

GOOD PRACTICE WEBINAR



Highlights report

Good Practice Webinar on Territorial instruments (LEADER/CLLD, Integrated Territorial Investments, and Smart Villages): lessons for the future

Introduction

The webinar explored how territorial instruments and approaches – LEADER/CLLD, Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs), and Smart Villages – work in practice and what lessons can be learned to inform future implementation.

Organiser: Rural Pact Support Office



22 April 2026



Online



Approximately 240 participants from 27 EU Member States and 10 non-EU countries, including representatives of Local Action Groups (LAGs), public authorities, NGOs, private sector and researchers.



[Presentations and recordings](#)



If you see this icon, click to watch the recording.

Main highlights from the event

Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs): improving uptake and impact in rural areas

- > **Adapting ITIs to territorial realities:** ITIs can take very different forms depending on scale, governance and territorial needs. Their added value lies in their flexibility and ability to mobilise integrated, multi-sector interventions, supporting complex and long-term strategies that go beyond isolated projects.
- > **Balancing functional territories and implementation capacity:** effective ITIs need to reflect real territorial dynamics while relying on institutions with sufficient authority, skills and resources to manage funds and coordinate delivery. This requires clear choices on territorial scope, governance arrangements and leadership structures.
- > **Strengthening coordination and technical support:** ITIs require close coordination across funds, programmes and governance levels. Simplified procedures, clearer entry points for beneficiaries and sustained capacity building are essential to improve uptake and impact in rural areas.

LEADER/CLLD: delivering local results and strengthening territorial coordination

- > **Delivering outcomes in fragile rural areas:** LEADER/CLLD is particularly effective in remote, lagging or shrinking territories where it supports not only tangible project results, but also social capital, local services and community-based solutions. These enhance capacity and deliver impacts beyond standard investment outputs.
- > **Designing multi-fund approaches coherently:** multi-funded CLLD can expand the scope and impact of local strategies, but only when systems are designed from the outset to operate across funds, with aligned rules and coordination. This enables innovation and experimentation and avoids additional layers of complexity.
- > **Acting as a connector across territories and actors:** LEADER/CLLD can strengthen rural-urban linkages, support cooperation beyond administrative borders and connect local stakeholders around common issues. It acts as a platform for trust-building, coordination and integrated territorial development.

Smart Villages: applying place-based approaches in rural development

- > **Moving beyond digitalisation:** Smart Villages are increasingly understood as broader, long-term strategies for resilience, liveability, quality of life, service provision and community capacity, rather than purely technology-driven interventions.
- > **Turning strategies into implementation:** local Smart Village strategies help communities move beyond isolated projects and develop longer-term, integrated approaches. However, these strategies require dedicated support, facilitation and funding to translate into action.
- > **Building local capacity through partnerships:** community-led organisations, such as Local Action Groups (LAGs), play an important role as enablers, helping communities organise, identify priorities, access expertise and develop the skills needed to design and implement Smart Village strategies.

Setting the scene: lessons learned on integrated territorial development instruments for rural areas

The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas and integrated territorial development instruments

Marie Lambert, European Commission, DG AGRI ([PPT](#))



The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (LTVRA) sets the framework for EU action towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040.

A key message of the vision is the need to adopt a more integrated and place-based approach to rural development. Integrated territorial development instruments – such as LEADER/CLLD, Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) and Smart Villages – play a central role.

While the rural vision does not introduce new funding, it highlights the need to better coordinate and mobilise existing EU instruments, supported by tools such as the [Rural Revitalisation Platform](#) and the [Rural toolkit to EU funding](#).

Findings from cohesion policy evaluations: mid-term 2021-2027 and *ex-post* 2014-2020

Davide Ceccanti, European Commission, DG REGIO ([PPT](#))



Cohesion policy evaluations show that territorial instruments such as ITIs and CLLD have helped deliver results that traditional planning approaches could not achieve, notably by strengthening social capital, trust, local ownership and cooperation across administrative silos. The [2014-2020 period](#) evaluation revealed persistent challenges, including slow start-up, administrative burden, limited integration and difficulties in combining funds.

