



“LEADER for everyone”

**Final report of the Finnish Presidency of
ELARD 2011-2013**



SUMMARY

The Village Action Association of Finland (SYTY) has held the presidency of the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) during the period 2011-2013. The present report records the background and the objectives of the Finnish presidency as well as the positions and actions taken by ELARD in the course of the three years term.

ELARD is a non-profit making association that aims to improve the quality of life in rural areas and to maintain their population by promoting the LEADER bottom-up methodology in local development. One of the most important aims of ELARD is to support its members in their efforts to network with each other in order to cooperate and disseminate good LEADER practices and know-how in Europe and beyond. In addition, ELARD represents the interests and needs of its members in front of international, European, and national institutions and it has made concrete efforts to make the LEADER approach better known among the European decision-makers.

The important policy objective of the Association is to maintain the LEADER approaches' position as an essential part of the European rural development policy. The Finnish presidency term of ELARD has coincided with a crucial time for the preparations of the programming period 2014-2020 of the CAP under which the regulations and financing of the LEADER program is decided. ELARD has been actively taking part in the debate on the future of the LEADER methodology and the introduction of Community Led Local Development (CLLD) post 2013.

The aims of the Finnish Presidency of ELARD have been the following:

- 1) Strengthening the LEADER method.
- 2) Development of the operational environment of LEADER.
- 3) Expansion of ELARD's membership base.
- 4) Promotion of the transnational cooperation of the LEADER actors.
- 5) Production of a high quality final report on the Finnish presidency.

After active advocacy work performed during the previous presidencies and the Finnish presidency of ELARD, many of the major goals of the Association have been achieved and will be implemented in the programming period 2014-2020. The increased visibility and prestige of the Association have facilitated the advocacy work and during the three years term ELARD has been invited to numerous meetings and events organized at the highest European and international level. Moreover, the representatives of the Association have been

received by the main European decision-makers in charge of the CAP reform. The cooperation with European Network for Rural Development (EN RD), other LEADER actors and other civil society networks (e.g. ARC2020, E.C.M., PREPARE) has been fruitful.

The recruitment of new members to join ELARD has also been efficiently carried forward during the Finnish presidency resulting in the significant expansion of the membership base especially in the countries set as target territories, namely in northern Europe and in the Pre-Accession Countries of the EU.

All in all, the activities of ELARD have increased substantially during the Finnish presidency particularly in terms of promoting transnational cooperation opportunities for its members, namely through the organization of yearly events and ELARD's LAGs Staff Exchange Program among others.

JULKAISUN KUVAUS

Suomen kylätoiminta ry (SYTY) on toiminut European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) -yhdistyksen puheenjohtajanaan vuosina 2011-2013. Käsillä oleva raportti kuvaa Suomen puheenjohtajakauden taustoja ja tavoitteita, sekä yhdistyksen kannanottoja ja toimintaa kolmivuotiskauden aikana.

ELARD on voittoa tavoittelematon yhdistys, jonka tavoitteena on parantaa maaseutualaueiden elämänlaatua ja tukea niiden positiivista väestökehitystä edistämällä ylhäältä alaspäin ohjautuvan LEADER-metodin soveltamista aluekehityksessä. Yksi ELARD:in tärkeimmistä päämääristä on tukea jäsenistönsä keskinäistä verkostoitumista, ja näin edistää näiden välistä yhteistyötä sekä levittää hyviä LEADER käytäntöjä ja osaamista sekä Euroopassa että sen ulkopuolella. Lisäksi ELARD edustaa jäsenistöään ja ajaa sen etua kansainvälisten, eurooppalaisten ja kansallisten instituutioiden edessä. Se on tehnyt määrätietoista työtä tehdäkseen LEADER-metodin paremmin tunnetuksi eurooppalaisten päätöksentekijöiden keskuudessa.

Yhdistyksen tärkeä politiikkatavoite on säilyttää LEADER-metodin asema eurooppalaisen maaseudun kehittämissä politiikan keskeisenä osana. Suomen puheenjohtajakausi on ollut ratkaisevaa aikaa valmisteltaessa EU:n yhteisen maatalouspolitiikan (CAP) 2014-2020 ohjelmakautta, jonka puitteissa LEADER-ohjelman säännöistä ja rahoituksesta päätetään. ELARD on ottanut aktiivisesti osaa keskusteluun LEADER-metodin tulevaisuudesta vuoden 2013 jälkeisenä aikana.

ELARD:in Suomen puheenjohtajakauden tavoitteet ovat olleet seuraavat:

- 1) LEADER-metodin vahvistaminen
- 2) LEADER-toimintaympäristön kehittäminen
- 3) ELARD:in jäsenpohjan vahvistaminen
- 4) LEADER-toimijoiden kansainvälisen yhteistyön edistäminen
- 5) Laadukkaan loppuraportin tuottaminen puheenjohtajakaudelle

Sekä aikaisempien puheenjohtajamainien että Suomen kaudella tehdyn aktiivisen vaikuttamistyön seurauksena useita yhdistyksen toiminnalle asetettuja tavoitteita on saavutettu ohjelmakaudella 2014-2020. Yhdistyksen kasvanut näkyvyys ja arvovalta ovat helpottaneet vaikuttamistyötä. Kolmivuotiskauden aikana yhdistys on saanut kutsuja kokouksiin ja tilaisuuksiin, joita on järjestetty korkeimmalla eurooppalaisella ja kansainvälisellä tasolla ja keskeiset yhteisen maatalouspolitiikan kehittämisestä vastaavat eurooppalaiset päätöksentekijät ovat ottaneet vastaa yhdistyksen edustajia. Yhteistyö EU:n maaseutuverkoston (EN RD),

muiden LEADER-toimijoiden (esim. FARNET), sekä muiden kansalaisyhteiskuntaverkoston (esim. ARC, E.C.M., PREPARE) kanssa on ollut hedelmällistä.

Myös uusien jäsenien rekrytointi on ollut tehokasta Suomen puheenjohtajakaudella. Yhdistyksen jäsenpohja on laajentunut erityisesti tavoitealueiksi asetetuissa pohjoisen Euroopan maissa sekä Euroopan unioniin liittymistä valmistelemissä maissa.

Kaiken kaikkiaan ELARD:in toiminta on laajentunut huomattavasti Suomen puheenjohtajakaudella. Kokemukset ovat olleet erittäin positiivisia jäsenistön kansainvälistä yhteistyötä edistämään pyrkivistä uusista toimintamuodoista, jollaisia ovat olleet muun muassa vuosittaisten tapahtumien järjestäminen sekä ELARD:in toimintaryhmille suunnatun toimihenkilövaihto-ohjelman käynnistäminen.

BESKRIVNING AV PUBLIKATIONEN

Byaverksamhet i Finland rf (SYTY) har innehavt ordförandeskapet i föreningen European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) under åren 2011-2013. Den här rapporten beskriver bakgrunden och målen för Finlands ordförandeskap samt ståndpunkter och åtgärder som föreningen har vidtagit under treårsperioden.

ELARD är en icke-vinstdrivande förening som syftar till att förbättra livskvaliteten på landsbygden och för att bibehålla befolkningen genom att främja LEADERs "bottom-up"-metod i lokal utveckling. Ett av de viktigaste syftena med ELARD är att stödja sina medlemmar i deras nätverkande med varandra för att samarbeta och sprida god LEADER-praxis och kunskande, i och utanför Europa. Dessutom företräder ELARD sina medlemmars intressen bland internationella, europeiska och nationella institutioner. Föreningen har gjort stora ansträngningar för att göra LEADER-metoden mer känd bland de europeiska beslutsfattarna.

Ett av de viktiga politiska målen med föreningen är att bevara LEADER-metodernas ställning som en viktig del av den europeiska politiken för landsbygdsutveckling. Det finska ordförandeskapet har varit en avgörande tid för förberedelserna av programperioden 2014-2020 och reform av den gemensamma jordbrukspolitiken (CAP). ELARD har deltagit aktivt i debatten om LEADER-metodens framtid efter 2013.

Syftet med det finska ordförandeskapet i ELARD har varit följande:

- 1) Förstärka LEADER-metoden
- 2) Utveckling av den operativa miljön för LEADER
- 3) Utöka ELARD:s medlemsbas
- 4) Främja internationellt samarbete mellan LEADER-aktörer
- 5) Producera en högkvalitativ slutrapport om det finska ordförandeskapet

Som ett resultat av aktivt påverkansarbete under både de föregående ordförandeskapen och det finska

ordförandeskapet i ELARD, har många av de övergripande syftena med föreningen uppnåtts för programperioden 2014-2020. Föreningens ökade synlighet och prestige har underlättat påverkansarbetet och under treårsperioden har föreningen blivit inbjuden till möten och evenemang som anordnats på högsta möjliga europeiska och internationell nivå. Dessutom har företrädarna för föreningen tagits emot av den viktigaste europeiska beslutsfattaren ansvarig för reformen av den gemensamma jordbrukspolitiken. Samarbeten med EU:s landsbygdsnätverk (EN RD), de andra aktörerna i LEADER (t.ex. FARNET), liksom med nätverk från civilsamhället (t.ex. ARC, E.C.M., PREPARE) har varit givande.

Rekryteringen av nya medlemmar till ELARD har varit effektiv under det finländska ordförandeskapet och medlemsbasen har utökats, särskilt bland länder man har haft som mål, nämligen Nordeuropeiska länder och anslutningsländer till EU.

I allmänhet har aktiviteterna utförda av ELARD ökat kraftigt under det finska ordförandeskapet. Särskilt erfarenheterna från den verksamhet som syftar till att främja transnationellt samarbete mellan föreningens medlemmar, organisering av årliga evenemang och ELARD LAG 's Exchange Program, har varit mycket positiva.



Preface

In ice-hockey the coaches talk about the importance of momentum. In an even match there might be just few seconds that turn the match to the visitor or the home team. So be awake and use the first seconds after the puck hits the ice at the start of the game (this made the Finnish junior national team World Champions few days ago). Use the opponent's penalty times, use their relaxed feeling right after they have scored. Use the momentum.

The past three years have probably witnessed the best momentum for the bottom-up rural and territorial development in the EU's history. The Common Strategic Framework (CSF) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) initiatives aim to disseminate the LEADER experience in rural development to new policy fields such as urban, social and fisheries development. In fisheries policy the first results (like more than 300 Fisheries Local Action Groups created in 2007-13) are already very promising.

LEADER dissemination has also been the number one goal of the Finnish Presidency of ELARD. LEADER in its full methodological meaning, in many Member States hasn't reached its full potential yet, even in the rural development policy. The biggest issues seem to be in decentralization, giving LAGs the autonomy they need in order to be innovative, and in the public-private partnership feature, where sometimes public tends to dominate over the private. LEADER is a flexible method, the Member States have found 28 different ways to implement it, but its spirit and specific features must always remain valid. The dissemination work also helps us identify and share best practices, reflect back to our method, which is ever evolving.

Human beings are the same everywhere, they share the dreams and needs to develop their living conditions, to strive for something better. This is why LEADER, despite its European origins, can and should also be applied in the Developing Nations too. Among the most

thoughtless reasons for why not to introduce the approach that I have heard include “the local people don’t have the capacity”. To that I answer ‘maybe they were never offered a chance!’” The European Parliament wanted to offer a better chance for overseas LAG cooperation in its CAP amendments – if I had to identify the best moment of my Presidency, seeing that would probably be it. There is a huge potential for mutually fruitful cooperation between the Developed and Developing Nations, and we need to utilize it.

