International conference TWG LEADER/CLLD National CAP Network

The future of rural development policy after 2027.



HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

Introduction

The conference brought together representatives of European and national institutions, local and regional self-government units, local action groups, development agencies, academia, civil society organizations, entrepreneurs and other rural development stakeholders.

The central topic of the conference was the future of rural areas in the context of the new multiannual financial framework of the European Union for the period after 2027, with a special emphasis on the role of the LEADER/CLLD approach in the design and implementation of development policies. Throughout the three-day program, participants learned about the implementation of the LEADER/CLLD approach in the Republic of Croatia in the previous programming period, the second day focused on topics related to the new multiannual financial framework and rural development policies at the EU and Croatian levels, while the third day focused on the presentation of projects, examples of good practice and innovative approaches to the development of rural areas.

Organiser: Thematic Working Group LEADER/CLLD National CAP Network

23. - 25. March 2026.

Terme Tuhelj, Hrvatska

170 participants from Croatia and abroad (other EU countries) including representatives of EU and Croatian institutions, public bodies, NGOs, local action groups, businesses and researchers

Presentations (click on this icon to see PPT presentation)

Video (click on this icon to watch recording)

MAIN HIGHLIGHTS OF THE CONFERENCE

Participants stressed the need for a clear, stable and integrated framework that will ensure the long-term position of rural development within the future financial and political system of the EU.

Shaping Rural Development Policy after 2027.

During the conference, participants identified the following key priorities and recommendations for the future development of rural areas.

- **Ensure a strong and clearly defined role for rural development in the future financial framework** by preserving cohesion policy, agriculture/fisheries and rural development as key instruments of territorial and economic cohesion.
- **Maintain stable, predictable and targeted financing of rural areas** in order to avoid competition with other policies and to ensure the continuity of investment in local communities.
- **Ensure that increased flexibility in future financial instruments does not result in uncertainty, reduced funding or decision-making becoming more distant from the local level**, through clear rules and preserving the role of local and regional stakeholders in the planning process.
- **Strengthen integration and coordination between different EU policies and funds** to enable more effective, simpler and territorially coherent development of rural areas and **ensure a genuine multi-level partnership** by formalising the partnership for the NRP plan and the role of regional and local authorities, civil society, youth and community organisations in the design, implementation and monitoring of future rural policies.
- **Basing the development of policies on data, evidence (rural proofing approach)** to ensure that policies correspond to the real needs of rural areas and bring measurable results.

Strengthening the LEADER/CLLD approach and rural areas as living spaces

Participants highlighted the key role of the LEADER/CLLD approach and local stakeholders in developing sustainable, resilient and attractive rural communities.

- **Introducing the LEADER/CLLD approach as a mandatory instrument within the framework of cohesion, social and other policies of the European Union. Ensure mandatory and dedicated funding of the LEADER/CLLD approach** in order to preserve its role as a fundamental instrument of community-led development and prevent its weakening within the wider system.
- **Strengthen the role of local action groups as development drivers** through greater authority in the preparation, selection and implementation of projects and their active involvement in policy formulation.
- **Preserve the integrated and multisectoral character of the development of rural areas, LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages** by connecting agriculture, forestry, fishing, tourism; entrepreneurship, social services and environmental protection into a single territorial approach.
- **Simplify administrative procedures and reduce the burden on beneficiaries** to enable faster implementation, especially of small projects, greater availability of funds and strengthening the trust of local stakeholders.
- **Develop rural areas as a space of life and opportunity through the concept of the "right to remain"** by ensuring conditions for quality of life, employment, innovation and population retention, especially youth.

Day 1: LEADER-CLLD in the previous programming period

Results of CLLD-a within the framework of the OP for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of Croatia 2014-20

Jelena Jerbić, Directorate of Fisheries, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery of the Republic of Croatia



Jelena Jerbić presented the results of the implementation of the CLLD approach under the OP for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the Republic of Croatia 2014–2020, highlighting its contribution to strengthening employment and territorial cohesion in coastal and island communities. She emphasized that the 2014–2020 programming period marked the first introduction of the CLLD approach within the fisheries sector in Croatia. Through a systematic implementation process—including awareness-raising activities, the establishment of local initiatives, the approval of Fisheries Local Development Strategies (FLDSs), and capacity building for Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) - the foundations for CLLD in fisheries were successfully established.

