

## Community-led local development: challenges and opportunities

The EU introduced 'community-led local development' (CLLD) in the 2014-2020 programming period, broadening significantly the scope of what was known as the 'LEADER approach'. Three years into this period significant challenges still face the practitioners and offer opportunities for better interaction and cooperation with the research community.

### The evolution of local development in the EU context

Local development in Europe has gone through various stages<sup>1</sup>. In the 1980s it was a spontaneous phenomenon that arose mostly in response to an economic crisis which had thrown up new responses such as 'local employment initiatives' (LEIs). This phenomenon was identified and analysed by the OECD's LEED Programme and was nurtured over a number of years by the action-research and networking activities of the European Commission's LEDA Programme. LEDA distilled the key characteristics of bottom-up local development approaches, including the triptych of 'local partnership', 'local area', and 'local development strategy', offering a generic model of area-based development by local partnerships with a whole host of social and economic development objectives. In 1991 this model was adopted in the Community Initiative 'LEADER' and has since been used as a 'tool' in EU funding programmes, mostly in the field of rural development.

Overall, the period before 2000 was marked by continuous political effort to transform the new phenomenon of local development into a genuine component of European economic development. This led to an increasingly sophisticated array of initiatives, tools, programmes and measures. However, after 2000, the drive was lost and local development was neglected in favour of other priorities, either broad ones such as EU enlargement and climate change mitigation or sector-based ones like flexibility of the labour market and competitiveness through technological innovation and R&D<sup>2</sup>.

After almost 30 years of local development ideas and practice in Europe, local development had lost its vibrancy, having either become 'part of the furniture', e.g. in rural development and LEADER, or having been more or less forgotten in other fields. Since 2010, there has been a revival in interest in local development at both EU and national levels. This was the result of the need to respond on the ground to the effects of the financial and economic crisis, echoing the early steps of local development, as well as other factors, such as the strong enthusiasm for Europe and the territorial approaches, especially LEADER, in the new Member States, the interest generated by the introduction of the local development approach in new policy areas (e.g. fisheries) and the whole process of preparing for better coordination and more effective use of the EU funds in the 2014-2020 period.

### Challenges for CLLD in 2014-2020 and beyond

The bottom-up local development approach, systematised in successive LEADER periods, became known as 'the LEADER approach'. In the 2014-2020 funding period, it was relabelled as 'community-led local development' (CLLD)<sup>3</sup> and was offered to all types of area and context: rural, urban, fisheries. EU Member States were given the option to use four of the European Structural and Investment Funds in support of CLLD: the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

Already, by the beginning of 2017, over 2400 local action groups throughout the EU have been approved and are implementing their local development strategies, and the number is expected to exceed 2700 by the end of the year. With the debate starting about the EU's post-2020 multi-annual

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ldnet.eu/ldnet-the-e-book-overview/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ldnet.eu/ldnet-historical-review-of-ld/>

<sup>3</sup> Articles 32-35 of the Common Provisions Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013

financial framework, the question arises as to whether CLLD is heading towards becoming a mainstream tool for cohesion and related policies beyond 2020.

However, it seems premature to answer this question in the affirmative. Few countries<sup>4</sup> have chosen to use more than one fund for CLLD and those that have done so are still struggling to put a meaningful multi-fund approach<sup>5</sup> into operation. All levels – EU, national, sub-national – seem preoccupied with governance issues in their narrowest sense: programme management and ‘how to spend the money’. There is a risk that local action groups may end up replicating the bureaucratic approaches of state authorities, preoccupied with administering calls for projects prepared by consultants and the paperwork of payments and controls, with only a thin veneer of ‘local strategy’ pretending to hold the selected projects together into an integrated approach. In this climate, broader governance aspects such as partnership working and links with community development may be neglected.

### **Opportunities for closer practitioner/researcher cooperation**

Since 2011 LDnet provides a forum for sharing information and knowledge among experts, researchers and all those active in local development. In this capacity it has been trying to go beyond the tunnel vision of CLLD as a mere tool for delivering EU programmes, to offer a forum for different perspectives and different actors, and to pay attention to key aspects of the local economy and society and the relevance of the policies pursued through CLLD.

For instance, LDnet has organised workshops and published papers on:

- urban/ rural links through the food sector<sup>6</sup>;
- rural resilience as a key to sustainable rural development<sup>7</sup>;
- achieving social inclusion in CLLD in the context of the results orientation of the ESI Funds<sup>8</sup>.

These and a whole host of other topics merit further and more systematic exploration that would benefit from a close interaction between practitioners and researchers. Indeed, there are many challenges such as growing inequalities, globalisation, climate change, refugees and migrants, which call for innovative multi-sector solutions at the local level, in tandem with policy initiatives at other levels.

Evaluating the outcomes of LEADER/CLLD-type interventions presents further challenges, not least due to the fact that they do not fit the standardised evaluation frameworks established for ‘mainstream’ EU programmes. There have been various attempts to customise such evaluation methodologies in the past under LEADER<sup>9</sup> and now, more broadly, under CLLD<sup>10</sup>, but the adequacy of these methodologies still needs to be proven. Anyway, some localities have received support over several programming periods and they offer a unique opportunity for a longitudinal analysis and an overall assessment of their socio-economic impact, as well as the resilience and prospects of local communities.

LDnet would like to engage with researchers interested in local development to create partnerships between practitioners and researchers in order to respond to some of these challenges and opportunities.

**Haris Martinos**

**LDnet**

<http://ldnet.eu/>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://ldnet.eu/how-are-the-eu-member-states-using-clld/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ldnet.eu/challenges-facing-the-implementation-of-clld-and-the-multi-fund-approach/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ldnet.eu/food-sovereignty-and-urban-rural-integration/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://ldnet.eu/resilience-and-its-core-principles-the-key-to-sustainable-rural-development/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://ldnet.eu/the-challenge-of-achieving-social-inclusion-in-clld-in-the-context-of-the-results-orientation-of-the-esi-funds/>

<sup>9</sup> [http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/leader/leader/leader-tool-kit/monitoring\\_evaluation/en/monitoring\\_evaluation\\_en.html](http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/leader/leader/leader-tool-kit/monitoring_evaluation/en/monitoring_evaluation_en.html)

<sup>10</sup> See FARNET guide “[Results-oriented CLLD in fisheries areas](#)” and Rural Evaluation Helpdesk guidance on the evaluation of LEADER (under preparation)

