**LEADER**

LEADER, introduced in 1991, was the EU’s participatory, bottom-up method for the rural development policy, later extended to coastal and urban areas. It centred around local action groups (LAGs) made up of private and public sector members of rural or coastal communities. Local action groups contributed to the design of a local development strategy and were responsible for initiating and funding projects to meet local needs. The evolution of the LEADER approach, led to a significant increase in financial support and the number of local action groups, in particular at the beginning of the 2007-2013 programming period.

The expectation behind the LEADER approach was that there was an added value compared with traditional top-down management of EU funds. The LEADER approach sought to facilitate local engagement and empowerment through local strategy development, delivery and resource allocation. It took advantage of the expertise and experience of local communities to define their development needs.

LEADER considered that local people were the best experts to drive the development of their territory (bottom-up approach), defined as a small cohesive area (10 000 – 150 000 inhabitants) with a local identity (area-based approach). In this area, local players gathered in a local action group (local partnership), which promoted links between local actors (networking). Furthermore, local action groups in different regions or Member States undertook joint projects to work on common solutions to similar local challenges (cooperation). Bottom-up approaches and interactions between different sectors at local level (integrated and multi-sectoral strategy) mobilised local potential. Local groups were best placed to identify integrated local solutions to local problems and were more responsive as well as bringing new solutions to local development (innovation). Participation in local decision-making generated enthusiasm and increased commitment and thereby resulted in better, more sustainable, local rural development.

In 2014-2020, LEADER was a mandatory part of all rural development programmes. From this point, EU legislation required Member States, except Croatia, to spend at least 5 % of their rural development funding on LEADER. The minimum contribution of Croatia during the 2014-2020 programming period was set at half of the percentage of the other Member States, i.e. 2.5 %. The total number of LEADER projects (for the 2014-2020 period) amounted to 143 487 by the end of 2020. The rural development programmes were extended to cover 2021 and 2022.

The 2021-2022 period saw the introduction of Community Led Local Development (CLLD), similar to LEADER which continues on an annual funding basis, with the assurance from Scottish Government that 2024-25 year should be the final transition year from LEADER to CLLD.