Trying to use our momentum over the past three years has been very much a team play exercise. First of all I want to thank the brilliant, dedicated staff team Stefanos Loukopoulos, Anna Simola and Romina Zago – without you this would have not been possible. Warm thanks also to the previous President / Vice President Panagiotis Patras, Vice Presidents Kirsten Birke Lund and Radim Srsen, our active Council Members and ELARD Members in 22 countries – especially the new ones – who helped me stay on the right track and contributed in many ways. Our cooperation with public institutions like the European Network for Rural Development, the European Commission and the European Parliament has taken big steps forward so my applause to good colleagues there too. Finally I want to thank my Finnish supporters the Finnish Village Movement, the Finnish Rural Policy Committee, the Finnish National Rural Network and the Council of Tampere Region who made the Presidency financially possible.

And last but not least: Best Luck for the New Presidency! I know it is in safe hands as the Czechs play very good ice-hockey too!

In Mahnala Village, Finland 9th January 2014

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'P' followed by a long horizontal stroke that tapers to a point on the right.

Petri Rinne

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1. Introduction

The Village Action Association of Finland (SYTY) has held the presidency of the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) during the years 2011-2013. This report will record the background and the objectives of the Finnish presidency as well as the positions and actions taken by the Association in the course of the term. The report aims at clarifying the operational concept of ELARD and at facilitating the presidency handover whilst securing continuity.

This first introductory chapter of the report will explain the operational principles of ELARD and the background of the Finnish presidency of the Association. In addition, in order to set a context for the description of the European debate on the position of LEADER in the overall rural policy of the EU post 2013, it will introduce the basic principles of the LEADER methodology and the policy developments it has faced during its history.

Following this, chapter two will introduce the European rural policy debate and the discussions on the future of LEADER taken place during the Finnish presidency. It will also present ELARD's reactions and positions to these developments. The years 2011-2013 have been a critical time for the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU and for the preparation of the programming period 2014-2020. This has set special challenges for the advocacy work of the Association.

The third chapter will look more in detail at the implementation of the aims set forth by the Finnish presidency. The actions taken in order to reach these aims will be separately analyzed from a self-evaluation point of view. All the actions, tangible and intangible results of the activities, project deliverables and evaluations of the stakeholders will be examined.

The final chapter will draw conclusions and reflections on the overall success of the Finnish presidency and summarize the lessons that can be learnt from the challenges faced.

1.1. What is ELARD?

The European LEADER Association for Rural development (ELARD) was founded in 1999 to improve the quality of life in rural areas and to maintain their population by promoting the LEADER bottom-up methodology in local development. ELARD is registered in Belgium as a non-profit making association. One of the most important aims of ELARD has been to support its members in their efforts to network with each other in order to cooperate and disseminate good LEADER practices and know-how in Europe and beyond.

In addition, ELARD represents the interests and needs of its members in front of international, European, and national institutions and it has made determined efforts to make the LEADER approach better known among the European decision-makers. The principal policy objective of the Association is to safeguard the LEADER approaches' position as an essential part of the European rural development policy. ELARD takes part in European debates concerning rural and regional development from the point of view of LEADER. As the only European organisation representing over 50% of the LEADER groups (Local Action Groups – LAGs) of the EU, the Association has been invited to represent them in various EU bodies and committees.

The founding members of ELARD are the National LEADER Networks of Local Action Groups of France, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain. During the 13 years of its existence ELARD has been constantly working on expanding its membership base. In the beginning of the year 2011 ELARD members came from 16 different European countries and by the end of the Finnish presidency the number of countries represented in the Association has risen to 22. At present, 1097 Local Action Groups are involved in ELARD either through their national or regional networks or as individual members.

The supreme body of ELARD is the General Assembly which is composed of a representative of each full member of the Association. It meets regularly at least once in each calendar year. The General Assembly, among other things, elects and discharges the Council, the president and the vice-president of the Association. The president is proposed by the General Assembly

for a two years term and he/she is responsible for leading and representing officially the Association.

Before Finland, the presidency of ELARD was held by the Italian Network (1999-2000), the French Network (2001-2002), the Spanish Network (2003-2004), the Irish Network (2005-2006), and the Greek Network (2007-2010). Finland is the first country holding the presidency of ELARD not belonging to the founding members of the Association.

1.2. The Finnish Presidency of ELARD 2011-2013

The term of the Greek Presidency of ELARD was completed in the end of 2010. During that year preparations were made for the presidency handover to Finland for the period 2011-2012. The 4th General Assembly meeting of ELARD held on the 26th November 2010 in Brussels decided in favor of the assumption of the presidency by the Finnish Network (The Village Action Association of Finland - SYTY) represented by Mr. Petri Rinne. The term of Mr. Rinne as ELARD's president officially commenced on January 1st 2011.

As mentioned above, the Finnish presidency has coincided with the period where at EU policy level the next programming period was being drafted, debated and negotiated. Due to the great involvement of the Finnish presidency in this wider debate, ELARD's members wished to secure continuity and, as there was no other presidency candidate at that time, the Finnish presidency was extended until the end of 2013. The decision to postpone the election of the next president was taken in the 5th General Assembly of ELARD on 5th December 2012. ¹

The Village Action Association of Finland (SYTY) is an umbrella organization of regional actors in rural development. Besides the Local Action Groups, its member organizations are also the residents' Associations, village coalitions and national central organizations. It

¹ Mr. Panagiotis Patras has held the position of vice-president of ELARD during 2011-2012 and Mr. Radim Srsen and Mrs. Kirsten Birke Lund during the year 2013.

promotes and develops village action and locally initiated rural development on the national level in Finland. All the Finnish LEADER groups are members of ELARD via SYTY.

Following the model of the previous countries holding the presidency, funding for the expenditures of the Finnish presidency term were applied from the Finnish central government. The project plan was approved to be financed in order to develop European networking on the basis of ELARD's evolution.

There is a long tradition of bottom-up rural development activities in Finland. In early 1970s, the rapid structural change in agriculture culminated in the years of rural depopulation and emigration to Sweden that lead to various responses, one of which was the emergence of rural 'grassroots activity', i.e. village-level action and development projects. Since 1997, when the first Finnish LAGs were approved, the experiences of the LEADER approach have been very positive².

Finnish rural policy has rapidly become more international during the first decade of the 21st century. The OECD has given Finland credit for succeeding remarkably well in LEADER work, in village action and in building of the cross-governmental Committee for rural policy (YTR). Currently, there are several ongoing research projects inspired by LEADER based at Finnish universities, for example, the development process of the LEADER method run by the Ruralia Institute of the University of Helsinki.

1.3. The LEADER method

ELARD has worked for over ten years aiming to spread the philosophy, principles and scope of the LEADER method. The driving force of the work of ELARD has been the strong belief that a sustainable rural development across Europe is best achieved by this methodology grounded on the following eight key features:

² Vihinen 2007, 66; Katajamäki 2007, 82.

- Area-based approach
- Bottom-up approach
- Local public-private partnerships: Local Action Groups
- Innovative approach
- Integrated and multi-sectoral approach
- Networking
- Cooperation
- De-centralized administration

These principles constitute prerequisites for the establishment of Local Action Group (LAGs), their operating mode and for the selection of individual LEADER projects. The LAG is a body of public and private actors that is established in order to bring together all the local stakeholders to work for the development of their area. The essence of the LEADER approach is that it views the local people as the main asset of rural areas and places the reliance on their ability to discover what kind of solutions are best suited to their environment, culture, working traditions and skills. In this way it has helped to reveal hidden human potential and local assets specific to a given area and to use these assets to create more sustainable economic development and to improve social cohesion³. The approach has proven to be able to foster local identities, the sense of belonging and feelings of allegiance that can be turned into drivers for the local development. It has also empowered local people by strengthening their capacity to articulate their needs and to get access to resources in order to achieve their aims⁴. This special added value of the approach can be described as the “LEADER spirit” which developed in many rural areas around Europe.

³ Wade & Rinne 2008, 10-11.

⁴ Lukesch & Schuh 2007, 2-3.

1.4. The story of LEADER since 1990

The proposal for the first LEADER initiative came from the European Commission officials who in 1990 came up with the idea to enlist the energy and resources of all who could contribute to the rural development process by forming partnerships at sub-regional level between the public, private and civil sectors. LEADER was introduced in 1991 as an EU initiative that allowed the LAGs a direct access to EU funds without having to wait for approvals from central or regional governments. The LAGs were expected to set up formal partnerships and to produce action plans that encouraged the local actors to cooperate in a manner that previously had been unfamiliar in many countries. The first programming period (1991-1995) of LEADER was a success. It led to its geographical extension during the second period (1996-1999) with LEADER II and the LEADER+ (2000-2006) spread the method over the enlarged EU-25.⁵

During the programming period 2007-2013 the approach has been integrated into the Union's mainstream rural development programs and it has thus become an integral part of the whole EU's rural development policy. In the year 2011 LEADER covered some 2 200 rural territories in the 27 Member States.

The mainstreaming of the LEADER initiative into a part of the overall rural development policy of the EU was welcomed by many LEADER actors as it recognized the achievements of the approach from the previous programming periods. Nevertheless, it also raised some major preoccupations among these actors. For example, one central fear was that LEADER would lose some of its original flexibility and autonomy in the mainstreaming process. In fact, according to several evaluators the mainstreaming has brought along restrictions to the original principles of LEADER. In some regions and countries it has led to centralization trends that have challenged the bottom-up approach and the regional targeting of the actions.

⁵ Wade & Rinne 2008, 9.

The mainstreaming has also had negative effects on the innovative features of LEADER and the implementation of cooperation projects has faced difficulties.⁶

Commission itself has noted that the mainstreaming has in some cases “*meant that the specificities of this innovative bottom-up approach were compromised, due to the narrowing of the scope to pre-defined measures and to the lack of clear distinction of roles between managing authorities, paying agencies and LAGs*”. The Commission has promised that more flexible implementation will be assured in the programming period 2014-2020.⁷ Measures taken by the Commission in order to achieve this goal will be discussed in the chapter 2.

1.5. Summing up

The negotiations on the development of the LEADER approach during the programming period post 2013 were held during the years 2011-2013. This set a special challenge and opportunity for the Finnish presidency of ELARD in terms of influencing the developments of the approach and safeguarding its position as a central feature of the rural policy of the EU. In this respect, the Finnish presidency of ELARD has continued the determined work of the previous presidencies of the Association in an effort to spread the philosophy and methodology of LEADER and to advocate for its smooth implementation all over Europe. The European debate on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and LEADER’s role in it is addressed in the following chapter.

⁶ Strahl & al. 2010, 15-16.

⁷ European Commission 2011, 28.

2. Debate on CAP – the future of LEADER post 2013

The term of the Finnish presidency of ELARD has coincided with a crucial time for the preparations of the programming period 2014-2020 of the CAP. ELARD has been actively taking part in the debate on the future of LEADER methodology post 2013. This chapter describes chronologically the legislative process and the debate on the future of the EU Rural Development Policy and LEADER under CAP, as well as ELARD's contributions to this debate.

The chapter deals with ELARD's advocacy work towards maintaining LEADER's positions as integral part of the EU's future Rural Development policy and safeguarding a sufficient funding for its full implementation. ELARD has been able to offer strong arguments for the justification of its stances, since the LEADER approach answers very well to challenges defined in the Europe 2020 Strategy in which the objectives of the Union are set for the next decade. In this strategy the Union lists its goals on employment, innovation, education, social inclusion and climate/energy to be reached by the year 2020.