From a financial perspective, more than EUR 344 million was made available under the Operational Programme, of which approximately EUR 30.5 million (around 9% of the total allocation) was dedicated to the implementation of the CLLD approach under Union Priority 4. Of this amount, EUR 29.5 million supported the implementation of local development strategies and covered operational costs, enabling 14 recognized FLAGs to implement 14 approved local development strategies across Croatia's coastal and island areas.

It was highlighted that Fisheries Local Development Strategies were designed not only to strengthen the fisheries sector itself, but also to diversify local economies, encourage innovative solutions, and promote multi-sectoral initiatives based on the bottom-up approach. This created new employment opportunities, increased the added value of fisheries products, and strengthened networking and cooperation among local stakeholders.

The implementation of supported measures produced tangible results through investments in fisheries, aquaculture and processing, the development of short supply chains, product promotion and branding, as well as the preservation of fisheries and maritime heritage. Particular attention was also given to projects promoting environmental protection and sustainable development, together with initiatives aimed at increasing the consumption of fisheries products and strengthening local communities.

Key performance indicators included the implementation of more than 110 FLAG calls for proposals and over 370 projects, accompanied by a high level of fund absorption. The presentation also highlighted concrete local impacts, including the creation of more than 50 new jobs, the preservation of over 250 existing jobs, and the launch of new entrepreneurial initiatives. Additional achievements included the construction of fish markets, the development of innovative solutions, and measures enhancing the resilience of the fisheries sector, further demonstrating the added value of the CLLD approach for the sustainable development of coastal and island regions.

Ex post evaluation of LEADER/CLLD-a within the Rural Development Program, Croatia, 2014.-2020. (2022.)

Danijela Mačković, Directorate for Support in Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery of the Republic of Croatia



Danijela Mačković presented the key components of the ex-post evaluation of Local Development Strategies (LDSs), focusing on the most common challenges and shortcomings encountered during both their preparation and implementation. She stressed that evaluation should not be regarded as a final administrative requirement, but rather as a process that must be planned from the earliest stages of strategy development, with clearly defined objectives, indicators and data collection methodologies. Failure to integrate evaluation into the strategic planning process often results in the inability to compare baseline and final conditions, forcing evaluators to rely on estimates rather than verifiable evidence.

Particular emphasis was placed on clearly defining the purpose of evaluation, which should assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and coherence of implemented interventions. It was noted that evaluation is often reduced to a formal reporting exercise, without its findings being effectively used to improve governance and decision-making processes.

The presentation further highlighted the importance of aligning intervention logic with evaluation methodology. Objectives, indicators and evaluation questions must be fully interconnected to demonstrate the actual contribution of Local Development Strategies to rural development objectives.
Another key message concerned the need to move beyond monitoring outputs alone towards systematically measuring results and long-term impacts, thereby providing evidence of real change within local communities. Establishing a robust data collection system—continuous, standardized and evidence-based—was identified as a prerequisite for credible evaluation. Without such a system, both the reliability of evaluation findings and the aggregation of results at strategy level become significantly more difficult.

Special attention was devoted to the concept of the added value of the LEADER approach, emphasizing that evaluation should extend beyond individual projects to include processes such as social capital development, partnership building, local governance and community animation. In this context, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including interviews and focus groups, was recommended to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of implementation outcomes.
In conclusion, the presentation underlined the importance of strengthening evaluation capacities and actively using evaluation findings to improve future strategies and policy development. Particular emphasis was placed on ensuring stronger links between local and national levels by demonstrating how Local Development Strategies contribute to the objectives of the Rural Development Programme, thereby increasing both the visibility and the justification for continued investment in the LEADER approach.

