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**Subject: Strengthening Territorial Cohesion through LEADER/CLLD in the Next MFF**

Dear Vice-President Fitto,

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with us a few weeks ago. We greatly appreciated the opportunity to discuss the role of participatory rural development in EU cohesion policy and to exchange views on the future of LEADER/CLLD. As you encouraged us to do, we are now following up with concrete proposals to ensure that rural areas across the EU continue to benefit from these crucial development tools in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

We fully agree that LEADER/CLLD should not be confined to the Common Agricultural Policy but rather recognised and reinforced as a horizontal territorial development tool that can address a wide range of rural, coastal, insular, mountainous, remote, and peri-urban challenges. While CLLD is already eligible under Cohesion Policy (ERDF and ESF+), its application remains inconsistent across Member States, often due to administrative complexity and insufficient financial incentives. In many countries, CLLD is still only implemented under EAFRD, limiting its full potential.

To unlock the full capacity of LEADER/CLLD as a place-based, participatory governance tool and solution for many of the challenges rural areas are facing now, we propose the following actions:

**1. Strengthen and expand multi-fund CLLD implementation across EU policies**

Despite its eligibility under multiple EU funds, LEADER/CLLD remains underutilised outside of the CAP. To ensure a truly integrated territorial approach, we propose:

- 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.
- A minimum earmarking for LEADER/CLLD within the ERDF, EMFAF and ESF+, ensuring that all types of rural communities (coastal, insular, mountainous, remote) can benefit from non-agricultural investments such as digitalisation, social inclusion, and local economic diversification.
- A clearer alignment between LEADER/CLLD and strategic EU priorities, such as the Just Transition Fund (JTF) for post-industrial rural areas, Smart Villages, and Green Deal implementation at the local level.

**2. Simplify administrative rules and harmonize the regulatory framework for multi-Fund CLLD**

One of the biggest obstacles to expanding CLLD beyond EAFRD is the administrative complexity of managing multiple funds, as each fund has different rules for programming, reporting, and financial controls. To streamline implementation, we propose:

- A harmonised regulatory framework for LEADER/CLLD across all EU funds, with unified rules for financial management, auditing, and reporting. This simplification would greatly reduce the





administrative burden on Local Action Groups (LAGs) and managing authorities, making multi-fund implementation more efficient, fair, and accessible across the EU.

- A centralised EU technical assistance facility to support LAGs in navigating multi-fund financing and to address disparities in Member State implementation.

### **3. Strengthen the Role of LAGs as territorial governance actors**

LAGs play a crucial role in territorial cohesion by fostering community-led solutions, but they remain under-recognised in broader EU governance frameworks. We propose:

- The official recognition of LAGs as facilitators of EU policy implementation at the local level, particularly for initiatives related to rural demographic challenges, territorial resilience, and economic transition.
- Integrating LAGs into EU crisis response mechanisms, ensuring they are included in rural emergency planning, demographic adaptation strategies, and migration response efforts.
- Leveraging LAGs to combat rural disinformation by formally involving them in EU communication strategies, as they are trusted local actors capable of countering misinformation about EU policies.

### **4. Reinforce LEADER/CLLD's role in the digital and green transitions**

Weather internal, coastal, insular, remote or mountainous, Rural areas face significant challenges in the twin transitions. LEADER/CLLD must be leveraged as a tool to localise these efforts by:

- Expanding LEADER/CLLD within the Digital Decade framework to support rural digitalisation, teleworking hubs, and Smart Villages initiatives.
- Recognising LAGs as key facilitators of Green Deal policies, allowing them to lead community-driven renewable energy, circular economy, and climate adaptation projects.
- Introducing a dedicated LEADER/CLLD Green Transition Fund, supporting local sustainability projects that do not fit neatly under traditional CAP or Cohesion Policy objectives.

### **5. Ensure adequate and flexible financial support for CLLD in the next MFF**

While LEADER currently has a minimum 5% allocation under EAFRD, this does not reflect the increasing demands placed on LAGs. We propose:

1. Raising the LEADER allocation under EAFRD by 5% at least to match its expanded role.
2. Guaranteeing co-financing flexibility for LEADER/CLLD projects, allowing Member States to adjust national contributions to better reflect territorial needs.
3. Creating a dedicated EU-funded mechanism for transnational LEADER/CLLD cooperation, ensuring knowledge exchange and best practice dissemination between LAGs across the EU and beyond.

### **6. Strengthening LEADER/CLLD in candidate countries and EU neighbouring regions and encouraging further the sharing of best practice**

Beyond the EU, LEADER/CLLD has been instrumental in fostering resilience in candidate and neighbouring countries, where it has contributed to socio-economic stability and EU integration. We recommend:

- Expanding LEADER/CLLD within the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) to ensure candidate countries have structured financial support for community-led development.
- Providing technical assistance for LEADER/CLLD implementation in pre-accession countries, ensuring they can integrate multi-fund approaches from the outset.
- Strengthening EU-LAG cooperation with non-EU countries, facilitating joint projects that promote economic and social convergence.





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As we discussed in our meeting, CLLD is not just a rural development tool—it is a tested and effective governance method that should be mainstreamed across EU policies. By strengthening its implementation, simplifying administrative processes, and ensuring adequate financial support, we can unlock its full potential for territorial cohesion and resilience.

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/](https://elard.eu/petition_en/)

We appreciate your engagement on this issue and look forward to further contributing to the Commission's work in shaping the next MFF. We remain at your disposal for further discussions and would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you or your team to explore these proposals in greater depth.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

**Piotr Sadłocha**  
**President of ELARD**