ELARD emphasizes in its campaign how the LEADER methodology is an ideal tool for supporting the Europe 2020 Strategy aims in terms of "smart", "sustainable" and "inclusive" growth, as the slogan of the strategy goes. The Association states that LAGs have instigated a new sense of optimism in the rural areas and that they have been successful in creating and maintaining hundreds of thousands of jobs, leveraging in private investment, sparking off innovation and animating people of different age and gender to work voluntarily for the development of their territory. ELARD member LAGs have shown strong evidence on the fact that applying the specific features of the LEADER methodology can help to find both innovative and environmentally and socially sustainable solutions for rural development and help mobilizing the unique human, social, economic and cultural potential of rural Europe.

2.1. ELARD's CAP Reform objectives

In 2010 the Commission launched a public debate on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and opened a consultation process for all stakeholders. ELARD submitted its answers to the Commission consultation questionnaire in the beginning of the year 2011 (See chapter 3.3.1.). At the same time ELARD also published its own CAP reform objectives.

In this document ELARD noted that the reform of the CAP offers an opportunity to create a real rural development policy independent from the agricultural policy. The Commission is criticized for its agriculture-centered approach and for ignoring the other - non-farming related - rural industries that often have more impact on rural economy. In this context, it is accentuated that keeping rural areas populated and viable should be a number one objective of the CAP reform as otherwise all rural industries, including agriculture, are at risk.

The position of ELARD states that since the LEADER method has proved its capacity to mobilize bottom-up local development and bring concrete results like new jobs and businesses to the countryside, it must remain at the center of the future CAP too. Provided that the rural development budget would be increased and the strategic targeting reinforced, this would help to diversify the rural economy and find new innovations from the emerging sectors. ELARD called for a minimum 10 % allocation of EAFRD (Pillar II of CAP) funds to LEADER that should be allocated to member states. Finally, ELARD also demanded that the eight specific features of LEADER should be better respected and taken into account in the new programming period.

2.2. Critique towards LEADER – European Courts of Auditors report

In the recent years, the most severe critique towards the implementation of the LEADER approach has been expressed in the European Court of Auditors (ECA) Special Report No5 (2010). In this report the Court argues that LEADER involves higher risks and cost compared with traditional methods of funding applied in the Union. According to the report, this is due

to the fact that the control over the EU budget is given to LAGs. Furthermore, the ECA report claims that the LAGs implement the LEADER approach in a way that, does not promote, but limits the potential for added value in terms of the approaches specific features, “*although the Court found some examples of good practice*”. The LAGs are accused for giving the majority of the grants to their own member organizations and for not being able to demonstrate innovation or interaction between different sectors in their strategies or projects. Also the soundness of the financial management and the transparency of the procedures of the LAGs are put under question.⁸

Following the publication of the report, open discussions took place among ELARD members and the Association decided to voice its opinion with regards to the contents of the report in question. In the beginning of 2011 ELARD published a position paper in which the critique expressed in the ECA report was contested by arguments based on the experiences of ELARD member organizations. The most important notion of ELARD’s position is that the report does not seem to grasp the true spirit of the LEADER method which in turn leads to a number of ill based assumptions. The ECA does not recognize the fact that LEADER produces above all qualitative results such as enhancing social capital in the rural areas and improving the quality of life and well-being of the people. The position stresses that even though these results are more difficult to measure, they do contribute towards creating more favorable conditions for local development through effective involvement of different actors and stakeholders in joint actions and projects.

In addition, ELARD argues that failing to grasp the spirit of LEADER and the often qualitative nature of the results has also led the ECA to the conclusion that there is an alleged lack of added value in the implementation of the LEADER method. As for the transparency questions, ELARD emphasizes that in the majority of LAGs the implementation of LEADER is exemplary, and, that it has been proven that the tripartite division of powers is highly efficient in assuring that the LEADER method and funds cannot be misused for the purposes

⁸ European Court of Auditors (2010) Special Report No 5: Implementation of the LEADER Approach for Rural Development.

of local administration or a single association alone. All in all, the position paper concludes, the ECA report's tendency to generalize its specific and limited findings (not all Members States were audited), in combination with its "technocratic" approach to the notion of LEADER, depicts an unrealistically gloomy picture of the implementation of the method.

2.3. European Commission proposals for the 2014-2020 Multi Annual Financial Framework

The European Commission published its proposals for the 2014-2020 Financial Framework (MFF) in the end of June 2011. In the proposal 89.9 billion euros are proposed against 96.0 billion that have been in use for the EAFRD during 2007-2013. Following the publication of the proposal ELARD expressed its deep concern about the diminishing funds for rural development in a published commentary. In its commentary ELARD noted that the proposal ignores the fact that the whole of CAP spending should remain on the same level. This was severely conflicting with the overall idea of modernizing the distribution of the CAP funding that has been the proclaimed objective of the Commission. Again the Association voiced its concern about the agriculture-centeredness of the CAP.

In this context ELARD remarked that the OECD along with numerous member states has been criticizing the European Commission for its unwillingness to let go off its outdated approach that can be called "old rural policy paradigm". Even though agriculture still remains one of the cornerstones of rural economy and is important in maintaining the production throughout the European Union, it was emphasized how fundamentally crucial it is to equally support other industries which can often be more important for the local economy and job creation than agriculture. This, ELARD noted in its commentary, is what the OECD defines as "the new rural policy paradigm" which should be the future for EU rural development policy.

2.4. Common Strategic Framework (CSF) and the EC legislative Proposals for 2014-2020

In the beginning of October 2011 another important document was published by the Commission: *A legislative proposal setting down a Common Strategic Framework (CSF) and common rules for governing the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)*. The proposal is said to aim towards increasing the coherence amongst the instruments for better synergies and greater impact.

From the point of view of the European LAGs, the most important change to the previous programming period presented by the CSF initiative is that the use of all the “CSF-funds”⁹ is made available for the LAGs, and accordingly, a LEADER like methodology is introduced to the Structural funds when tackling local development issues. A very strong influence of the LEADER methodology is visible within this new approach to development called “Community-Led Local Development” (CLLD). The Commission proposes that in the future the support from EAFRD to LEADER should be consistent and coordinated with support from ERDF, ESF, CF and EMFF. This is intended to be ensured through coordinated capacity building, selection, approval and funding of local development strategies and LAGs. The responsibility for the implementation of local development strategies covering all the funds is given to the LAGs.

Subsequently, in mid-October 2011 the European Commission presented a draft reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the programming period after 2013. According to the EC, the proposals aimed to strengthen the LAGs and to promote employment and entrepreneurship by stimulating economic activity in rural areas and encouraging local

⁹ European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

development initiatives. As for LEADER the most important aspect of these legislative proposals was that its application was proposed to remain compulsory for all Rural Development programs in the future. In addition, a minimum allocation of EAFRD funds (at least 5 % of the overall funding) was suggested to be dedicated to its implementation. The EC also proposed a higher EU co-financing rate for LEADER, that is, 90% in less developed regions and 80% in other regions in comparison to previous 75% and 50% (programming period 2007-2013) in the standard rural development measures.

Following the publication of the legislative proposals, ELARD published a communication in which it welcomed the fact that the Commission acknowledges the key role that LEADER plays in the development of rural areas, as well as its commitment to guaranteeing the continuation of the method. The CSF initiative was seen to have the potential to ensure better coordination of local development initiatives which was regarded as a positive outcome in the communication. The extension of CLLD to all structural and the Fisheries funds coincides with ELARD's long term objective to spread the LEADER approach to new policy fields. However, it was emphasized that it is of utmost importance that the CSF will be implemented in such a way so that it does not cause delays in the LAG's launch in the new programming period (2014-2020).

In its communication, the association also expressed its satisfaction with the safeguarding of at least 5% of the total EAFRD budget towards LEADER. Nevertheless, ELARD maintained that this minimum allocation for LEADER is far too small. The paper once again adduced the recommendation for a 10% minimum allocation of EAFRD budget, given that in the past the allocation of funding determined by Member States has in many cases been inadequate. Moreover, ELARD emphasized that it is highly important that the minimum allocation must refer both to EC funding and national match funding. The higher EU co-financing rate for LEADER was warmly welcomed by the Association.

2.5. Further negotiations on the EU budget allocation for rural development

In early 2013 further negotiations of the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MMF) were held and followed by a worrisome compromise for the EU budget 2014-2020 put forward by Council President Herman van Rompuy. The rural development budget was suggested to be cut by 9.3%. In view of this, ELARD published a statement in which it urged the negotiating parties to consider the negative impact that possible cuts on Pillar II of the CAP would have upon rural areas and the livelihoods of millions of European citizens. In a period characterized by deep economic recession, the alarming increase of unemployment and stagnating levels of growth, cutting the budget of Rural Development was viewed by ELARD as a major strategic mistake which may derail the EU further away from its 2020 Strategy objectives.

In the Councils' proposal, Pillar I and direct payments for farmers seemed to be coming out of the cuts relatively unscathed (4.8% cut) while Pillar II was set to decrease twice as much. ELARD warned that, taking into account the reverse modulation from Pillar II to Pillar I, the cut for Rural Development could potentially double. The Association called the EU's heads of states not to endorse the proposal of the President of the European Council and to recognize the paramount importance of Rural Development as a tool capable of alleviating EU citizens from the heavy burdens of the financial crisis through sustainable and integrated local development.

However, following a two day negotiation-marathon (7th-8th February 2013) in Brussels, EU leaders concluded their discussions and agreed on the budget. In this compromise the budget allocated to Rural Development (Pillar II) had slightly increased compared to the Van Rompuy proposal made 2 months earlier (from 83.7 billion Euros to 85.1 billion Euros). Yet, compared to the programming period 2007-2013 the budget for Rural Development was going to suffer a cut of about 6 billion euros.

ELARD reacted to this decision by publishing its position on 12th February 2013 where it regretted the way the search for a compromise among the contending parties had resulted in a shift further away from the original goals and aspirations for the next programming period.

Even though compared to other funds the CAP suffered relatively smaller losses, it was seen as obvious that the Commission's intentions for genuine reform were casually swept under the carpet. ELARD maintained that despite the current financial crisis, which reinforces the pro austerity sentiments among some Member States, Rural Development and the Greening of the CAP should have been spared from additional cuts and legal backdoors.

ELARD's particular concern was the fact that the Rural Development budget was reduced even further in the final negotiations to €85 billion, which translates to a decrease of 14% compared to the current situation. What is more, the decision that Member States would be allowed to transfer a part of their Rural Development budget to Pillar I was viewed as one that may have a significant negative impact upon rural areas and their population as a whole. Allowing Member States to transfer from 15% up to the astonishing 25% of their Rural Development budget to Pillar I would undoubtedly hinder the development of rural areas particularly in countries where this is needed the most.

ELARD's position concluded that Europe's continued attachment to the outdated and potentially growth hindering spending on agriculture's direct payments, at the expense of sustainable rural development and the environment, does not allow for a real and much needed reform of the CAP. It therefore called on MEPs and Heads of State to reconsider and avoid the business as usual practices by opting for a genuinely reformed, socially responsible and greener CAP.

2.6. Agreement on CAP reform and the MFF 2014-2020

On 26th of June 2013 the European Parliament, Council of Ministers and Commission reached to an agreement concerning the new CAP. Overall, ELARD viewed the agreed terms as moving towards the right direction, although it seemed like most of the contentious points were solved by leaving them as options to the discretion of each Member State. As for LEADER there were no unexpected developments. Clearly, LEADER will have a more prominent role in the new CAP. Member States will have to spend at least 5% of their rural development funding from the EU budget on the LEADER program. Even though ELARD's

recommendation for a 10% minimum allocation of EAFRD budget for LEADER was not reached, the fact that some minimum allocation was set can be considered as a positive outcome as such.

For LEADER the new CAP promises:

“Greater emphasis on awareness-raising and other preparatory support for strategies; promoting flexibility for operating with other funds in local areas, i.e. rural-urban co-operation; N.B. LEADER will now be used as the common approach for community-led local development by the following ESI Funds: the ERDF, ESF, EMFF and EAFRD.”