In 2021-2027, the framework has evolved through [Policy Objective 5](#) (PO5), the use of functional areas, simplified rules and stronger rural focus, with 35% of PO5 targeting rural, mountainous and island territories.

Effectiveness, however, remains linked to coherence with other funding instruments and the capacity to coordinate across governance levels.

Cohesion policy has worked in the last decade: ERDF, CF, JTF evaluations

Ex post evaluation 2014-20, REACT-EU Report and mid-term evaluation 2021-27 are distinct exercises with a shared message:

Cohesion policy through ERDF, CF and JTF has delivered sustainable development for all territories and reduced inequalities between regions.

In some territories and thematic areas, it has worked better than in others and we identified areas for improvement.

- Territoriality: Place-based, adapted to regional needs
- EU Added value: Strategic and funding continuity
- Relevance: Keeping with EU objectives
- Simplification: Modest costs, room for streamlining
- Capacity building: Uneven, improvement needed



Multi-sector CLLD within CAP Strategic Plans: EU overview and case study from Poland

Iwona Lisztwan, European Commission, DG AGRI ([PPT](#))



LEADER remains the main EU-funded CLLD instrument in rural areas, with EUR 5 billion allocated under the CAP and coverage of around 65% of the rural population. While multi-fund CLLD is applied (e.g. Czechia, Estonia, Poland, Slovenia), its uptake remains limited and uneven across Member States, despite its potential to support more integrated approaches.

Examples showcased at the webinar revealed that the combination of LEADER with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund+ (ESF+) can enable more comprehensive local strategies, linking support for economic development, social inclusion, public services and infrastructure. The added value lies in broader intervention scope and access to additional financial resources, governance networks and knowledge, although implementation remains constrained by administrative complexity, differing rules and coordination challenges across funds.

CLLD in fisheries and coastal communities: achievements and lessons

Monica Veronesi, FAMENET (PPT)



FAMENET

CLLD under the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) currently supports around 315 Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) across 18 Member States, covering coastal and inland fisheries and aquaculture areas. In the 2014–2020 period, CLLD contributed to mobilising local stakeholders, strengthening community capacity and supporting socio-economic and environmental adaptation, while also bringing EU funding closer to citizens.

On average, one FLAG supported 44 projects with EUR 1.9 million of public investment, contributing to jobs, business diversification, short supply chains, environmental actions and local innovation. A key added

value lies in engaging new beneficiaries and fostering local ownership, although sufficient staffing, simplified procedures and faster implementation remain critical for effectiveness.

Conclusions and recommendations

FAMENET, CTB.1 2030-026 Rural Pact Webinar 22.04.2026

- ✓ A small amount of money can go a long way
- ✓ Valuable tool for ensuring EU money goes to real needs
- ✓ A powerful tool to involve local communities in delivering EU objectives
- ✓ Increased visibility of the EU and its impact on the ground

78% of local stakeholders surveyed believe that **CLLD** has made a big difference in coastal communities

BUT

- ✓ **Sufficient** budget and staff are necessary
- ✓ Fewer administrative requirements
- ✓ Quicker and simpler procedures

Lessons learned from the implementation of the Smart Villages intervention

Edina Ocsko, Smart Village Network (PPT)



Smart Villages are being implemented across EU Member States through a variety of approaches, often combining dedicated interventions with strong reliance on LEADER as a delivery mechanism. Early experiences show diverse models, including regional cooperation projects, LAG-led 'umbrella projects', and Smart Village strategies linked to local development strategies.

The scope has evolved beyond digitalisation to cover broader challenges such as service provision, sustainability, social inclusion, resilience and preparedness. Key lessons highlight the importance of strong partnerships, flexible implementation models and continuous capacity building, as well as the need to clarify what constitutes 'smart' and 'innovative' solutions in different territorial contexts.