Mojca Hrabar, Krešimir Ivančić, Ernst & Young



Representatives of Ernst & Young Advisory presented the framework and methodology for the ex-post evaluation of the Croatian Rural Development Programme**,** with particular emphasis on the LEADER approach and its contribution to local development. The evaluation, launched in July 2025 and scheduled for completion in June 2026**,** examines the effectiveness of programme implementation, the functioning of Local Action Groups (LAGs), and the overall contribution of LEADER interventions to rural development. The evaluation focuses on understanding how the system functions in practice, including the institutional capacities of LAGs, beneficiaries' experiences, and the administrative challenges encountered during implementation.
In this context, it seeks to answer key questions concerning the effectiveness of the LEADER approach, its added value, and its contribution to interventions supporting local development, infrastructure, cooperation and capacity building. Methodologically, the evaluation combines quantitative and qualitative data sources, including analyses of administrative and program data, surveys of Local Action Groups, workshops, and stakeholder consultations. Particular importance was placed on incorporating field-level experience, recognizing LAGs as the primary delivery mechanism and the principal point of contact for beneficiaries, thereby providing valuable insights into practical implementation challenges and the overall functioning of the system. The presentation also highlighted key implementation indicators of the LEADER approach under the Rural Development Programme. Croatia's 54 Local Action Groups currently cover approximately 2.4 million inhabitants**,** representing around two-thirds of the country's rural population. More than 2,000 projects have been selected for funding, complemented by numerous inter-regional and transnational cooperation projects, demonstrating both the extensive territorial coverage and the operational capacity of the LEADER approach in Croatia.

In conclusion, it was emphasized that the evaluation findings, including the collected evidence and stakeholder feedback, will be incorporated into the final evaluation report and used as the basis for recommendations supporting the design of future rural development policies. Particular importance was attached to the active participation of Local Action Groups through surveys and consultation workshops, ensuring a participatory evaluation process and a more comprehensive understanding of the LEADER approach's impacts at the local level.

The interactive session that followed provided participants with an opportunity to exchange experiences regarding the implementation of the CLLD and LEADER approaches. Through discussions and practical examples, participants identified both successful practices and the principal challenges faced by local stakeholders, particularly in relation to administrative procedures, institutional capacities, and the overall efficiency of the implementation system.

Day 2: Main Conference day

Welcome and Opening

Milan Medić, President of the Thematic Working Group LEADER/CLLD National CAP Network, Croatia



In his opening address, Milan Medić emphasized that the primary objective of the conference was to initiate a structured discussion on the future of rural areas within the context of the new programming period beyond 2028, with particular attention to the implications of the proposed Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) of the European Union for rural development. He stressed the importance of gaining a timely understanding of the changes introduced by the new financial framework, particularly regarding the LEADER/CLLD approach and other territorial development instruments, in order to ensure the meaningful involvement of all relevant stakeholders in shaping future development policies. Particular emphasis was placed on strengthening dialogue and strategic cooperation between the European, national and local levels, while promoting greater integration of cohesion, agricultural and fisheries policies.

Medić noted that the effective implementation of future development policies will require simpler and more agile support mechanisms capable of delivering genuine economic, social and territorial cohesion across rural areas.

Within the context of the LEADER/CLLD approach, he highlighted the role of Local Action Groups (LAGs) as key actors in strengthening the identity, visibility and cohesion of local communities. He also emphasized the importance of their more active participation in consultation processes and the exchange of experience and good practices at the European level, thereby further improving the quality of rural and coastal development.

Denis Ranogajec, Krapina-Zagorje County Enterpreneurial Centre, representative of the County Prefect of Krapina-Zagorje County



Denis Ranogajec emphasized that the conference represented an important opportunity to reflect on the future of rural areas in Europe, stressing that rural territories should no longer be perceived as peripheral regions, but rather as equal, vibrant and strategically important places to live, work and develop. In this context, he highlighted the need to ensure stable, predictable and sufficiently robust support tailored to the real needs of local communities, while maintaining agriculture as one of the fundamental pillars of rural development. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of an integrated development approach that connects agriculture with processing industries, tourism, entrepreneurship and environmental protection, while simultaneously investing in public services, infrastructure and digital connectivity.

He also stressed the need to create conditions that encourage people—particularly young people—to remain in rural areas through the development of a competitive economy, innovation and a high quality of life. Regarding the implementation of the LEADER approach, Ranogajec highlighted the essential role of Local Action Groups in connecting stakeholders and delivering development initiatives at the local level. He underlined the need to further strengthen LAGs through adequate institutional capacities, simpler regulatory frameworks and more efficient administrative procedures to ensure the timely and effective implementation of development projects.

Silvio Šimon, Head of the Sector for Implementation of Rural Development Measures and Interventions, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery of the Republic of Croatia



Silvio Šimon emphasized that discussions on the future of rural development are taking place within the broader context of preparing the next programming period and the growing emphasis on integrating European Union policies and funding instruments.