Later in the fall 2013 (24th September) a political agreement was reached on some outstanding points of the CAP that had not been decided yet. The possibility to transfer from Pillar I to Pillar II, and vice versa, up to 15% (but not up to 25% as it was envisaged in the proposal of the European Council) of the budget allocated remained in the agreement. Favorably for LEADER, it was decided that the maximum EU co-funding rates will be up to 85% in less developed regions, 75% in transition regions, 63% in other transition regions and 53% in other regions for most payments, but can be higher for LEADER projects among others¹⁰.

Finally, on 19th November 2013, the European Parliament voted in favor of the Multiannual Financial Framework and gave its blessing to the budget of 84.9 billion Euros for the Rural Development (Pillar II). The Council adopted the regulation on 2nd December 2013 allowing the new budget to be implemented as from 1st January 2014.

¹⁰ The measures supporting knowledge transfer, cooperation, the establishment of producer groups and organisations and young farmer installation grants, as well as for spending related to the environment and climate change under various measures.

2.8. Summing up

Under the financial conditions of the economic crisis, significant cuts were made to the rural development budget. This has definitely diluted any intentions the Commission might have had for genuine reform of the European Agricultural policy. Europe continues to be firmly stuck with the “old rural development paradigm”. Particularly worrisome is the option given to the member states to move funds from Pilar II to Pilar I.

Yet, the fact that LEADER’s role in the RD policy of the new CAP will be prominent can be considered as a partial victory for ELARD. Moreover, it has to be seen, if the possibility given to LAGs to search for funding from different sources can help them find new ways of financing projects, and therefore to compensate the diminishing Rural Development funds. The fact that a minimum allocation for LEADER was set is also positive, even though the percentage is smaller than the 10% recommendation of ELARD. Finally, the introduction of LEADER like CLLD to new funds and fields of policy is in line with ELARD’s long term goal of giving the LAGs the possibility to deliver many different policies to rural citizens of Europe.

3. The Finnish presidency of ELARD: aims and actions

In the third part of the report the attainment of the objectives set for the Finnish presidency will be evaluated from the point of view of the actions taken during the three years term. First, the aims of the Finnish presidency will be presented in chapter 3.1. Thereafter, each aim will be discussed separately. All the actions taken, as well as project results, deliverables and evaluations of the stakeholders will be examined. It is important to note that some actions implemented during the project have served the achievement of several objectives simultaneously.

3.1. Aims of the Finnish Presidency

The strategic guidelines of the Finnish presidency of ELARD seek to influence on the policy developments both by expanding the LEADER method to new policy fields and geographical areas and by influencing the qualitative development of the approach. In addition, it seeks to induce a stronger organizational basis and boost even more cooperation of rural development actors both on European and global level. More specifically, the aims of the Finnish Presidency of ELARD have been the following:

1) Strengthening the LEADER method.

- Dissemination of the methodology to new policy fields following the model of the European Fisheries Fund. In addition, the Association has aimed to support the adoption of the LEADER method in rural and fishery policies in new territories.

2) Development of the operational environment of LEADER.

- Restoration of the specific characteristics and the flexibility of LEADER.

3) Expansion of ELARD's membership base.

4) Promotion of transnational cooperation among LEADER actors.

5) Production of a high quality final report on the Finnish presidency.

3.2. Aim 1: Strengthening the LEADER method

The first objective of the Finnish presidency is based on the understanding that the LEADER approach, which proved to be a very successful method in local development work, can be used as a model in other policy fields when linked to local development. The target policy fields have been regional, urban, environmental, employment and development policies.

ELARD strongly believes that the method is adaptable to very different environments and it has potential to become a tool for different kind of local development initiatives inside and outside of the EU borders. At the same time, the dissemination of the methodology can strengthen the method itself while experiences on its implementation are gathered from varied environments.

3.2.1. Disseminating LEADER to new policy fields

A long term goal of the Association has been to better develop and exploit the synergies between the Rural Development Fund (EARDF) and other policies and funds of the EU. ELARD member LAGs have for long been requesting that, rather than solely Local Action Groups, they should be considered as “local development agencies” that could be financed from many different EU funds. ELARD believes that considerable synergy benefits could be gained by a better EU level coordination of different funds. The LAGs have good potential of becoming a much needed one-stop shop for delivering these policies to rural citizens.

Rural development is not the only policy field where positive experiences have been gained from the implementation of the LEADER methodology. Especially experiences from implementation of the Axis 4 of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) have been encouraging in this respect.¹¹

¹¹ During the programming period 2007-2013 the LEADER method was introduced to fisheries policy, and in the year 2011 around 300 Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) were devising and implementing local solutions to the challenges confronting Europe’s fisheries areas following the LEADER method. The FLAGs are, like LAGs, partnerships between fisheries actors and other local private and public stakeholders. In some regions the

The aim to better develop and exploit the synergies between the different funds has been highlighted in the publications¹² and positions of the Association and by ELARD's representatives in different events, as well as, in their work in the Committees of the European Network for Rural Development (EN RD). ELARD was accepted on September 2008 as the European Association representing LAGs at the European level in the EN RD. The representatives of ELARD have participated both in the work of the Coordination Committee and in the LEADER Subcommittee of EN RD. (See Box 1.)

Box 1. The function of the Committees of the EN RD

The European Network for Rural Development (EN RD) was set up by the European Commission DG Agri in 2008, to help Member States to implement their Rural Development Programs. The Coordination committee assists the European Commission in preparing and implementing the EN RD's activities. For instance, it strives to ensure coordination between the EN RD, the National Rural Networks and other organizations active in the field of rural development. It also contributes to the choice and the coordination of thematic work carried out by the EN RD and gives advice to the EC on the Annual Work Plan of the EN RD. The LEADER subcommittee contributes to the work of the Coordination committee and advises the European Commission on the annual work program of the EN RD particularly in respect of the LEADER axis. It also offers support to the European Commission in the implementation and monitoring of transnational cooperation projects. In addition, it has established a number of focus groups to review LEADER implementation.¹³

FLAGs and the LAGs have already been working in a very close cooperation. For example in mainland Finland the fisheries groups have all been formed beneath LEADER groups with which they share their administrative support structure. Source: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/cms/farnet/>.

¹² E.g. In April 2011 ELARD published a leaflet on the LEADER method, ELARDs' positions and the Finnish presidency aims. The leaflet was widely disseminated through members of ELARD, ELARDs' networks and in the events where ELARD was represented. ELARD was also featured in the issue 337 of the Parliament Magazine, distributed on the 7th of November 2011.

¹³ <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/>.

The goal to spread a LEADER like local development initiative to new policy fields has been common for both ELARD and DG AGRI. With regards to the first aim, ELARD welcomed with satisfaction the fact that coordination of the funds was presented by the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) and that the Community-led Local Development (CLLD) was introduced to the Structural Funds. (See chapter 2.4.) This position was highlighted in the communications of the Association as well as in the presentations given by its representatives. In addition, after the publication of the Commission's legislative proposals, ELARD has made a number of efforts in order to influence the decisions of the European Parliament (See chapter 3.3.2.).

Moreover, ELARD was invited to give a presentation in two high level conferences organized in the European Parliament dealing with the CSF initiative and the CLLD. The conference "The Common Strategic Framework: adding value to rural development? Bridging the gap between the CAP and the cohesion policy" (22nd November 2011) had the aim of contributing to the debate on the dynamic coordination between the objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy with a special focus on the impact of the CSF. ELARD was invited to this conference¹⁴ to bring the grassroots level dimension to the table. Furthermore, ELARD was invited to participate in a public hearing in the European Parliament titled "Sustainable development of island and mountainous areas: learning from the past, planning for the future" (19th June 2013) and was asked to present the LEADER method in the current programming period as well as to provide the participants with an outlook of what is in stock for 2014-2020 with a focus on CLLD and the multifund approach¹⁵.

¹⁴ The Association was represented by its Coordinator Mr. Stefanos Loukopoulos and the other speakers in the panel were, among others, the Commissioner of Agriculture and Rural Development Mr. Dacian Cioloș, Commissioner for Regional Policy Dr. Dirk Ahner and Member of the European Parliament Ms Britta Reimers.

¹⁵ The representative of ELARD on this occasion was its Coordinator, Mr. Stefanos Loukopoulos.



Picture: ELARD's Coordinator, Mr. Stefanos Loukopoulos, giving a speech in a conference organized in the European Parliament 22nd November 2011.

3.2.2. Disseminating LEADER methodology to new Member States and IPA countries

Besides the work done for the dissemination of the method to new policy fields, the Association has made efforts in order to support the adoption of the LEADER model in new territories in the EU and in the Pre-Accession Countries (IPA) of the Union. The representatives of ELARD have travelled around the continent and given numerous presentations on the LEADER approach in different conferences, seminars and workshops. Moreover, study groups have also visited ELARD premises in Brussels in order to learn more about the method. (See table 1.)

Table 1. Examples of LEADER dissemination activities at IPA level

<p>The president of ELARD was invited as a speaker in a workshop that took place in Danilovgrad, Montenegro on 27th April 2011. The multi country workshop on "LEADER - legal basis, policy implementation, LAGs, best practices" was organized by the Institution Building Unit of the European Commission DG Enlargement. The seminar focused on relevant EU Legislation, institutional set-up, LEADER implementation mechanisms, LAG structure, technical fiche for LEADER, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The presentation of Mr. Rinne focused on the establishment of monitoring and evaluation procedures.</p>
<p>The president of ELARD acted as an expert on TAIEX mission on Leader in Croatia on the 14th-15th March 2011. The aim of his mission was to help the Croatian rural development program managing and payment authorities to get necessary information about the LEADER method for bottom-up development. The role of Mr. Rinne was to explain the LAG management and administrative process as well as the local development strategy design.</p>
<p>The vice-president of ELARD, Mr. Panagiotis Patras, was invited by the Rural Development Network of the Republic of Macedonia (RDN of RM) to take part in the Agro food Fair 2011 that took place in Skopje, Macedonia (15th-17th November 2011) in which he participated in the Rural Development Forum session "Diversification, networking and the LEADER approach in the rural areas".</p>
<p>Meeting between ELARD and a Turkish Cypriot delegation was organized in ELARD's premises on the 14th March 2011. The aim of the meeting hosted by ELARD staff was to disseminate information about LEADER and ELARD to the members of ministry level officials interested to establish LEADER type of structure on the Turkish Cypriot territory. With similar goal a meeting was organized with the delegation of the Croatian rural network and with the newly established Croatian LAGs, on 6th December 2010 at ELARD's Brussels office.</p>
<p>The President of ELARD participated in the LeaderFEST2012 on 29th-31st May 2013. The event took place in Levoča, Slovakia, and it was the 3rd meeting of the Lags' representatives and other EU rural development stakeholders working with the LEADER method. The President of ELARD participated in workshop "Community-Led Local Development as a Tool of EU Pre-accession Policy" and spoke about the experience of LEADER and Local Action Groups and how these coincide with the European Commission's proposal of CLLD.</p>

ELARD was one of the main partners in the organization of the National Conference "VENKOV" (RURAL) 2013 in Czech Republic (1st-3rd October 2013). On the opening day of the conference, ELARD hosted a panel discussion titled "Putting CLLD into practice". The main concept behind this session was to invite experts from the policy, institutional, academic and civil society sectors so as to provide the audience with a well-rounded and informed approach on CLLD and thus make a small contribution towards its demystification.