Initial common lessons

RURAL PACT

- ▶ **LEADER** has become a key vehicle for implementing and/or supporting the implementation of SV
- ▶ **Umbrella project** method is most common
- ▶ **Partnership** is key = under 'cooperation' intervention
- ▶ **'Smart'** is still hard to define (what is innovative?)
- ▶ **Challenges of strategy development:** integrated-holistic, links between projects is hard to ensure
- ▶ **Capacity-building on the way:** Early (preparatory, pre-application) and continuous consultation and support is crucial
- ▶ **Learning by doing:** still new / experimentation (refining / simplifying rules on the way, etc.)
- ▶ **Co-financing** is sometimes challenging

Learning from experiences to shape the future

> Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs): improving uptake and impact in rural areas



Implementing ITIs through regional frameworks: the 'Future Regions' model (Germany)

Insa Schwob, Lower Saxony Ministry for Economic Affairs, Transport and Construction ([PPT](#))



Niedersachsen

The 'Future Regions' model in Lower Saxony applies an ITI approach within a multi-fund ERDF/ESF+ programme, with EUR 95 million supporting 14 territorial strategies. Each region develops its own ITI strategy through participatory processes, focusing on themes such as innovation, low-carbon development, circular economy, biodiversity, participation and culture.

Regional steering groups are responsible for selecting projects, within a framework defined and coordinated by the managing authority. The model reflects the diversity of the territory and aims to support demand-driven, place-based interventions while strengthening inter-municipal cooperation.

A multi-fund ITI for territorial resilience: the Pinhal Interior approach (Portugal)

Luís Matias, Pinhal Interior Territorial Development Agency ([PPT](#))



The Pinhal Interior ITI covers a low-density functional territory in central Portugal, bringing together 24 municipalities and five inter-municipal communities. It was developed following the devastating forest fires of 2017, using the crisis as a starting point for a long-term strategy focused on resilience, cohesion, competitiveness and attractiveness.

The approach combines multiple funds and instruments around a territorial action plan, with operational coordination led by a non-profit territorial development agency. The approach highlights the importance of functional territories, shared diagnosis, close coordination, flexibility and community participation.

Towards Territorial Resilience.

- 01** — The Pinhal Interior ITI shows that crisis can be a catalyst for structural transformation — if local actors are empowered and supported to act collectively.
- 02** — Governance innovation — combining private-law coordination, multi-level accountability and participatory strategy — is as important as financial architecture.
- 03** — Multi-fund integration is not just a technical exercise: it requires political will, coordination capacity and a shared territorial vision.
- 04** — The experience confirms that place-based approaches work best when grounded in functional territorial realities, not administrative convenience.
- 05** — The journey is ongoing: implementation, learning and adaptation are continuous processes, not a one-off project cycle.

Supporting mountain transitions through ITIs: the Lombardy Alpine valley case (Italy)

Leonardo La Rocca, Regione Lombardia ([PPT](#))



In Lombardy, an ITI has been implemented in Valmalenco, a small Alpine valley facing depopulation, economic decline and strong dependence on seasonal tourism. The ITI brings together municipalities, regional and national authorities, private actors and local stakeholders to deliver a medium-term strategy of 30 projects structured around six thematic priorities: mobility; urban regeneration; sustainable economic development; territorial identity; energy transition; and sustainable transition.

The approach combines multiple funding sources and mobilises public and private investment, illustrating the role of ITIs in supporting diversification and resilience in mountain areas.

