaire, 2024.

Again, **political or regulatory obstacles** is the most significant challenge identified by respondents. This suggests that the framework within which LAGs operate may not always be conducive to the flexible and innovative approaches needed to effectively implement the LTVRA, with limiting

factors as bureaucracy, restrictive regulations, and lack of political will. This emphasizes the need for advocacy and collaboration with policymakers to create an enabling environment for LAGs and their LDS.

Lack of funding is also identified as a major concern, closely following political and regulatory challenges, highlighting the critical need for sufficient financial resources to implement the LTVRA effectively. Without adequate funding, even well-conceived strategies and initiatives could turn less successful. Ensuring diverse and reliable funding streams (multi-funded approaches), including from national, regional, and EU sources, will be essential for overcoming this barrier.

The alignment, or lack thereof, between **national policies** and the LTVRA objectives is a significant concern. When national priorities do not align with the objectives of the LTVRA, it can create divergences and reduce the effectiveness of local initiatives. This indicates a need for greater coherence and alignment between the LTVRA and national policy frameworks, as well as for LAGs to engage in dialogue with national governments to ensure that their efforts are supported and not hampered by broader policy agendas.

The adequacy of **resources within LAGs** themselves is also a meaningful challenge. This includes human resources, expertise, and technical capacity. If LAGs do not have the necessary resources, their ability to implement the LTVRA effectively can be decreased. Capacity-building initiatives, training, and support from higher levels of governance will be relevant to address this issue.

In this sense, it's important to emphasize that the challenges faced by LAGs and the success of rural development initiatives are not solely about the availability of financial resources, but also about the guidelines and regulations that govern how these resources can be used. Clear, flexible, and supportive regulatory frameworks are essential for enabling LAGs to implement effective strategies and maximize the impact of available funds.

Without appropriate guidelines and regulations, even substantial funding may be limited in its effectiveness, as overly restrictive or unclear rules can create barriers to innovation, collaboration, and the tailored solutions needed. Therefore, both financial resources and regulatory frameworks must work in harmony to foster meaningful and regenerative change in rural areas.

The **mechanisms** available for implementing the LTVRA at the local level are also seen as a challenge. This could relate to the structures, processes, and tools that LAGs have at their disposal

to carry out their work. Inefficiencies or inadequacies in these mechanisms could hinder progress, indicating a need to improving implementation processes, making them simpler and more efficient.

Although less of a concern than the above factors, the level of support and commitment from **regional and local policies** still presents a challenge. The success of the LTVRA depends not only on national and EU-level alignment but also on support from regional and local authorities.

External factors, as economic instability, **community support and engagement**, and **collaboration with local authorities and other relevant entities** are also noted as a barrier, however, by a low percentage of respondents, compared to the above.

When comparing the challenges and risks identified for potentially implement the LTVRA in the future with those for the current LDS, several similarities and differences emerge. Both sets of challenges emphasize the importance of political support, funding, and administrative obstacles, but they also highlight concerns specific to each context.

However, the current LDS face more acute challenges related to external factors and community engagement, while the LTVRA is more focused on aligning with national policies and ensuring that LAGs have the resources needed to drive rural development.

The influence of the most important barriers for a successful implementation of development strategies at local level is explained below.

Political landscape

- National policies and priorities can either facilitate or constrain the work of LAGs. The alignment of national policies with the principles of the LEADER approach is essential for effective implementation. Also, changes in government and shifts in political priorities can impact the continuity of support for LAGs and the implementation of long-term projects and initiatives.
- Regional and local policies support and commitment can play a critical role, as if local governments are supportive and engaged in the LEADER approach, LAGs are likely to have more influence and resources to contribute to

the regeneration and sustainability of the territories. The political stability / political cycles and alignment with broader regional strategies are also important factors.

- The degree of flexibility to which the policy framework allows for adjustments at the local level (e.g., regulations) is a critical factor to facilitate innovative and context-specific strategies / initiative / projects that the LEADER approach encourages.