In this regard, he highlighted the important role of the thematic working groups within the National CAP Network in guiding policy development, improving the implementation of the CAP Strategic Plan, and contributing to the preparation of future development frameworks.

Particular attention was given to the importance of agriculture and rural development as essential components of national identity and long-term sustainability, especially in Croatia, where rural areas play a significant social, economic and cultural role. He noted that the synergies created through the coordinated use of different EU funds and financial instruments under the Multiannual Financial Framework represent both an opportunity and a challenge, requiring stronger coordination and a more integrated approach to development.
Within the LEADER/CLLD framework, Šimon emphasized the pivotal role of Local Action Groups as the link between national policies and local needs. He noted that the bottom-up approach enables LAGs to better understand the needs of rural communities—particularly small-scale farmers—and contributes to the more effective use of available resources through Local Development Strategies and project calls.
In conclusion, he stressed that the future development of rural areas must include continued investment in infrastructure, digitization and access to essential public services, while placing particular emphasis on generational renewal and retaining young people in rural communities. He concluded by emphasizing that people are the most valuable resource of rural areas and that future policies must create conditions that enable them to live and work with dignity and quality of life.

Integrating EU policies at EU and Member states levels

European Parliament

Karlo Ressler, Member of the European Parliament



In his video address, Karlo Ressler, Rapporteur of the European Parliament's Committee on Budget, emphasized that discussions on the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) are taking place against a backdrop of increasing geopolitical uncertainty and the need to strengthen the resilience of the European Union. He stressed that the future EU budget will play a decisive role in shaping the development, competitiveness and security of Member States, particularly smaller countries such as Croatia. In this context, he highlighted the importance of preserving cohesion policy, agriculture and rural development as fundamental priorities of the European budget.
Commenting on the proposed financial framework, Ressler warned that greater flexibility must not lead to increased uncertainty or shift decision-making further away from the local level. He emphasized that simplification should be based on clear rules and a coherent implementation framework while maintaining a balance between emerging priorities—such as competitiveness and security—and traditional policies that safeguard territorial and economic cohesion.
He further noted that negotiations on the future financial framework remain ongoing and that the final budget allocations have yet to be determined. In this context, he stressed that the debate is not merely about financial resources, but about the strategic direction of the European Union. Maintaining strong and adequately financed agriculture and rural development, he concluded, is a fundamental prerequisite for Europe's long-term stability, resilience and security.

European Parliament

Marko Vešligaj, Member of the European Parliament



Marko Vešligaj, Rapporteur of the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, emphasized that the debate on the future of rural areas beyond 2027 extends far beyond a single policy area. Rather, it concerns whether rural Europe will continue to be a vibrant place to live or become a marginalized component of the European budget. He underlined that the LEADER/CLLD approach is one of the few policy instruments capable of delivering tangible and measurable results, highlighting its contribution to strengthening local democracy and empowering communities through the bottom-up approach.
Vešligaj also drew attention to the risks associated with the proposed Multiannual Financial Framework, including the possibility of reduced or diluted funding for local development. He stressed the importance of securing clearly defined and protected funding for the LEADER/CLLD approach, maintaining mandatory financial allocations and well-defined objectives to ensure that investments continue to generate meaningful impacts in rural areas.
He further emphasized the need to strengthen the role of Local Action Groups by granting them genuine responsibilities in project preparation and implementation, while preserving the integrated and community-wide nature of the LEADER approach. He noted that administrative simplification must be practical and effective in order to facilitate the timely and efficient implementation of local development initiatives.
In conclusion, Vešligaj stressed that the future of rural development must be built on trust in local communities, emphasizing that the LEADER/CLLD approach provides precisely this opportunity by transforming local knowledge, initiative and responsibility into tangible development outcomes.

Regional Development and development policies in the new EU financial framework

Dubravka Lipovac Pehar, Member of the Croatian Parliament, President of the Committee for Regional Development and EU funds and member of the Committee for Agriculture of the Croatian Parliament

Dubravka Lipovac Pehar emphasized that discussions on the future of rural development and the European Union's new Multiannual Financial Framework represent a strategic issue for the Republic of Croatia, particularly in relation to rural, island and coastal areas. She stressed that European funds play a vital role in supporting investments in infrastructure, the economy, agriculture and other sectors, thereby directly contributing to the development of local communities.
In this context, she highlighted the importance of maintaining strong support for regional development through future programming documents, with particular emphasis on involving local stakeholders and addressing the specific needs of individual regions. She also stressed the importance of continuing dedicated support for islands and assisted areas in order to stimulate economic growth, reduce depopulation and create new opportunities for young people.