In addition, ELARD has worked as one of the leading organizations of the project Alliance for Common Rural Development, ACoRD, financed by the European Union¹⁶. The main goals of the project are the establishment of a Rural Development Network in Bosnia-Herzegovina and building of capacities of the member organisations of this network. The implementation of the project will last until December 2014. Within that time, the project envisages numerous activities, such as research that will encompass all relevant policies from areas of agriculture and rural development in BiH and their harmonization with EU policies, organisation of Rural Parliament, etc. For instance, ELARD in cooperation with ACoRD hosted a rural development conference in Sarajevo (28th May 2013) aiming to introduce participants with ACoRD project and the current situation in rural development in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as with practices of neighboring countries. Moreover, ELARD hosted three "training of trainers" seminars in BiH where ELARD experts carried forward training sessions for local rural animators and workers.

3.2.3and beyond

The Finnish presidency of ELARD has been particularly interested in disseminating the LEADER methodology to continents other than Europe. The new EAFRD regulation allows the European LAGs to start cooperation projects with local public-private partnership on a

¹⁶ Project ACoRD is implemented by ACED within "Civil Society Facility Programme 2012" Agency for Cooperation, Education and Development from Banja Luka as leading organisation Sana from Sanski Most, and European partner ELARD.

rural territory implementing a local development strategy outside the Union (Article 44). Therefore, the cooperation with non-European territories can become an even more interesting challenge for the LEADER groups than it has been before.

In this respect, the most important effort of the Association during the Finnish presidency has been the organization of the international “*LAGs Global Networks*” seminar that took place on the 15th-16th June 2011 in the municipality of Sastamala in Finland (See also chapter 3.5.1.). ELARD’s members have during the past years accumulated a wealth of experience on cooperation with non-EU regions and the seminar looked to answer the question of what can be learnt from this interaction. In addition, it aimed to promote contact-building and cooperation with non-European territories. In addition to ELARD’s members with experience from LEADER dissemination projects and partners from a LEADER development project¹⁷ from the Zambezia Province government, Mozambique, were invited to share their experiences. Other speakers included representatives of major international organizations like OECD and FAO and academic rural researchers from Finnish universities. In addition, representatives of the European Commission, EN RD and FARNET gave presentations in the seminar. (See box 2.)

A positive indication of the increasing visibility of LEADER has been that some major international organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) have shown interest in the potential of the LEADER methodology in the fight for eradicating hunger in the world. ELARD was invited and has been actively contributing in the process of introducing the methodological approach of LEADER and the territorial experience to food security and poverty eradication policies of FAO. Also the World Bank has expressed interest towards the CLLD methodology. Through its own actions it implements another approach called Community Driven Development (CDD). ELARD’s president presented the local implementation of CLLD, as well as, the experiences on disseminating

¹⁷ Starting from the beginning of the year 2014 ELARD will be leading a follow up project of this pilot project that aims at the establishment of LAGs in three new provinces of Mozambique. An extensive preparatory work on this project has been done already during the Finnish presidency term.

CLLD type actions in the context of developing countries (specifically Mozambique) to the officials of the World Bank in Brussels (7th November 2013).

Box 2. Experiences on LEADER dissemination outside of Europe

The examples presented in the LAGs' Global Networks seminar on LEADER piloting projects outside the EU in territories of Russia, Ukraine, Latin America and Africa (Mozambique – Cape Verde) proved that it is indeed feasible to implement and set up LEADER like structures outside of the EU. This in turn indicates the satisfactory level of flexibility and adaptability of the LEADER method in different socio-economic contexts.

Overall, the LEADER pilot projects presented listed a wide range of positive impacts felt in the communities involved. In Mozambique, for example, the LEADER project had created new jobs, improved the quality of food produced locally and most importantly had contributed towards the gradual empowerment of the local community. This conclusion can be drawn even though some of the core values and philosophy of LEADER (i.e. bottom-up approach) may have been rooted in traditions and cultures of different territories to different extents. In fact, once people realized their potential and the importance of their views and involvement in terms of shaping the future of their territory, cultural barriers and obstacles started fading, resulting for example in more women and youths participating actively in the LEADER project in Mozambique.

The seminar also provided some ideas on what from the non-EU experiences could be reflected back to the EU concerning the methodological development of the approach. The cooperation with the countries outside of the Union can be in many ways beneficial also for the European partners. For example, as in the context of the countries of the South the bureaucracy at the local level is almost non-existing, new trials and straight-forward actions can be taken without major delays in transforming legislation etc. In many of the countries represented in the seminar, the LEADER approach really reflects the local needs and the applicant/beneficiary remains at the center of the whole process. While further developing the LEADER methodology it is important to remember these lessons as in the EU the overwhelming bureaucracy and sometimes overlapping structures can make the whole picture of rural development somewhat shady to the applicant/beneficiary.

Table 2. Other examples of LEADER dissemination activities outside of the EU

<p>ELARD's president gave a presentation titled "<i>LEADER – a European social innovation worth disseminating</i>" during a conference titled "Enhancing approaches to development at local level" organized by the UNPD focusing on regional and local economic development and on practical solutions and actions (8th February 2011).</p>
<p>The president of ELARD was invited to give a presentation in the Intercontinental Forum on Sustainable Territorial Development organized in Santa Catarina, Brazil (22nd-24th November 2011). Fifteen Latin American and European organisations had joined their forces to organise a conference in the South of Brazil showcasing and sharing the best practices of territorial development on the two continents. Some 200 conference participants came from almost all Latin American countries and major international organizations were present. In his speech Mr Rinne presented the European rural development experience, emphasising the LEADER approach as an example of a method that is able to involve and empower the local people and renew the structures of rural economies.</p>
<p>The vice-president of ELARD, Mr Radim Srsen, represented the Association in the international forum "<i>Rural Tourism in Russia</i>" in Belgorod, Russia (3rd- 4th August 2013). As well as in the 3rd Global World Economic Leaders Summit in Changchun – China (4th – 6th September 2013)</p>

3.2.4. Summing up

The overall, long term objective of the Association is crystalized in the title of this report: "*LEADER for everyone*". This means that the LEADER method should be in the use of all rural, as well as urban, citizens of Europe willing to work for the development of their local area. Moreover, the method has a great potential to serve people with similar goals living in non-EU territories. ELARD has been very active in spreading this message to the relevant stakeholders during the term of the Finnish presidency.



Picture: Some speakers of “LAGs Global Networks” seminar: Mr. Panagiotis Patras (Greece), Mrs. Teresa Mauaie (Mozambique), Mrs. Maria José Murciano (Spain), Mr. Fransico Graciano (Mozambique), Mr. Philip Wade (OECD) and Mr. Petri Rinne.

The attainment of the Finnish presidency aim of strengthening the LEADER method has been successful in various respects. ELARD has voiced up the needs of local actors for more bottom-up, community-led approaches for development. In the future the coordination of the CSF funds can, if the initiative is well implemented, help the LAGs to become one-stop shops of their territories putting into practice objectives of many different policy fields of the Union. At the same time, this offers an opportunity to develop further and strengthen the methodology of LEADER itself.

ELARD has facilitated the establishment of LEADER type structures in various Pre-Accession Countries by participating in projects and sending its experts on missions and to speak in different events. In addition, the Finnish presidency of ELARD has been especially

keen to develop the LEADER methodology to be applicable also in the non-EU context and ELARD's expertise has been offered for the use of international organizations like FAO and the rural development actors in countries outside of the Union.

ELARD has been active in facilitating the introduction of the changes brought by the new regulations to the local practitioners and disseminating information specifically about Community-led Local Development (CLLD). The future challenge will be to monitor and ensure that the implementation of the new regulations will be smooth on the national and local levels. Civil society organization like ELARD can have a major role in spreading information about the aforementioned reforms as well as about the good LEADER practices especially in the localities where bottom-up is a new approach.

3.3. Aim 2: Development of the operational environment of LEADER

As noted in part one of this report, the mainstreaming of LEADER into being a delivery mechanism for the overall Rural Development programs of the EU was not a total success. Transforming the individual LEADER programs into a separate axis of RD program changed the level of funding as well as the way in which LEADER is executed in comparison to the previous periods. According to the feedback from the LAGs, the original flexibility and innovative character of the approach was partly lost in the process. For example, the diminishing autonomy of LAGs has threatened the "bottom-up approach" principle and the mainstreaming has also occasionally resulted in the reinforcement of regional powers, which in turn has discredited local agents, and placed political power over civil power. As a result, the mainstreaming process has sometimes caused significant delays in the development of rural areas. Therefore, the restoration of the specific characteristics and the flexibility of LEADER was set as an aim of the Finnish presidency of ELARD. Moreover, under this aim efforts have been made to safeguard a sufficient level of funding for LEADER in the future.

3.3.1. Participation in LEADER related work of the EU bodies

The Association has worked towards this aim by proactively taking part in the development work done by the European institutions. As mentioned in the chapter 2.1., in January 2011 ELARD submitted its contribution to the questionnaire for the CAP consultation process, following DG AGRI's invitation for all interested parties and stakeholders to provide their insight and views on the Communication "Meeting the food, natural resources and territorial challenges of the future"¹⁸. In February 2011, by the request of the DG AGRI, ELARD also submitted its comments on the revision of the "Guide for the Applications of the LEADER Axis of the Rural Development Policy 2007-2013 funded by the EAFRD". In addition, ELARD has published a number of position papers at different stages of the legislative process of the CAP (See chapter 2).

As noted in the chapter 3.2.1., ELARD has participated in LEADER related work of the Committees, Thematic Working Groups¹⁹ and Focus Groups of the EN RD. Another thematic activity of the EN RD is the work of the Leader Focus Groups (FGs).²⁰ During the year 2011 ELARD actively advocated for the establishment of a new EN RD Focus Group 4 (FG4) on "Better Local Development Strategies" and the Association, along with the Finnish and

¹⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-post-2013/communication/com2010-672_en.pdf

¹⁹ The role of the Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) is to carry out specific analysis on the basis of ongoing rural development programs and this way to identify the bottlenecks of their implementation. The specific aim of this working group is to ensure that Unions RD policy has the most effective delivery system possible.

²⁰ The first three Focus Groups were launched in November 2009. Their main objectives were to examine LEADER implementation throughout the EU and to identify examples of good practice that could be developed into recommendations to improve the implementation of the approach. In these Focus Groups representatives of National Rural Networks (NRNs), LAGs, Managing Authorities and NGOs, worked together in order to gather information based on which other EN RD activities related to the implementation and improvement of EU rural development policy has been implemented. Source: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/rural-development-policy/leader/en/leader-focus-group_en.cfm

Portuguese National Rural Networks (NRN's), has been co-chairing this group. The aim of the FG4 is to advise the Member States during the current and the next programming period and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the LEADER approach. More specifically, the goal of the work is to identify the critical requirements in the design of the Local Development Strategies (LDSs) and to collect tools and good practices used at LAG level ensuring an efficient implementation of the LDSs. The work of FG4 included an elaboration of a questionnaire, desk research and reporting on the findings and outcomes to be presented to LEADER subcommittee of the EN RD (LsC)²¹. FG4 has a central role guiding the local development strategy design and implementation process during the programming period 2014-2020. Its work has been also important in responding to the criticism expressed by the European Court of Auditors on LEADER (See Chapter 2.2.).

Finally, ELARD was invited by the Commissioner of Agriculture and Rural Development to become a member of the High Level Steering Board of the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) “Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability”. The Steering Board is composed of three Ministers of Agriculture, the Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, the Commissioner for Innovation Research and Science as well as civil society organisations such as Slow Food, Via Campesina and Greepeace. The High Level Steering Board is mandated to provide the EIP with strategic guidance from highly qualified representatives from stakeholder organisations and Member States. The fact that ELARD was invited into this high level body can be seen as a clear evidence of its increasing visibility and prestige in the EU policy-making.