Financial resources

- As LAGs heavily depend on financial resources, in particular sourced from EU funding programmes for rural development, the financial allocations, the competitiveness of grant applications, and the duration of funding cycles can significantly influence the capacity of LAGs to carry out their initiatives.
- In this domain, it is also important to consider if the LAGs are resorting only to the CAP funding or if they will have access to other funding sources to implement their LDS. In addition, if the role of LAGs will be only as intermediaries or also as beneficiaries.
- The implementation of LDS is also closely linked to the economic capacity of potential beneficiaries, as well as their ability to sustain and scale up the projects they receive support for.
- This is particularly true for smaller beneficiaries, who often rely on the proximity and direct support of LAGs to realize their projects, as they may face additional challenges in accessing resources or learn the complex administrative processes. These challenges make the guidance and support provided by LAGs crucial for the success and long-term sustainability of rural development projects and initiatives.

Implementation mechanisms

- The importance of integrated implementation mechanisms with the possibility of multi-funded approaches lies in the recognition that rural development is a complex and multifaceted effort that requires a holistic and coordinated approach. In this sense, the possibility of multi-funded approaches is instrumental for LAGs to effectively act as Intermediate Organisms in rural development policies and to

address the diverse needs of their communities more effectively.

- Besides the MS regulations, the capacity of LAGs to design and implement local development strategies depends on their administrative capacity, i.e., training, experience and technical expertise are influencing factors in the effectiveness and efficiency of policy / projects / initiatives' implementation.

Collaboration and engagement

- The collaboration with local authorities and relevant entities is essential for smoothing the implementation of projects and initiatives. Strong partnerships with public bodies and other stakeholders are key for innovative and context-specific approaches that the LEADER approach advocates.
- The engagement of rural communities (acknowledgment and interest) is of most importance for assuring the expected outcomes of the support granted through LDS and of the LAGs own initiatives. In this sense, effective communication and participatory processes are fundamental for building and maintaining community adherence. In this scope, also the existence of local leaders who advocate for the LEADER approach can be beneficial.

Besides these aspects, the role of the EU towards national governments, and these with LEADER Networks, is an essential component of the support for LAGs as it provides context for effective collaboration, policy alignment, knowledge sharing and access to funding opportunities. It is important to provide elements for informed decision-making and to strengthen the capacity of LAGs to implement effective and sustainable LDS in line with the EU vision for rural areas.

Moreover, more relevance should be given by European and national CAP Networks to support more effectively LAGs, namely, provide timely and relevant information about policy and funding options, best practices, and to the delivery of capacity-building processes (e.g., for LAG members and technical teams) for effective management (including monitoring and evaluation), financial planning, and community engagement (development of effective participatory approaches).

4 KEY FINDINGS

4.1 Overview of the last programming period (2014-2020)

The findings from the questionnaire highlight an alignment between the priorities identified by LAGs and the broader challenges facing rural areas. However, there is a noticeable gap between the importance of these priorities and the perceived effectiveness of the LDS in addressing them.

The distribution of project categories supported by LAGs during the 2014-2020 programming period aligns with some of the key priorities identified, particularly economic diversification, employment and infrastructure development. However, there are gaps where the focus of projects does not fully align with the identified needs. For example: agriculture, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and rural youth, reveal potential areas for improvement.

This suggests that while LAGs are aware of the critical issues impacting their communities, the LDS may not be fully equipped to tackle these challenges effectively.

The degree of alignment between local priorities and regional and national strategies is a key factor influencing the effectiveness of the LDS. A strong alignment would ensure that LAGs are working within adequate resources and a supportive policy framework, which can enhance the impact of their initiatives and contribute to more coherent and coordinated rural development efforts, not only effective at the local level but also contribute to overarching policy objectives at higher levels of governance.

The results of the questionnaire reveal that there are concerns about the resources available to address the challenges facing rural areas. Administrative and regulatory obstacles, lack of funding, and external economic factors are seen as the most critical barriers, with a substantial number of LAGs also citing political support and community engagement as potential barriers.

In terms of financial resources, the data shows that LAGs are relatively leveraging a diverse range of funding sources beyond the EAFRD to support their development strategies. This diversification of

funding is essential for addressing the specific needs of rural areas.