Addressing the future financial framework, Lipovac Pehar pointed to the challenges arising from the European Union's evolving priorities while emphasizing the need to preserve cohesion policy and the Common Agricultural Policy as the principal instruments for achieving territorial and economic cohesion. She further highlighted the importance of strengthening the integration of different policy areas in order to provide more efficient and accessible support for rural development while reducing regional disparities.
In conclusion, she emphasized that Croatia must actively participate in negotiations on the future financial framework while ensuring effective strategic planning and implementation of development policies in order to achieve balanced regional development and improve the quality of life in rural areas.

Making Rural Vision and Pact happen in Member states

Pawel Krzeczunowicz, Policy Coordinator of the Rural Pact Support Office (RPSO)

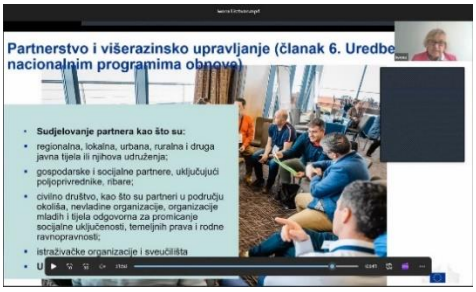


Paweł Krzeczunowicz presented the key elements of the European Union's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas and the Rural Pact as its principal implementation mechanism, emphasizing their significance for Member States, including Croatia.
He explained that the Long-Term Vision, launched by the European Commission, establishes a strategic framework for the development of rural areas up to 2040 through a comprehensive approach that promotes stronger local communities, social innovation, economic diversification, improved connectivity, mobility and the overall resilience of rural territories. He further explained that the implementation of the Vision is pursued through two complementary mechanisms:
the Rural Action Plan**,** which sets out the European Commission's actions,and the Rural Pact, an open cooperation framework connecting stakeholders at the European, national and local levels. He emphasized that the Rural Pact is not a regulatory instrument but rather an invitation to collaborate, aimed at increasing the visibility of rural issues within policy-making processes, promoting networking and capacity building, and encouraging concrete action on the ground.
Particular attention was given to the role of the Rural Pact Support Office (RPSO)**,** which assists rural stakeholders through a range of activities and tools, including knowledge exchange, the dissemination of good practices, thematic workshops and digital collaboration platforms. Krzeczunowicz emphasized the importance of active stakeholder participation, noting that the Community Platform already brings together a large network of participants from across Europe, while also observing that some Member States—including Croatia—remain underrepresented, presenting significant opportunities for increased engagement.
He also emphasized that the Rural Pact should be further developed and implemented at both the national and regional levels through the active participation of public institutions, Local Action Groups and other stakeholders. Croatia, he noted, already possesses a strong foundation for this process through existing mechanisms such as the LEADER approach, thematic working groups and the Croatian Rural Parliament, all of which can contribute to strengthening the Rural Pact at the national level.
In conclusion, Krzeczunowicz encouraged Croatian stakeholders to become more actively involved in the Rural Pact by participating in its activities, sharing experiences and showcasing their own initiatives. He emphasized that such engagement would enhance the visibility of rural needs while enabling more effective participation in shaping future European rural development policies.

The proposal for a new MFF after 2027 and what awaits EU rural areas

Legal proposals for LEADER/Smart Villages for 2028-34

Iwona Lisztwan, European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development



In her presentation, Iwona Lisztwan outlined the proposed legislative framework for LEADER and Smart Villages for the 2028–2034 programming period within the broader context of the European Union's new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**.** She emphasized that the proposed changes should not be viewed in isolation, but rather as part of a broader reform of the EU budget aimed at reducing the number of funding programs, strengthening the focus on results, and increasing the flexibility and adaptability of the overall system. The central message of the presentation focused on the need to simplify implementation procedures, particularly by reducing the administrative burden that has long represented a significant challenge for beneficiaries. In this context, the proposed framework envisages a much wider use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs)**,** including mandatory simplified financing models for the management of Local Action Groups, lump-sum payments for smaller projects, and broader use of flat-rate financing mechanisms. These measures are intended to reduce administrative costs, accelerate implementation and improve access to funding for local stakeholders.