3.3.2. Other advocacy work

Apart from the cooperation with the abovementioned EU bodies, ELARD representatives have also made efforts to influence the main decision makers responsible for the future of

²¹ Sihvola, Sanna & Pires da Silva, Ana: Progress report of FOCUS GROUP 4 on Better Local Development Strategies (LDS). Presentation given in Extended Leader subcommittee meeting, Brussels, 23rd November 2011.

LEADER. Worth mention is the meeting organized on 22nd January 2011 between ELARD's representatives and the Members of the cabinet of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Rural development (Mr. Yves Madre, Mrs. Alexandra Catalao, Mrs. Alina Ujupan). The meeting was instrumental in advancing ELARD's positions concerning LEADER and the CAP reform. This meeting was the first in which ELARD was received by the Commissioner's Cabinet. In this meeting ELARD representatives presented the Association's CAP Reform positions and its vision for the LEADER method.

In addition, in the beginning of 2012 a meeting was organized with the rapporteur of the European Parliament's Agricultural committee (COMAGRI) MEP Luis Manuel Capoulas Santos. Mr. Capoulas Santos was in charge of drafting the parliamentary report of the new EARDF regulation. (See also chapter 3.2.1.) In this meeting ELARD brought forward its positions with regards to the new EARDF and CSF regulations whilst particularly focusing on the LEADER aspects of the two texts. Special attention was given to the budget issue stressing that the reduction of the total budget of Pillar II in parallel with the increase of the number of LAGs would unavoidably lead to a noteworthy reduction in the average budget of each LAG. Moreover, in order to express ELARD's positions (See chapter 2.5) on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) deal reached in the Council (February 2013) and its foreseen negative impact upon rural development and the CAP reform process as a whole, a second meeting with Mr. Capoulas Santos was organized on March 2013.

A major challenge for the advocacy work of the Association has been to find ways to influence the national governments of the Member States who play a crucial role in the legislative process. In this respect ELARD has relied strongly on its network of members and has encouraged them to contact their national parliaments and national representatives in the European Parliament in order to pass them the points of view of the local rural development actors of Europe. ELARD has tried to provide its members with all the possible information and support they need in these efforts by transmitting news and analysis on the latest policy developments. All the relevant news and documents are communicated to ELARD's members through a mailing list. Additionally, in the beginning of the Finnish presidency the Association revamped its website which has proved to be an efficient tool for disseminating information on European policies, ELARD's positions and activities, on LEADER approach, LEADER

related events etc. The feedback on the renewed website has been very positive and it has been described as being both user-friendly and a very useful source of information.

Moreover, in the beginning of the year 2011 ELARD opened a Facebook page that has served similarly for disseminating information and also in facilitating the networking of ELARD's members. With similar aim a Twitter account was opened in the beginning of 2012. The Association also publishes a quarterly newsletter that records its activities, informs readers about the policy developments at the European level, promotes best LEADER practices by presenting projects of ELARD's members and, more generally, promotes ELARD's visibility through its wide distribution.

3.3.3. Organization of events

The annual ELARD event of the year 2012 was the "Marseille LEADER Gathering" (25th and 26th September 2012). LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) towards the next programming period formed the main topic of this international conference (See box 3.).

In the context of the Committee of the Regions Open Days Event 2012 (9th October), ELARD hosted a workshop titled "The LEADER Approach Evolving through Time: 20 years of Community Led Local Development in Practice". The aim of the workshop was to showcase the positive impact that the work of LEADER LAGs have had upon rural communities over time. It focused on three case studies each of them covering a specific period of the lifetime of LEADER, thus touching upon the evolution and impact of this successful local development method through time. The workshop was followed by a networking session where the participants had a chance to discuss, meet the presenters and collect relevant literature²²

²² The workshop was very popular from the onset: about 160 registrations were received, out of which only 68 could be "formally" accommodated (that was the maximum capacity of the room allocated to ELARD). Despite this, on the actual day of the workshop more than 85 participants were counted in the room, some standing others sitting on the floor.

Box 3. Reflections on LEADER and CLLD towards the Programming Period 2014-2020.

Among the speakers in the “Marseille LEADER Gathering” was Mr. Pedro Brosei of DG AGRI who stressed that the bottom-up approach could be the best tool for local development in the context of the introduction of the multi-fund approach.

The importance of LEADER and its role within the multi-funds period was confirmed by the president of ELARD, who argued that more adequate funding will be required in order to carry out CLLD successfully. Furthermore the dissemination of LEADER, as was highlighted, could be involved not only in rural areas but also in urban ones facilitating greater integration and cooperation.

According to the vast majority of the participants at the seminar, to allow the next programming period 2014-2020 to carry out all its innovative elements, the simplification of the administrative processes is more than a necessity.

In reference to the integration of the funds, Ms. Monica Burch from the Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) presented the experience of the application of the LEADER approach on the fisheries fund, while Mr. Ciaran Reid from the Ballyfermot/Chapelizod Partnership in Ireland presented the opportunities that may rise from the introduction of LEADER in urban areas by showcasing successful examples of relevant projects.

3.3.4. Participation in events

In addition, the representatives of the Association have taken part in a wide number of conferences, seminars and other events organized at international, national and local levels²³.

²³ To mention a few, ELARD’s president represented the Association and gave a presentation in the networking event "Networking Across the Clusters and Beyond" organized in Northern Ireland on the 6th-7th October 2011 and in the seminar "LEADER as a local development approach to regional policy implementation in the new programming period (2014 - 2020)" organized in Ropazhi, Latvia on 12 January, 2012.

In these events they have given presentations on the policy changes expected for the programming period post 2013 and the views of the Association have been pushed forward²⁴.

To mention a few examples, ELARD was present and had an active role²⁵ in the EN RD seminar "Leader as a driver for Rural Europe: workshop for new Local Action Groups" (Brussels, 19th-20th January 2011). Over 300 LAGs from all around Europe attended this seminar. Especially the organization of the handover of ELARD's presidency in the cocktail event organized after the first seminar day offered a great spotlight for the Association. Similarly, ELARD had a central role in the EN RD's "LEADER Event 2013: Building bridges for the future" (Brussels, 17th-18th April 2013).²⁶

During the three years term, ELARD's president was invited to several high level meetings and conferences to present ELARD's positions on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy post 2013. Among others, he participated in the DG AGRI event "Monitoring and Evaluation for CAP post 2013 - Stakeholder Conference" (Brussels, 20th-21st September 2011). The conference hosted by the DG AGRI was attended by 230 participants from all Member States representing Managing authorities, NGOs, evaluators and EU officials. The

²⁴ For instance, ELARD participated in the seminar on "Rural Development and LEADER in Europe 2020 Strategy" which took place in Budapest - Hungary (24th January 2011). The purpose of this seminar was to bring together LEADER and rural development stakeholders, organizations and networks in order to discuss the future of LEADER in the Europe 2020 Strategy. Additionally, during this seminar the participants were involved in the drafting and signing of a declaration ("Budapest Declaration") which underlines the significance of LEADER's presence in the Europe 2020 Strategy. ELARD was represented in this event by its Hungarian Member, Dr. Pal Hajas. Moreover, ELARD fully supported the ideas expressed in the declaration in a support letter which was included as an annex to the final Declaration.

²⁵ ELARD's president gave a speech in the plenary session of the first conference day and the vice-president of the Association chaired one of the workshops.

²⁶ In the plenary session of this event the president of ELARD gave a speech, and in addition, ELARD hosted an open discussion titled "National LEADER Networks - What, how & why?".

two days meeting was a participatory communication event where the participants were invited to re-shape the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the CAP. ELARD's president chaired a working group with the topic "LEADER approach and Local Development". The participants of this working group came from DG AGRI, DG MARE, DG REGIO, Managing Authorities and evaluator organizations²⁷.

3.3.5. Cooperation with other networks

ELARD has also aimed at the development of the operational environment of LEADER in cooperation with other networks with similar goals. The four most important associates have been the network ARC2020 (Agricultural and Rural Convention), the PREPARE-network, ECM (European Countryside Movement) and the Local Development network LDnet.

ARC2020 is a process and a multi-stakeholder platform formed by the civil society organizations and people interested or engaged in a reform of the CAP. Its aim is to gather and mobilize people and organizations and to prepare more powerful common actions pushing for a new kind of European agricultural and rural policy. In the year 2010, ARC generated a common "Communication of Civil Society» that gathered 150 signatories, ELARD among them. As for the Rural Development policy, the communication calls for strong and diverse communities, cultures and resources "linked effectively to regional development and honoring the EU's commitment to social, economic and territorial cohesion". As an answer to the problems of the current policy it suggests a "rural renaissance" pursued through the second pillar of the CAP and with close links to other EU funds. The effective linking of the rural, regional, social, cohesion and fisheries funds forms a part of its objectives.²⁸ Thanks to the efforts made by ELARD during the Greek presidency, LEADER

²⁷ As a follow-up of the activities triggered by this conference, a joint Coordination Committee and Evaluation Expert Committee workshops titled "Strategic Programming and Monitoring and Evaluation for RDPs 2014-2020" was organized (14th-15th March 2012) in Brussels. The president represented the association in this event.

²⁸ <http://www.arc2020.eu>

is mentioned as one of the key tools in reaching the goals of the ARC communication, and ultimately, of the envisaged “rural renaissance”. ELARD participated in a gathering of ARC network members and in the second ARC conference organized in Brussels (13th July 2011). The gathering aimed to clarify the concerns and hopes of the members of the network for the future policy and to reach a common set of positions in preparation for the conference. In this gathering ELARD highlighted the importance to commonly advocate for a more efficient use of the LEADER methodology.

ELARD has established close ties also with the PREPARE network which strives to strengthen civil society and to promote multi-national exchange in rural development, with a main focus on the new EU member states and accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The president of ELARD acted as speaker in the PREPARE gathering organized in Sarajevo (September 2013). This cooperation has also resulted in the preliminary plan to organize a joint gathering of members of ELARD and members of PREPARE in 2014.

In 2012 ELARD became a member of the European Countryside Movement which brings together a number of rural development NGOs across Europe. The E.C.M. is a platform gathered around specific initiatives and/or position papers. Without a legal or political entity, it values the specific NGOs partners while respecting their identity and diversity. The European Countryside Movement organizes workshops on European rural development issues and adopts position papers in the framework of the EU policy.

The fourth central cooperation network of ELARD has been the Local Development Network LDnet. This is a mostly web-based forum for information and knowledge exchange of the experts, the representatives of the various European Commission DGs, researchers and others active in Local Development. It aims to act as an independent think-tank “whose work can inform stakeholders and contribute to policy development and implementation, and generally benefit all those involved in local development in Europe and beyond”. In addition, the members of the network try to work towards a common strategy for the next programming period 2014-2020.²⁹ ELARD was present in the launching event of the network (1st February

²⁹ <http://www.ldnet.eu/HomePage>

2011) in Brussels. Moreover, ELARD via its President has been actively involved in the publication of LDnet's "Local Development e-Book", currently composed of seven chapters approaching Local Development from a variety of angles and approaches. Mr. Rinne has contributed a chapter to this book entitled "Local Development in the Developing World".

3.3.6. Summing up

It is still premature to evaluate if the original characteristics of LEADER will be restored in the programming period 2014-2020. ELARD has made efforts to actively contribute to the LEADER related work of different EU bodies in order to steer the evolution towards this direction. For example, the establishment of the EN RD Focus Group 4 and its work can be seen as a positive step towards the fulfillment of this presidency aim.