The overall interpretation of questionnaire results gives a positive picture of the effectiveness of LAGs in implementing their LDS. However, the results also highlight the importance of continuous improvement. While the majority of LAGs are successful, there is still potential to enhance the impact of their initiatives further.

To enhance the impact of the LDS, future programming should be adjusted to more effectively tackle these challenges. By addressing these gaps, LAGs can play a more significant role in driving sustainable and regenerative development, ensuring that rural communities can thrive in the face of current and future challenges.

This means the need for continued efforts to strengthen the coherence between local, regional, and national strategies. Improving this alignment will be crucial for addressing the challenges, such as administrative and regulatory obstacles, funding shortages, and the need for greater political support.

These findings are consistent with the comments on the priorities and effectiveness of the LDS in addressing key rural development challenges. The alignment between the identified risks and the perceived limitations of the LDS suggests that addressing these challenges will require not only more resources but also efforts to simplify administrative processes, secure stronger political support, and enhance community engagement. Strengthening the technical competence and knowledge base of LAGs is also crucial in overcoming these barriers and ensuring the successful implementation of their strategies.

By tapping into various national, regional, and EU-level funds, LAGs can enhance their capacity to implement effective Local Development Strategies (LDS). The widespread use of funds such as the ESF and ERDF highlights the importance of these sources in supporting the economic and social pillars of rural development. Nonetheless, it would be more straightforward and efficient with the possibility of multi-funded approaches, avoiding the need for LAGs to seek and secure the support for their territories' development, which is an objective of EU.

The measures identified by LAGs to ensure the sustainability and continuity of their initiatives reflect a comprehensive and strategic approach to rural development. By focusing on building local capacity and ownership, promoting innovation, securing long-term funding, and providing targeted support and capacity building, LAGs could lay the groundwork for the long-term success of their projects.

By implementing these measures, LAGs are not only enhancing the sustainability of their current initiatives but also building the capacity of rural communities to continue driving their own development in the future.

4.2 Reflection on Common European Themes for future LEADER/CLLD implementation

The importance of **aligning the LEADER approach and LAG interventions with the LTVRA** is emphasized to ensure that LDS effectively contribute to broader EU goals. However, while LAGs generally recognize the importance of the LTVRA and are supportive of its goals, only a small part of the LAGs are highly familiar with it, existing the need for increased knowledge and understanding of its goals and objectives.

Furthermore, while the alignment of LDS with the LTVRA is supported by many, a significant portion of LAGs are uncertain or neutral, and reveal a moderate confidence in their ability to contribute to the its goals. Moreover, LAGs believe that further efforts are needed to ensure that the goals of the LTVRA are well integrated into local development strategies, accentuating the need for increased collaboration between LAGs and higher levels of policy-making.

The **priority areas identified by LAGs for future programming**, reflect a strategic focus on **empowering communities** and **diversifying rural economies**, also an emphasis on **ensuring access to essential services** and **promoting sustainability**.

LAGs have proven their capability in mobilizing local actors through the LEADER approach. By actively involving rural communities in defining and implementing LDS, they reaffirm their commitment to participatory democracy. This inclusive process ensures that the strategies are duly adjusted to

each specific context and leverage local innovation to address rural development challenges.

The empowerment of rural communities continues to be one of the key priorities for future programming, further strengthening their capacity to shape and own their development paths. This reflects a strong emphasis on fostering local leadership and active community engagement in the development and implementation of LDS, namely, by supporting rural communities in developing skills, and ensuring that all groups, including vulnerable, marginalized, minorities, and also youth, are represented and actively participating in rural development initiatives.

By positioning local communities at the center of their rural regeneration, the LEADER approach emphasizes decentralized governance and participatory democracy, as well as social cohesion. This is aligned with the broader European vision included in the LTVRA. Hence, the presence of LAGs in rural areas serve as vital asset and should be considered as an added value to achieve this vision.

The need for economic diversification, has emerged as a key area of focus for future programming, acknowledging the importance of moving beyond traditional activities to embrace new opportunities in order to meet rising expectations for rural development and territorial and social cohesion.