Under the proposed framework, LEADER remains a mandatory intervention for all Member States while retaining its core community-led development methodology. The approach will continue to be based on the principles of partnership, the territorial approach, innovation and stakeholder participation, while preserving the central role of Local Action Groups in developing local strategies and selecting projects.

At the same time, Lisztwan highlighted an important change to the financing model for LEADER. Unlike the current programming period, the new proposal no longer includes a mandatory minimum allocation for LEADER at the European Union level. Instead, Member States will have greater flexibility in determining their level of investment. As a result, LEADER will increasingly compete with other development priorities within national and regional plans, further emphasizing the need to strengthen its visibility and strategic importance.

She further explained that the proposed framework facilitates closer integration of the LEADER/CLLD approach with other sectors and policy areas through the introduction of a single fund and simplified implementation rules. This is expected to facilitate the development of multi-sectoral strategies and promote stronger synergies between agriculture, regional development, employment and other policy areas, thereby reinforcing LEADER's role as an instrument for integrated territorial development.

In conclusion, Lisztwan noted that the legislative proposal is currently under negotiation between the European Commission, the Member States and the European Parliament, and that its final form will depend on the outcome of these negotiations. She emphasized that the European Commission is working towards reaching an agreement as quickly as possible while recognizing the need to strengthen the role of rural areas in future EU policies, including the possible introduction of targeted allocations for rural development within national and regional plans.

EESC recommendations for the future and financing of rural areas

Lidija Pavić Rogošić, European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

Lidija Pavić Rogošić presented the European Economic and Social Committee's recommendations on the future development and financing of rural areas beyond 2027. She emphasized the need for a comprehensive, place-based and cross-sectoral approach that strengthens the links between rural and urban areas while promoting balanced territorial development and greater community resilience.



At the core of her presentation was the need for stronger, more stable and clearly targeted financing for rural areas within the future Multiannual Financial Framework, while safeguarding both their visibility and dedicated funding. She warned that integrating rural development into excessively broad financial frameworks could create competition between policy areas and ultimately undermine rural development objectives.

She highlighted the pivotal role of the LEADER/CLLD approach as a community-led development instrument that enables the direct participation of local stakeholders, strengthens partnerships and contributes to effective local governance.

She emphasized the need to further reinforce the approach by ensuring long-term financial stability and preserving its essential role in building social capital.
Particular emphasis was placed on simplifying and harmonizing the rules governing the use of European Union funds in order to improve access to financing and reduce the administrative burden on local stakeholders. She stressed that integrated and multi-fund approaches should simplify—not complicate—access to EU funding.
In this context, Pavić Rogošić underlined the importance of integrated territorial approaches that connect rural and urban areas into functional regions, thereby promoting more efficient resource use, strengthening local value chains and reducing territorial disparities. She also noted that community-led development approaches can be successfully applied in urban areas facing development challenges, provided that they remain complementary to rural programs and do not reduce funding for, or weaken the focus on, rural areas. Clear financial separation between rural and urban interventions should therefore be maintained.
She further highlighted the importance of introducing Rural Proofing as a systematic approach to assessing the impact of policies on rural areas through the use of reliable data, analytical tools and stronger partnerships across different levels of governance.
From a governance perspective, she emphasized the importance of multi-level governance and the active involvement of local and regional stakeholders—including civil society organizations and young people—throughout all stages of policy development.
In conclusion, Pavić Rogošić stressed that a sustainable, equitable and cohesive Europe requires stronger financial support, simpler implementation rules, greater stakeholder participation and improved policy coordination. She emphasized that rural areas must be recognized as equal partners in the development of the European Union, while consistently applying the principles of territorial cohesion and "leaving no one behind."