Moreover, ELARD has been very proactive in the advocacy work, carried out in cooperation with its members, aiming at making an impact at all levels of the EU decision-making process. One of the main objectives has been to safeguard sufficient funding for LEADER in the future. Working under the conditions of the European economic crisis, and thus, of the diminishing EU funds, has made these efforts challenging.

ELARD's own prestige and influence seem to have risen alongside with the grown visibility of the Association. The fact that the representatives of the Association have repeatedly been received by high level officials and decision-makers of the EU institutions can be seen as one demonstration of this. Moreover, the fact that ELARD has received a number of invitations to give presentations in major European conferences, seminars and workshops, and the Commissioner's invitation to join the steering board of the EIP, indicate the same thing.



Picture: The president of ELARD, Mr. Rinne, chairing a panel discussion in the Committee of the Regions Open Days Event 2012.

Additionally the cooperation with other networks has been fruitful. Especially the participation in the ARC process has proved the power that the civil society organizations striving towards similar goals can have when their forces are united. ARC has become a common voice of the civil society in the CAP Reform process. ELARD's participation in ARC has been instrumental for pushing forward the objectives of the Association since the LEADER approach has been used as a positive rural development practice in the "rural renaissance" envisaged in the ARC Convention.

3.4. Aim 3: Expansion of ELARD's membership base

In the beginning of 2011 there were eleven EU countries that were not yet represented in ELARD. Since its establishment, ELARD has constantly worked on expanding its membership base in an effort to create a culturally and nationally diverse front united by the common goal of a sustainable and viable rural Europe. After the enlargement of the European Union, the special focus of these efforts has been in the new Member States. The Finnish Presidency has also aimed to expand ELARD's membership base in the northern countries of Europe. In addition, the Association opened up towards the Pre-Accession Countries (IPA) of the EU that are making efforts to apply the LEADER methodology in their rural areas, and this way, to prepare themselves for the future membership of the Union.

Moreover, ELARD has aimed to strengthen the cooperation with other LEADER actors (i.e. the 200 Fisheries Local Action Groups of the EU), with sectorial organizations of rural development, with the European Network for Rural Development (EN RD) and with rural researchers. To this end, bilateral negotiations with different actors and organizations have been held and synergies have been sought by strengthening cooperation at different levels.

3.4.1. The new members of ELARD 2011-2013

The membership of ELARD is open for representative networks of LAGs and LEADER-type organizations, as well as for any other entity working to promote the sustainable development of its territory and which shares the objectives of the Association. Most of the active members of ELARD are voluntary networks of LAGs at national and regional levels. In addition, singular LAGs have been admitted in the event that no LEADER network exists.

In an effort to further expand the membership base of ELARD, the Finnish presidency has carried out negotiations with LEADER actors of several countries not yet members of the Association. In addition, ELARD has taken part in rural events organized in these countries in order to introduce the activities of the Association to local actors. The new members who joined ELARD during the Finnish presidency term are listed in the table 3.

Table 3. New members of ELARD 2011-2013

<p>Already during the first three months of 2011, the Rural Network Northern Ireland representing the seven Northern Irish LAGs and two LAGs from Scotland (<i>Scottish Borders Council</i> and <i>Rural Aberdeenshire LAG</i>) joined ELARD as full members. In addition, in 2013 (1st October) the Association's board approved the membership applications of two more LAGs from the UK: <i>PLANED - Pembrokeshire Action Network for Enterprise & Development</i> (UK/Wales) and <i>Northumberland Uplands Local Action Group</i> (UK/England).</p>
<p>The Danish Regional Network, <i>The Coordination Council for LAG's Denmark</i>, representing nine LAGs, received a full membership of the Association in March 2011.</p>
<p>In effort to create contacts with neighboring countries of Finland, the president of ELARD gave a speech in an Estonian seminar that took place in Tallinn (9th March 2011). In his speech he presented the activities of ELARD and the position of the Association towards the reform of CAP. The National LEADER network of Estonia, <i>Estonian LAG's Forum</i>, representing 26 LAGs, joined ELARD as full members in the Council meeting of the Association held in Brussels on the 7th December 2011</p>
<p>Similarly, the president represented the Association in a Swedish LEADER networking event held in Östersund, Sweden (31st March–1st April 2011). In this event the Swedish LEADER actors had an opportunity to have direct discussions with him and get to know ELARD. As a consequence of the negotiations, <i>LAG LEADER Folkungaland</i> joined the association as observer member on the 17th November 2011. The contact between ELARD and the Swedish LAGs was intensified through the president's networking activities, and in the spring 2013 a group of Swedish LAGs visited ELARD's premises in Brussels. This meeting eventually encouraged these LEADER groups to establish an informal network of 28 LAGs (<i>Samverkansgruppen Sverige</i>) which later on (October 2013) joined ELARD as full member.</p>
<p>Prior to the Finnish presidency, Poland was represented in ELARD through the regional network of Malopolska. In October 2013 the <i>Polish National LEADER network</i> joined the Association as an associated member, augmenting the number of ELARD LAG members by 265.</p>

In September 2012 the *National network of Slovak Local Action Groups*, made up of 15 LAGs, joined ELARD as associated members. In November 2013 the same Network applied for full membership.

Hungary, previously being represented by a single LAG, brought 53 new LAGs in ELARDs family when the *Hungarian Cluster of Local Action Groups* joined ELARD as a full member in December 2012.

The President of the association was on TAIEX Expert Mission on Leader in Croatia in March 2011 (see chapter 3.2.2.) and following this journey *the Croatian Rural Development Network* (HMRR) assumed the associated membership status with ELARD. HMRR is a civil society organization (NGO) that at the moment includes 16 member-organizations, six of which are LAGs. In September 2012 the newly established *Croatian LEADER Network* and its 20 LAGs, joined the Association as full members.

The vice-president of ELARD, Mr. Panagiotis Patras, was invited by the *Rural Development Network of the Republic of Macedonia (RDN of RM)* to take part in the Agro food Fair 2011 in Skopje, Macedonia (15th-17th November 2011). In this event he had a chance to start negotiations with this network which later on joined ELARD as associate member in December 2011.

3.4.2. Establishment of close contacts with other LEADER actors

During the Finnish presidency ELARD has reinforced the cooperation and established new contacts with several organizations central to LEADER.

As mentioned in previous chapters, ELARD has been involved in the work of the EN RD at many levels. Besides its active involvement in the committees and focus groups of the Network, its active participation in its events, the Association has also supported the work of the EN RD (for example, by gathering best practice LEADER project examples for the EN RD's database).

During the Finnish presidency ELARD has also tightened ties with the Fisheries Areas Network FARNET. The contacts with FARNET have been close during the whole Finnish presidency³⁰.

Contacts have also been established with various organizations which have interest in LEADER - rising from different perspectives³¹. For example, meetings have been held with the umbrella organization of European farmers and agri-cooperatives, Copa-Cogeca³².

3.4.3. Summing up

At the start of the Finnish presidency the members of the association came from 16 different countries: Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom. By the end of the Finnish presidency LAGs and networks from six new countries joined, namely Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Republic of Macedonia, Slovakia and Sweden. The Association has also remarkably widened its membership base in countries that already had some representation in it before 2011 (UK, Poland, and Hungary). In its entirety, the number of LAGs represented by

³⁰ An example of the cooperation was ELARD's presidents' presence in a conference on "*the Future of Local Development in Fisheries areas*" organized by FARNET Support Unit in Brussels on the 12th-13th April 2011. The aim of the conference was to provide early information about some of the initial proposals for improving support for sustainable development of fisheries areas through the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund as well as the potential offered by the other EU funds.

³¹ During the presidency ELARD established contacts with various Finnish organizations involved in the rural development and LEADER projects i.e. the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, the University Network of Tampere and the Finnish Sports Federation.

³² On the 18th April 2011, the president of ELARD had a meeting with, among others, the Finnish Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK), which President, Mr. Juha Marttila, had recently been elected as the vice-president of Copa-Cogeca. The aim of the meeting was to discuss about the producers commitment to the LEADER development work, how to make the cooperation closer during the period 2014-2020, as well as about the common interest in advocacy related to the reform of CAP and the CSF.

ELARD raised to 1097. Thus, it is safe to say that the Finnish presidency succeeded very well in its aim to expand the Association's membership base, particularly in countries of northern Europe and in the Pre-Accession Countries. The new members have actively participated in ELARDs activities after joining the Association and have brought along new ideas and experiences. During the three years term of the Finnish Presidency ELARD has also strengthen its wide network of partners involved in Rural Development at different levels.



Picture: The representatives of the members of ELARD in the Council meeting held in Brussels on the 16th of April 2013.

3.5. Aim 4: Promotion of transnational cooperation of LEADER actors

Transnational cooperation is the one feature of the LEADER approach that is often neglected by LAGs since many of them see it as something complex, time-consuming and even intimidating. It is common that the number of transnational cooperation project initiated is significantly lower than the general objective set in the countries strategies, and this must be seen as a shortcoming of the implementation of the method. According to the Commission, an alarmingly small number of international LEADER projects had been launched by the mid-term of the programming period 2007-2013.

Transnational cooperation can help LAGs to boost their activities as it allows local actors to experience similarities and differences faced in the LEADER work. It can lead to knowledge exchange and provide new perspectives and concepts regardless of, and thanks to, the great diversity of rural areas and governance contexts in Europe.³³

The European Union emphasizes the dissemination of the European good practices in all its actions and programs. Thus, an increased cooperation between European LAGs can work as evidence of the added value of the LEADER program. On the other hand, failing in this task can question the proper functioning of the program in the eyes of the European decision-makers. This is only one of the reasons why ELARD believes that international cooperation should be an obligatory feature of every LAG's activities. Most importantly, ELARD sees that by promoting the networking and cooperation of its members it can help the LEADER methodology to reach its full potential in Europe.

Thus, promoting transnational cooperation between its members is a general and long-term objective of ELARD, as well as one of the Finnish presidency aims. The most important actions taken during the three years term in order to reach this goal have been the organization

³³ Lukesch and Schuh 2007, 14

of international networking events, meetings and seminars and the launch of the international LAG's Staff Exchange program. These activities will be described in the following chapters.

3.5.1. Events organized by ELARD

The main event organized by the Association during the first presidency year was the international LAG's Global Networks seminar that took place on the 15th-16th June 2011 in Finland³⁴. The content of the seminar has already been described in the chapter 3.2.3., in the context of the dissemination of the LEADER method to non-European countries. Alongside with the aim of strengthening of the LEADER method, the seminar also served as an excellent platform for contact building between the European LAGs and other rural actors coming from European and non-European regions, and thus, for promoting transnational cooperation. The seminar brought together 155 guests from 21 different countries.

In the seminar evaluations the participants made special mention to the informal atmosphere of the seminar that made sharing views and experiences with other seminar participants possible. According to the feedback, the seminar did not only offer plenty of valuable information, but by offering a space for discussions with other LEADER actors, it also facilitated making comparisons with how the LEADER is managed in different countries and finding ways for solving problems faced by LAGs. Also the topic ("LAG's Global Networks") chosen for the seminar was evaluated as interesting, even though some LAGs with less experience in transnational cooperation said that they would have liked to hear more about the practical organization of cooperation projects between the European LAGs.

³⁴ On the 3rd-5th October 2011 ELARD also acted as co-organizer of a two-days conference in Koszęcin, Poland, on "LEADER after 2013". In this conference the future of the LEADER approach and new challenges for the development of rural areas of Europe were discussed. The transnational conference brought together experts from different countries and institutions dealing with the LEADER approach and offered them an opportunity to exchange their views and experiences. The president of ELARD acted as a moderator in the panel discussion of the first conference day. Also an informal meeting of ELARD members was organized in the context of the conference.

However, it was also said to be very refreshing to hear about the growth of the LEADER as an approach.