This is tied to promoting rural entrepreneurship, rural tourism, sustainable agriculture and circular economy, to fostering economic opportunities, encouraging new business models, small businesses, social enterprises, and innovative startups; to adding value to local products and services (e.g. stimulating local branding, local food systems, and traditional crafts and services that can contribute to local economic regeneration).

These approaches, including innovative solutions, have the potential to contribute in an effective way to promoting regenerative, sustainable, inclusive, and innovative rural development, and, hence, economic and social resilience, essential for long-term transformation as mentioned in the LTVRA.

Although other themes did not feature as the top priority across all LAGs, their importance cannot be understated. For instance, LAGs are increasingly attentive to themes such as environmental

conservation, climate change adaptation, and sustainable food systems. As rural areas often face environmental challenges, LAGs are well-positioned to promote environmentally conscious development, which also ties into broader EU objectives.

In what regards social resilience, many LAGs report challenges in engaging vulnerable groups and fostering social cohesion, therefore, social innovation in rural areas, by promoting inclusive practices and policies, could address issues such as out-migration, aging populations, and poverty, creating more resilient and equitable rural societies.

The relatively lower prioritization of digital connectivity, transport and infrastructure, suggests that while these are recognized as important, they may be seen as dependent on broader structural support. These remain crucial, as they provide the foundation for enhanced communication and economic opportunities and, therefore, for LAGs to successfully implement innovative strategies and foster entrepreneurship.

Regarding the **roles that they could assume**, LAGs strategically position themselves to play a pivotal role in the realization of the LTVRA. Collaboration with stakeholders and providing guidance to local communities are seen as the most relevant roles, suggesting that LAGs recognize the importance of both collective effort and community support.

In this sense, a significant portion of LAGs express strong interest in receiving additional training and support to better integrate the objectives of the LTVRA into their activities. This suggests a proactive stance toward aligning local initiatives with broader European rural development goals, but at the same time keeping their territorial specificities.

For the LEADER approach to fully capitalize on the identified themes, LAGs need enhanced **training and capacity building**. Specifically, focusing on equipping LAGs with the most adequate skills to foster the regeneration of their territories and communities, in alignment with the LTVRA. These initiatives should also improve LAGs understanding of the tools and instruments available, while also promoting greater stability in management.

The value of **transnational cooperation** is underscored by LAGs. Therefore, it is essential to promote networking and partnerships across MS.

These initiatives should be expanded, enabling LAGs to share best practices, pool resources, and develop solutions that are adaptable across different regions.

LAG networks and individual LAGs themselves present a valuable platform for facilitating the coordination and ensuring that EU strategies are translated into tangible actions at the local level. Therefore, leveraging LAGs and LAG networks as intermediaries can help bridge the gap between EU and national policies and local needs, ensuring that LDS are tailored to address the challenges and opportunities faced by rural areas.

By building on the LAGs and LAGs networks knowledge and expertise and by taking advantage of the already existing assistance mechanisms, the efforts to establish and sustain a supportive framework for rural communities could be further encouraged, implemented and operationalized, ensuring that LAGs have access to the necessary guidance, resources, and expertise to successfully cope with the objectives they are expected to fulfil.

However, several **obstacles were identified in relation to the successful implementation of LDS**. The major challenges identified include **political and regulatory obstacles** and **lack of funding**. These barriers highlight the need for greater policy support and financial resources to improve the successful implementation of the LTVRA at the local level.

These issues have long been recognized by LAGs, as well as by other rural stakeholders, and even by public administrations. However, notwithstanding this widespread acknowledgment, there has been little or no progress in addressing them. These longstanding concerns are again corroborated, reinforcing the perception that regulatory and administrative barriers continue to hinder effective and efficient rural development efforts.

One of the report's key insights emphasizes **policy alignment and strategic flexibility**, reaffirming the ongoing concern of LAGs for the need for greater alignment between regional/national strategies and local priorities and needs. In fact, the LEADER approach faces ongoing challenges and a lack of adequate policy coordination, which jeopardizes the consistency and stability of support for rural development.