European Committee of the Regions

Experiences of integrated territorial development of rural areas (CLLD) in the Czech Republic and a review of the future of rural development 2028+ in the light of proposals for the new MFF

Radim Sršen, European Committee of the Regions, Rapporteur on the Future of Rural Development Beyond 2028, Chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group (RPCG),



Radim Sršen presented the Czech Republic's approach to integrated territorial development together with key recommendations for the future of rural development beyond 2028, emphasizing the need for stronger involvement of local and regional authorities in the design and implementation of development policies.
He highlighted that Community-Led Local Development (CLLD**)** has become a cornerstone of territorial development in the Czech Republic, achieving almost complete territorial coverage. Local Action Groups have evolved beyond their implementation role to serve as development agencies, intermediaries, innovation facilitators and key drivers of local development.
Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of institutionalized partnerships through mechanisms such as national and regional permanent conferences, which facilitate coordination across different levels of governance while ensuring the active participation of local stakeholders in decisions concerning funding allocation and development priorities.
Within the context of the future Multiannual Financial Framework, Sršen stressed the need for a holistic and horizontal approach to rural development that extends beyond sectoral policies and promotes stronger integration between different funding instruments and policy areas. He emphasized that rural development should not remain solely within the framework of agricultural policy, but should be fully integrated into broader regional development policies.
In this context, he referred to the European Committee of the Regions' recommendation that at least 30% of available funding should be directed towards rural areas, with a minimum of 10% specifically allocated to integrated territorial approaches such as LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages**,** in order to achieve stronger synergies and more effective use of financial resources.
He further emphasized that the future financing model should avoid excessive earmarking that could further fragment funding. Instead, it should focus on delivering measurable results while preserving the territorial dimension of development and adequately addressing the specific needs of rural communities.
Special attention was also given to the principle of subsidiarity and the introduction of a "regional check" mechanism, designed to ensure that local and regional stakeholders are actively involved in the preparation of national and regional development plans, with institutional safeguards available where this principle is not respected.
In conclusion, Sršen emphasized that effective rural development requires the continuous involvement of local stakeholders throughout every stage of the policy cycle and their sustained participation in decision-making processes. He stressed that successful development policies must be built upon partnership, coordination and close cooperation among all relevant actors.

Strengthening LEADER and CLLD in the new programming period within the NRPP

Piotr Sadlocha, President of ELARD and Polish Network of LAGs



Piotr Sadłocha expressed concern regarding the proposed legislative framework for the period beyond 2027, highlighting shortcomings in the positioning of the LEADER/CLLD approach within future European Union policies. While acknowledging that the proposal maintains LEADER as a mandatory intervention under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), he pointed out that it does not establish a corresponding obligation to implement the CLLD approach under cohesion policy. According to Sadłocha, this represents a significant risk for both the future implementation of CLLD and balanced territorial development.
A central theme of his presentation was the uncertainty surrounding the concept of the "rural target", which, he argued, remains insufficiently defined and operationally unclear, particularly regarding the methodology for calculating and allocating financial resources. He warned that this uncertainty complicates strategic planning and could lead to divergent interpretations among Member States, including the risk that funding would be directed primarily towards sectoral measures rather than broader rural development objectives.
Sadłocha also highlighted the significant imbalance in funding between urban and rural areas, noting that integrated territorial instruments in urban regions often receive substantially higher per capita investments than LEADER/CLLD initiatives in rural territories. Drawing on examples from different regions and Member States, he argued that these disparities demonstrate the need for stronger and mandatory integration of the CLLD approach across all relevant European funds in order to achieve a fairer distribution of resources and more balanced territorial development.
Using Poland as a case study, he identified several practical implementation challenges, including uneven application of the CLLD approach across regions and a highly complex governance structure involving numerous managing authorities. He noted that this fragmentation creates significant disparities in both access to funding and implementation efficiency, thereby further widening territorial inequalities.
Within this context, Sadłocha presented the principal advocacy proposals promoted by ELARD, including the allocation of at least 30% of national and regional development funding to rural areas, with no less than 30% of that allocation dedicated to LEADER/CLLD, Smart Villages, and other community-led development approaches. He also emphasized the need to clearly define the relationship between LEADER and CLLD and to recognize them as a single integrated instrument applicable across all relevant European Union policies.
In conclusion, he called for the introduction of LEADER/CLLD as a mandatory instrument within cohesion policy, social policy and other relevant European Union policy frameworks, while ensuring the active participation of Local Action Groups in planning and decision-making processes. He stressed that without such an approach, there is a substantial risk that rural areas will continue to fall behind, reducing the effectiveness of the European Union's territorial development policies.