Multi-funded LEADER/CLLD and territorial coordination: the Nouvelle-Aquitaine approach (France)

Catherine Hua, Pays Périgord Vert; Léa Gautronneau, La Rochelle-Ré-Aunis; Josselin Patron, Ouest Charente LAGs ([PPT](#))



In Nouvelle-Aquitaine, multi-funded CLLD combines LEADER (EAFRD), ERDF (Policy Objective 5), and in some cases EMFAF, within the region's 54 local development strategies. Each project is financed by one fund, with clear dividing lines, while coordination is ensured through continuous interaction between LAGs and regional managing authorities.

The approach has strengthened territorial coordination, expanded coverage to both rural and urban areas, and increased resources for local development. At the same time, it requires managing different eligibility rules and systems, which can constrain flexibility and add complexity for implementation.

Delivering social economy solutions in lagging rural areas through LEADER: the Užimtumo namai case (Lithuania)

Gintė Ivanauskienė, Ukmergė region LAG ([PPT](#))



In the Ukmergė region, LEADER supported the creation of a local 'employment house' providing flexible, small-scale work opportunities for socially vulnerable groups in a remote village with limited transport access. The initiative brought jobs directly to residents through outsourced tasks (e.g. packaging, assembly), improving access to employment, income opportunities and social inclusion.

The project created initial employment and expanded participation over time, demonstrating the potential of small-scale, locally adapted social economy models. It highlights the importance of flexibility, cooperation with private companies and adapting solutions to local constraints.



Key takeaways

- LEADER can deliver **real impact in remote areas**
- Small investments → **high social return**
- Social business = effective rural tool
- **Effective response to:**
 - Limited mobility
 - Unemployment
 - Social exclusion
- **Main lessons:**
 - Bringing jobs closer to people works where commuting fails
 - Flexibility is key for vulnerable groups
 - Small-scale pilot projects can be scaled up
 - Community-based solutions are more sustainable
 - Partnerships with private sector (orders) are crucial
 - Social innovation can emerge from rural areas



Partnership agreement across administrative borders around the city of Kraków (Poland)

Barbara Kawa, LAG Korona Północnego Krakowa ([PPT](#))



Around Kraków, a LAG initiative helped to build a partnership across municipalities linking rural areas, suburbs and the city through a shared territorial initiative covering over one million inhabitants. The cooperation started with strengthening short supply chains, promoting local products and reinforcing territorial identity through joint branding and local markets.

A formal partnership agreement signed in 2026 brings together public authorities and stakeholders to coordinate actions across administrative boundaries. The experience shows how LEADER can support rural-urban linkages, foster local economies and build cooperation at metropolitan scale.

> Smart Villages: applying place-based approaches in rural development

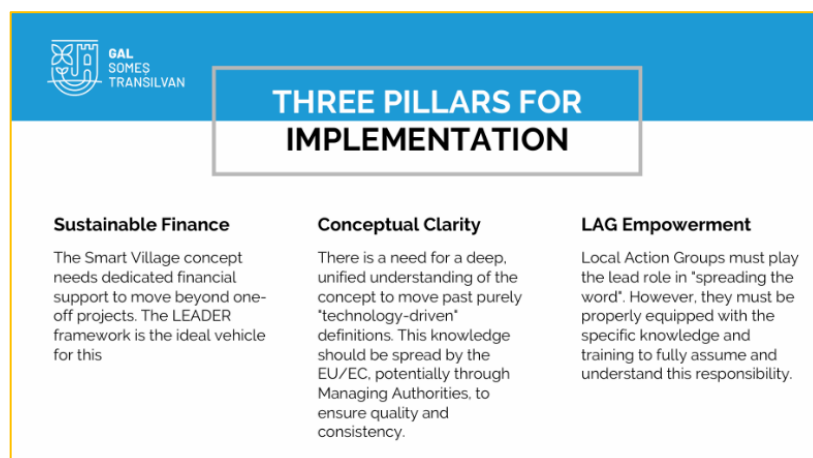
Living Lab to Smart Village strategies: the Someș Transilvan model (Romania)

Laura Incze, LAG Someș Transilvan ([PPT](#))



In the Someș Transilvan LAG area, Smart Villages are implemented through LEADER as a community-led process rather than a technology-driven intervention. The approach combines a Living Lab pilot with an umbrella project to support the development of local Smart Village strategies.