However, the integration of the EU rural development goals, including through the themes of intervention mentioned above, requires national policies and flexible frameworks that allow LAGs to adjust their LDS based on local needs and expectations. EU policies should incentivize this flexibility, enabling LAGs to adjust as economic and social conditions evolve.

In this scope, it is believed that a stronger representation at the EU and national levels is needed to ensure that LAGs have a voice in policy design and for aligning their activities with LTVRA objectives. Support should be provided for LAGs to advocate for their needs, share their challenges, and contribute to shaping policies focusing and/or affecting rural areas.

Despite the LDS potential for transformative change, these instruments often face challenges in capturing **financial support** for their implementation. This difficulty stems from the multi-layered nature of funding allocation processes, which entail various political and bureaucratic layers before reaching the local level.

Furthermore, the fragmented nature of funding sources and decision-making structures can aggravate the challenge of assuring financial support for implementing LDS. Coordinating efforts across multiple layers of governance should be assured through an effective collaboration and communication among decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders.

To better address diverse rural needs, particularly in regions with limited funding resources, efficient multi-funded approaches should be encouraged. The decrease in MS adopting multi-funding in the 2023-2027 programming period limits the capacity of LAGs to draw on the broadest range of resources to face rural development challenges and needs. By increasing the articulation between funds and allowing direct access to ERDF and ESF, and eventually other EU funds, alongside the EAFRD, LAGs could effectively support initiatives that cover economic, social, and environmental objectives.

Another aspect, are the bureaucratic and administrative procedures disproportionately affecting smaller-scale projects. LAGs should be allowed to play a more relevant role in channeling funds to specific initiatives and projects within their intervention areas.

Overcoming these challenges requires streamlining administrative processes, enhancing coordination among decision makers, and advocating for policies that prioritize and facilitate funding flows to rural development.

4.3 Recommendations for future LEADER/CLLD implementation

4.3.1 LTVRA implementation

For the LTVRA implementation and aspiration to truly drive rural revitalization, it is essential to strengthen the communication and dissemination of its objectives among LAGs, ensuring that they are fully engaged, equipped and motivated to align their local strategies with the broader European vision.

4.3.2 Key areas for intervention

Empowerment of rural communities emerged as a top priority, with LAGs playing an essential role in building local capacity and ensuring that rural communities have an active voice in the development process.

The policy framework should provide LAGs with the tools and resources needed to engage with their communities and empower them effectively. This means flexible scope of support to enhance participatory governance, to actively involve rural communities in the decision-making processes.

While certain themes / areas are "traditional" in the interventions of LAGs, there are others, such as digital connectivity, transport, and infrastructure, typically fall under the responsibility of other institutional actors, and are compatible with the financial scale of LDS. These larger-scale interventions require broader coordination and funding beyond what is feasible for LAGs, highlighting the need for collaboration with other stakeholders to achieve comprehensive rural development.

4.3.3 Training and knowledge sharing

Capacity-building programs for LAGs within the LTVRA should be established, aligning their activities with EU rural development goals. Priority areas for additional support include funding access, understanding the LEADER approach, and enhancing networking and partnerships. Support in planning and implementing LDS, as well as monitoring and evaluation, is crucial to ensure effective execution and continuous improvement. Training should also focus on sustainable practices, eco-

nomics development, tourism promotion, innovation, digital transformation, and community engagement.

Transnational cooperation and networking are essential for sharing best practices, addressing common challenges, and fostering complementarities. LAGs highly value collaboration with other LAGs and stakeholders to enhance the LEADER approach, using cooperation as a flexible tool to achieve LDS objectives.

Expanding opportunities for transnational collaboration on key rural development issues is necessary, alongside creating EU and national platforms to systematize project results, facilitate knowledge exchange, and integrate best practices. Such cooperation also strengthens fund management and governance, allowing LAGs to improve their skills and apply insights from other regions.