Some participatory methods (Community theater, “Viking boat” rowing) were applied during the seminar in order to enhance the networking of the participants and the feedback of these activities was very positive. For future seminars, more flexibility with timing and more interactive approach i.e. more time for discussions and workshops were requested. In fact, the lack of time for general discussions and one to one meetings was partly a result of schedule problems caused by the late arrival of one of the key speakers. Some participants also had missed language interpretation that, given the limited financial resources, was not within the possibilities of the association to organize. The overall evaluations of the seminar varied between “very good” and “excellent”.

The main ELARD event in the year 2012 was the international conference organized in Marseilles, France (25th-26th September 2012). The “Marseille LEADER Gathering” was organized in cooperation with ELARD’s member LEADER France and with the support of the Region Provence Alpes Cote d’Azur. This conference constituted a moment of reflection and analysis on LEADER and Community-Led Local Development towards the next European Programming Period. The speakers came from diverse backgrounds: LAGs, European institutions and organisations provided their input and expertise in order to better define the future of rural development and its tools. Moreover the event provided an excellent opportunity for LAGs to network and establish contacts as well as to be informed on transnational cooperation project opportunities. The content of the event is described more in detail in the chapter 3.3.3.

The third ELARD event hosted during the Finnish presidency was held in Hranice – Czech Republic (1st-3rd October 2013) and it was co-organized along with the Czech LEADER Network and National Rural Network. The conference was intended for representatives of the public and non-profit sector, entities operating in rural areas and also to the general public. The main focus of this event centered on CLLD and the future for rural areas in the context of the coming programming period. The conference included panel discussions with experts

debating on CLLD, sessions aiming at preparing practitioners for the next programming period, interesting study visits, exhibitions and social events.

Among the important platforms for the networking of ELARD members are also the General Assembly and Council meetings of the Association where numerous representatives of ELARD members from all over Europe get together to exchange, consult and forge strong ties. During the Finnish Presidency a total of 6 such ELARD meetings were held in Brussels, Marseilles (France), Sastamala (Finland) and Hranice (Czech Republic).

Finally, through its co-chair position in the Focus Group 4, ELARD was part of the core organizing team of the conference “Local Development Strategies and Cooperation: Key Approaches to Local Development” lead by the EN RD (Brussels, 27th – 28th April 2012). The event aimed at enhancing the quality and implementation of the local development strategies, integrating cooperation as a key component of local development strategy and encouraging a new wave of transnational cooperation projects.

3.5.2 The LAG’s Staff Exchange Program

Another important and by all accounts innovative initiative aiming to promote transnational cooperation of LEADER actors has been the launch of the “ELARD LAG’s Staff Exchange Program”. A pilot program was initiated in July 2011. Based on the experiences gained from the pilot a second edition of the program was opened in March 2012 and a third edition in March 2013.

The aim of the initiative has been to offer ELARD member LAGs an opportunity for reciprocal, international staff exchange and by doing so, to promote their formation and training as well as exchange of experiences, know-how and new ideas. It aims at offering the participants a new and valuable perspective to the work they do in their local territory as well as a chance to improve their intercultural skills and establish networks and contacts.

Through this program ELARD wants to provide its members with a low-threshold opportunity to network on the international level and to facilitate the launch of new

cooperation projects. Another objective has been to enhance the dissemination of the methodology and its instruments and applications as well as to further develop the methodology itself by collecting good European practices. The exchange diaries drafted by participants during the exchange have been published on ELARD's website in order to further disseminate the experiences on LEADER gathered from different European countries. ELARD coordinates the exchanges and works as a contact point helping LAGs with similar interests to get in touch.

In the pilot phase of the program 24 applications were received, out of which six LAGs³⁵ finally sent their staff members to exchange. 14 LAGs had to withdraw their application for financial reasons or because of the schedule problems they faced. Four LAGs did not accept the partner proposed to them or were not accepted by the other LAG as a partner.

All the participants of the pilot program said that they would be ready to recommend the exchange program for a colleague. Some problems were reported with regards to the practical organization of the exchanges. These problems were related especially to tight schedules (for example too little time for preparing the exchange program) or to the length of the exchange period. Nevertheless, according to the evaluations, the program offered an excellent opportunity for learning and getting a new perspective to the work of the LAGs. Moreover, all the LAGs who participated were planning to start new cooperation projects with their exchange partners in the future.

Based on the experiences gained from the program pilot, the length of the originally three weeks exchange was shortened to a recommendation length of two weeks. In the second edition of the program the participants were thus given more flexibility to define themselves the optimal length of the exchange best answering to their situation. In addition, the period during which the exchanges could be organized was made longer for the second edition in order to avoid problems in fitting the exchanges to the tight schedules of the LAGs and to provide the LAGs more time for the preparation of the exchange programs. The opportunity

³⁵ Coming from Estonia, Finland, Germany, Spain and UK.

to organize the exchanges during the summer months was also hoped to ease these difficulties; the pilot program took place between October 2011 and February 2012 that are normally busy months for the LAGs. In the second edition the participants were able to carry out the exchanges in between May – November and in the third edition in between July-December. The second edition of the exchange had 8 LAGs³⁶ participating and 6 LAGs³⁷ sent their staff members into exchange under the third edition. According to the evaluations received, the exchange experiences were highly positive. The participants stated that they would warmly recommend the exchange program to a colleague:

“More people should try it. They would definitely benefit.” (Participant of the 2nd edition)

3.5.3. The Transnational Cooperation tool

Since the establishment of ELARD, one of its objectives has been to help its members in their efforts to locate partners for their cooperation projects. Already during the Greek presidency a Transnational Cooperation Tool was introduced on ELARD’s website and during the Finnish presidency, in the context of the revision of the website, the tool was further developed and reactivated.

The idea of this tool is to facilitate the contact building and partner search of ELARD’s members by offering a platform for publishing their TNC projects. However, despite the efforts made in order to promote the tool through all the possible channels available, the users have not embraced it and only a few projects have been published in it during the years. The members of ELARD have preferred to send their projects directly to ELARD to be promoted via mailing list and newsfeed. Removing the tool from the website can be considered if the number of users will not increase in the future.

³⁶ Coming from Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Greece, Czech , Finland, UK and Slovenia.

³⁷ Coming from Italy, Croatia, Estonia, Poland, Sweden, Spain.

3.5.4. Summing up

The LAGs' Global Networks seminar organized in Finland was the first international conference organized by ELARD. The organization of international networking events of this kind proved to be an excellent way of aiding ELARD's members in their efforts to promote their networking and transnational cooperation. Moreover, it provides a great opportunity to gather together the LAGs belonging to the ELARD's network, and hence, it can also help to bring the Association closer to its members. It is thus recommendable that ELARD would continue organizing yearly events also in the future. In addition, co-organizing other events has offered ELARD a possibility to cover a wider range of questions and topics related to the LEADER method.

The ELARD LAG's Staff Exchange program has also been a very interesting experiment. This new kind of initiative was warmly welcomed by LEADER actors both at the local and the European level. Although the pilot phase carried out during 2011 faced some constraints related especially to the tight schedule and the length of the exchanges, the program was then developed based on the evaluations of the participants and the implementation of the editions that followed was already notably smoother. In every edition the participants were pleased with their experience in terms of the learning opportunities offered by the exchange. Moreover, all the participants reported that they hope to start new cooperation with their exchange partners. Thus the program answered very well to the objectives set to it and it has a good potential to be further developed.

3.6. Aim 5: Production of a high quality final report on the Finnish presidency

The specific purpose of producing the present final report of the Finnish presidency of ELARD has been to clarify the operational concept of the Association. During the previous presidencies no official records on the activities have been made public and this report seeks to answer to the need for more systematic documentation of the work of ELARD. Thus, it is hoped to bring new kind of coherence and continuity to the work done under different presidencies, to smoothen the presidency handover and to help the next president country in its efforts of further develop the activities of the Association.

4. Conclusions, reflections and lessons learnt

The last part of the report will draw conclusions on the overall success of the Finnish presidency. The actions taken will be further reflected in the light of the challenges faced, the results accomplished and the possible lessons learnt.

4.1. Influencing the European policies

As for the advocacy work, given the complexity of the EU level decision-making processes, it is always difficult to evaluate the direct impacts of the actions taken by an individual association. However, it can be concluded that after active advocacy work performed during both the previous and the Finnish presidency of ELARD, many of the major goals of the Association have been achieved for the programming period 2014-2020. The increased visibility and prestige of the Association have facilitated its advocacy work; during the three years term of the Finnish presidency ELARD has been invited to meetings and events organized at the highest European and international level and the representatives of the Association have been received by the main European decision-makers in charge of the CAP reform.

It is fundamental that ELARD will maintain the good contacts and relationships established with the Commission, European Parliament, EN RD, FARNET and the other bodies and organizations central to the work of the Association. Similarly, it is important to continue cooperating with the relevant civil society networks. A central future challenge of the Association will be the safeguarding of a smooth implementation of the new regulations affecting the work of the LAGs and securing that the original spirit of LEADER will not be lost in the process. New routes and methods have been searched, and should be searched in the future, in order to efficiently influence in the decision-making, also at the national level. For example the renewed website and social media sites have proved to be very good tools in keeping the members of the Association informed about the European level policy developments. In the coming years, it is ever more important to work towards activating the

members to take part in the advocacy work as the most important decisions on the implementation of LEADER will be taken at the national level.

ELARD has an important double role in Europe: It should continue the work towards raising the profile of the LEADER method and making its central characteristics, features and the “LEADER spirit” better known, regardless of the name used, be it LEADER or “Community-Lead Local Development”. The Association’s participation in the development work done within the EU institutions has been essential, and will continue to be so in the future, as the new regulations, as well as the diminishing funds, will bring along important new challenges for the implementation of the approach. At the same time the Association should continue supporting its members in order to make LEADER stronger in the countries where it already is applied as well as disseminating the method to new territories not yet familiar with it.

4.2. Bringing the “LEADER family” together

Recruiting new members to join ELARD has been efficient during the Finnish presidency and the membership base has been expanded especially in the countries set as target territories, namely in northern Europe and in the Pre-Accession Countries of the EU. Participating in the local events has been experienced as a positive way of approaching the LEADER actors in the potential new member countries and, at the same time, it has offered good opportunities to promote the methodology in these territories. In addition, inviting the potential members to take part in the events and meetings organized by ELARD and offering them the possibility to join ELARD for one year as observer members can be considered as good practices.

There are still seven EU countries in which ELARD is not present, that is Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta and the Netherlands. Since the higher percentage of the European LAGs represented by the Association will also mean increased influence in Europe, the Association should work towards expanding its membership base even further. Individual LAGs in the above mentioned countries have already expressed interest towards the work of the Association. For example, the pilot phase of the LAG’s Staff Exchange

program was also open for non-member LAGs and applications to participate came both from Germany and Austria.

All in all, the activities of ELARD have increased substantially during the Finnish presidency. The permanent Brussels office was established under the Greek presidency and the Finnish presidency term has offered the Association an opportunity to further develop and effectuate many activities provisionally discussed during the previous years.

The experience of organizing ELARD's own yearly event has been very positive and the members have been interested and pleased to participate in these activities. It is highly recommendable that ELARD would continue organizing events of its own, preferably every year, as it does facilitate achieving several objectives of the Association simultaneously (e.g. promoting networking and cooperation of its members, offering platform for the development and dissemination of the methodology etc.). Depending on the topics and venues chosen, these events can also have an important function in the advocacy work of the Association.

Undoubtedly one of the greatest innovations brought by the Finnish presidency is the ELARD Staff Exchange program. The experiences of this program have been positive and it too has supported some of the key functions of the Association.

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