Communities are expected to form local strategy groups, identify needs, organise consultations and prepare strategies, while the LAG provides methodology, workshops and coordination. The experience highlights the importance of conceptual clarity, community ownership and dedicated support to move from planning to implementation.



Building local governance for Smart Villages: the Ballyboughal approach (Ireland)

Ian Dempsey, Prescience ([PPT](#))



In Ballyboughal, a Smart Village strategy was developed to strengthen social capital, local governance and quality of life in a rapidly growing village near Dublin. The process translated community priorities into spatial concepts and practical actions covering governance, placemaking, biodiversity, heritage, recreation and social well-being.

Implementation is led through local community structures and volunteer groups, with support from LEADER and other funding sources. Early results include a community hub, village website, biodiversity action plan, heritage guide, signage and funding for public realm improvements.

Supporting the design and implementation of Smart Village strategies at local scale: the LAG EVV approach (Italy)

Carlo Salot, LAG Escartons e Valli Valdesi ([PPT](#))



The Escartons e Valli Valdesi LAG supports Smart Village strategies across a mountain territory of 67 municipalities in north-west Italy. Its approach combines capacity building, technical support and funding for strategy development before supporting investments and implementation.

The LAG launched a call for expression of interest, supported communities through expert guidance and selected eight Smart Village strategies covering most of the LAG territory. The experience shows the role of LAGs as enablers of local action, helping communities define their own priorities and build capacity to access wider funding opportunities.

Stakeholder panel discussion: lessons for current and future implementation

A panel of four experts reflected on the practical delivery and future of territorial instruments, with a focus on enabling conditions, stakeholder roles and priorities for future implementation.

Stefan Kah, [European Policies Research Centre](#) (EPRC)



ITIs offer high flexibility and can take different forms depending on scale, governance and territorial needs. A key challenge is balancing functional territorial approaches with the need for institutions that have sufficient capacity and authority to manage funds. This requires careful choices between tailoring instruments to local challenges and relying on existing administrative structures.

Future uptake depends on stronger involvement of managing authorities and Member States, as well as simplified access for beneficiaries through clearer entry points and reduced administrative complexity.

Edina Ocsko, [Smart Villages Network](#)



Smart Villages are evolving beyond digital solutions towards broader goals such as resilience, liveability and community capacity. Strategies help communities move beyond isolated projects and adopt longer-term, strategic approaches.

LAGs play a central role in capacity building, facilitating participation and supporting community-led planning. Key priorities include scaling up good practices, ensuring adequate funding, and strengthening the integration of Smart Villages in future policy frameworks.

Michael Schmitz, [Council of European Municipalities and Regions](#) (CEMR)



Effective delivery of territorial instruments depends on flexible funding rules aligned with local needs. Fragmentation across funds creates significant administrative burdens, particularly for smaller actors. Stronger alignment between funds, simplified procedures and reduced thematic layering are therefore essential.

Predictable and accessible funding, meaningful application of the partnership principle, and early involvement of local stakeholders in programming processes are key conditions for improving implementation.

Luis Chaves, [Minha Terra](#)



Effective LEADER/CLLD implementation relies on a supportive framework with simplified procedures, predictable delivery and strong local capacity. The approach should remain focused on outcomes and local impact, including social and community benefits beyond standard investment outputs.

Coherent multi-fund systems are needed, designed from the outset rather than layered onto existing complexity. The effectiveness of LEADER in supporting animation, inclusion and strategic thinking depends on the availability of sufficient and well-structured funding.

Next steps for the Rural Pact Support Office (PPT)

- > Upcoming [Rural Pact activities and events](#)

Join the Rural Pact Community and online platform
https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/become-member_en



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