4.3.4 Encourage multi-funded approaches across Member-States

The use of multifunded approaches tend to benefit a broader range of financial resources, which enhances the scope and impact of rural development initiatives. There is a need to initiate a broader reflection on the fragmentation of European funding for rural areas. While EAFRD has usually played the largest role in supporting rural development, in the recent past it has significantly reduced the focus on rural infrastructure, services, and local development as a whole.

EU authorities should promote and support the implementation of multi-funded models in the territorial instruments, considering that other funds, besides EAFRD, could provide valuable opportunities for rural areas. Additionally, provide technical support, guidance, and capacity-building initiatives to help Managing Authorities to understand the advantages and effectively implement multi-funded CLLD models.

As some relevant intervention areas often fall outside the primary focus of EAFRD funding, such as social inclusion and wellbeing, it makes it difficult for LAGs to address these and other issues adequately. The multi-funded approaches could provide additional funding sources for supporting a broader scope of projects.

4.3.5 Ensure flexibility in programmatic and regulatory frameworks

Regulatory and administrative obstacles as significant challenges for LAGs to implement LDS adjusted to local needs, and, overall, in an effective way.

This underlines the need for establishing a cohesive and adaptable approach to territorial funding. The EC should advocate to the MS the need for flexible programmatic and regulatory frameworks that allow LAGs to tailor their LDS in response to local needs and emerging opportunities, while minimizing the excessive bureaucracy tied to current procedures and ensuring accountability.

Additionally, LAGs should see their role in supporting innovation and capacity for rural transformation duly strengthened. Innovation should be viewed as a core component of the LAGs role in rural development. There should be a supportive framework to encourage LAGs to take on a more proactive role in integrating innovation in rural areas, by innovative practices, inclusive decision-making, and creative problem-solving into their LDS. This should be appropriately reflected in the delivery mechanisms.

To this, there is a need to further engage with policy dialogue between the EC and national authorities to drive for more adaptable regulations and simplified administrative procedures supportive of more innovative projects under LEADER and local development initiatives. The national authorities' role must be realigned to prioritize the overarching goal of cohesion and territorial development.

The key findings do not introduce anything fundamentally new, but rather reinforces the long-standing challenges to ensure that the potential of the LEADER approach and LAGs is fully realized in driving regenerative and sustainable rural development across Europe.

These challenges have long been well-known and recognized, not only by the LAGs themselves but also by public administrations and other key actors in rural development. However, despite this widespread awareness, little meaningful progress has been made in addressing them. Now, more than ever, it is crucial for these needs to be met with strong commitment from the relevant authorities, beginning with the EC, which is spearheading the LTVRA.

The moment has come for decisive action to ensure that the full potential of the LEADER approach, LAGs and CLLD instrument is harnessed to drive regenerative, sustainable and inclusive development of the rural territories.

The LEADER approach and LAGs are the best positioned to drive sustainable and transformative rural development across the EU. It is essential to provide LAGs with an evident institutional recognition, along with increased resources and autonomy, to amplify their territorial impact. Their function goes well beyond project implementation, as they play a critical role in fostering territorial cohesion and developing local networks.

The key-findings reaffirm the need for a multi-faceted path that strengthens the implementation of the LEADER approach and, therefore, the core roles of LAGs while addressing the key challenges identified in the questionnaire.

By promoting community empowerment, innovation, transnational cooperation and knowledge exchange, adequate funding, flexible regulatory frameworks and efficient administrative procedures, LAGs can maximize their impact in achieving the LTVRA objectives and regenerating rural areas in an effective, sustainable and long-term manner.

These steps will ensure that the LEADER approach continues to be a catalyst for regenerative and sustainable development and inclusive growth across rural areas. To achieve this, the LEADER approach must be reinforced, and the legitimacy and expertise of LAGs must be properly trusted, recognized and supported.

To make results of LEADER approach and LDS implementation more evident, there is a need to better design and support the monitoring and evaluation systems. LAGs require user-friendly tools for tracking progress, assessing outcomes, and measuring the results of LDS and LEADER approach implementation, allowing continuous improvement.

Effective monitoring and evaluation require robust data collection and analysis. Providing LAGs with training in these areas ensures they can demonstrate their impact clearly and effectively to the relevant stakeholders and decision-makers.