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Dear Commissioner Serafin,

I hope this letter finds you well. As the European Commission undertakes its review of the multiannual financial framework (MFF), we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this process and ensure that participatory, community-led approaches to rural development are effectively reflected in EU budgetary planning.

We are currently preparing a contribution through the Commission's consultation platform, outlining key recommendations for strengthening LEADER/community-led local development (CLLD) as a strategic tool within EU financial instruments. However, we also believe that a direct exchange with your team would allow us to provide additional insights and discuss potential avenues for integrating participatory rural development for internal, coastal, insular, mountainous and remote areas more effectively into the MFF structure. We would therefore like to formally request a meeting with you or your cabinet. Additionally, if there are any task forces or working groups focused on the MFF review, we would be very keen to contribute.

LEADER/CLLD has been one of the EU's most effective bottom-up development tools for over 30 years, empowering local communities to design and implement projects that directly address their economic, social, and environmental challenges, *ie* participation into Local Action Groups (LAGs). Despite its success, its future remains uncertain due to budgetary constraints, administrative complexity, and inconsistent uptake across Member States.

As part of the MFF revision, we urge the Commission to reaffirm its commitment to participatory rural development by strengthening the role of LEADER/CLLD across multiple EU funds. In this regard, we would like to put forward the following key budgetary recommendations:

1. **Ensuring a stable and sufficient financial allocation for LEADER/CLLD**
 - a. To make participatory rural development tools mandatory across all EU member states in the next multiannual financial framework (MFF), ensuring that leader/CLLD remains a core pillar of EU territorial policies.
 - b. The current 5% minimum allocation within the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) has proven insufficient given the increasing demands on Local Action Groups. We propose to double the amount currently dedicated to it to match its expanded role in rural transformation.
 - c. Beyond EAFRD, a minimum earmarking for LEADER/CLLD within the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) should be considered to enable broader rural development investments beyond agriculture.

2. Supporting multi-fund CLLD implementation through a more flexible budgetary framework





The complexity of managing multiple EU funds for LEADER/CLLD (EAFRD, ERDF, ESF+, EMFAF, and JTF) has discouraged broader uptake. We propose a harmonised regulatory framework for LEADER/CLLD across all EU funds, with unified rules for financial management, auditing, and reporting. This would simplify fund management, reduce bureaucracy, and enable a truly cross-sectoral approach to rural development.

3. Expanding CLLD to align with key EU priorities

The next MFF should ensure that LEADER/CLLD is explicitly included in major EU strategic priorities, such as:

- a. The Green Deal and the Just Transition Fund, to support rural communities in implementing local climate adaptation and renewable energy projects.
- b. The Digital Decade, ensuring digital transformation strategies include participatory rural approaches to broadband expansion, teleworking hubs, and digital skills training.
- c. Social inclusion and youth employment initiatives, using LAGs to deliver locally driven employment and inclusion programmes under ESF+.

4. Enhancing financial stability and pre-financing for LAGs

Many LAGs struggle with cash flow and operational continuity due to delayed fund disbursements. To address this, we propose:

- a. Increasing pre-financing rates for LAGs to ensure financial stability and avoid disruptions in project implementation.
- b. Introducing multi-annual funding security for LAGs within the MFF, reducing uncertainty between programming periods.

5. Ensuring stronger support for participatory rural development in candidate and neighbouring countries

LEADER/CLLD has played a crucial role in EU accession processes, strengthening local governance and economic resilience. The next MFF should expand funding for LEADER-like initiatives in the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) to help candidate countries integrate participatory development models into their national policies.

As the Commission shapes the next MFF, we strongly believe that participatory rural development must be a key consideration in budgetary planning. We would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you or your team to discuss these proposals in greater detail. Additionally, if the Commission is establishing task forces or working groups on budgetary priorities, we would be keen to contribute to discussions related to territorial cohesion, rural development, and participatory governance.

In parallel to our institutional advocacy, we are currently launching a Europe-wide petition to gather public and stakeholder support for these proposals. You may find the petition text here: https://elard.eu/petition_en/

We look forward to your response and remain at your disposal for further discussions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Piotr Sadłocha
President of ELARD





**European Leader Association
for Rural Development**
Brussels, www.elard.eu

**POLISH
PRESIDENCY**
2025-2026



The LEADER approach

LEADER (Liaison Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy) is a European rural development programme. Created in 1991 as a complement to the first pillar of the CAP in order to support the transformation and diversification of rural areas, it now is a cross-cutting axis of its second pillar. The LEADER programme, with a minimum budget of 5% from the EAFRD in every Member State supports innovative projects that are part of a local strategy for the development of rural areas, developed and supported by a Local Action Group (LAG). These groups bring together public actors (ex. elected representatives of local authorities) and private actors (ex. companies, cooperatives, or associations). It allows local actors to define priorities and actions at their level (bottom-up approach), rather than having ready-made measures imposed on them.

ELARD

ELARD is a European association that represents nearly 2,600 Local Action Groups (LAGs) from 30 countries, including countries in the European Union's neighbourhood, which have adopted and implement the LEADER methodology for local development by local actors.

We are actively working to make the LEADER approach better known among European decision-makers and to showcase it as the solution it can become to the many challenges rural areas face. We support actor-led local development and represent the interests of LAGs to national governments and European institutions.

Since 1 January 2025, ELARD has been chaired by the Polish network of Local Action Groups, Polska Sieć LGD.

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