Key messages from the RPCG on rural development policy and integrated local development approaches

Edina Ocsko, Smart Village Network Services, Vice-chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group



Edina Ocsko presented the key recommendations of the Rural Pact Coordination Group regarding the future of rural development policies beyond 2027, emphasizing the need to strengthen the position of rural areas within the European Union's new financial framework. She stressed that rural areas should not be viewed solely as territories facing challenges, but also as places with considerable development potential whose prosperity benefits society as a whole. A central message of her presentation was the importance of integrated, multi-fund approaches to rural development, particularly in light of the proposed introduction of a single National and Regional Partnership Plan (NRPP) bringing together multiple funding sources.
While acknowledging that such an approach offers opportunities for greater policy coherence and coordination, she also warned that it poses significant risks if dedicated funding for rural areas is not clearly safeguarded.
In this context, Ocsko emphasized the need to allocate at least 30% of available funding to rural areas, with an additional 10% reserved for community-led approaches such as LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages, recognizing them as essential instruments for strengthening local capacities and participatory governance.
Particular attention was given to the positioning of rural development within the future financial framework. Ocsko argued that, in an environment of limited resources and increasing competition between policy priorities, relying solely on earmarked financial allocations may not be sufficient. Instead, she advocated for integrating the rural dimension across multiple funds and policy instruments while simultaneously ensuring that financial resources effectively reach rural communities.
She further highlighted the importance of establishing effective monitoring and tagging mechanisms to ensure that funding intended for rural development can be clearly identified and tracked, particularly at the level of smaller territorial units. She

emphasized that defining rural areas at the local level is essential for accurately targeting investments and evaluating policy impacts.
Ocsko also stressed the importance of strengthening the capacities of local stakeholders, including Local Action Groups and rural networks, together with introducing more flexible and simplified implementation mechanisms to enable more efficient use of available funding.
In conclusion, she emphasized that successfully positioning rural areas within the future financial framework requires a combination of clearly earmarked financial resources and an integrated policy approach, supported by the active participation of local stakeholders and a stronger role for them in shaping and implementing development policies. She concluded by stressing that rural development must not become marginalized within the broader financing architecture but should instead be systematically integrated across the European Union's various policies and financial instruments.

Rural proofing – the importance of evidence-based policies creation

Betty-Ann Bryce, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Betty-Ann Bryce presented the concept of Rural Proofing as a key instrument for evidence-based policy-making, emphasizing the need to systematically assess the impacts of public policies on rural areas. She pointed out that many public policies, although well-intentioned, are often designed without adequately considering the specific characteristics of rural communities, which can lead to unintended negative consequences for rural populations and economies.
In this context, she explained that Rural Proofing is a structured process involving the collection of relevant data, stakeholder engagement, and the timely provision of clear and accessible information to policymakers, enabling policies to be better adapted to real conditions on the ground.
Particular emphasis was placed on acting within the "window of action - the period before final policy decisions are taken - when there is still an opportunity to influence policy design.
Bryce stressed that Rural Proofing is not primarily aimed at those already working in rural development, but rather at decision-makers across a wide range of policy sectors who often overlook the rural dimension of their decisions. She emphasized that understanding their perspectives, priorities and institutional constraints is essential for presenting evidence and arguments in a way that is both relevant and persuasive.



A central element of the presentation was the importance of developing a robust and well-structured "Rural Proofing Intelligence" framework consisting of three key components: an assessment of the current situation in rural areas, an evaluation of the likely impacts of specific policies, and evidence demonstrating the added value of involving rural communities in addressing broader societal challenges. Bryce noted that this third component represents a significant shift in policy thinking by re-framing rural communities from passive beneficiaries of public support to active partners in achieving development objectives.
She also discussed the challenge of convincing policymakers to incorporate the rural dimension into decision-making, emphasizing that merely identifying negative impacts is not always sufficient to influence policy outcomes. Rural Proofing, she explained, cannot compel decision-makers to act; rather, it is a tool that improves the quality of the policy process by enabling more informed and evidence-based decisions.
In this context, Bryce emphasized the importance of changing the narrative surrounding rural areas by moving beyond perceptions of rural communities as places characterized primarily by problems and dependence on public support. Instead, she argued that greater emphasis should be placed on communicating the contribution of rural areas to addressing key economic and societal challenges, thereby reinforcing their role as partners in sustainable development.
In conclusion, she emphasized that effective Rural Proofing requires continuous collection and organization of existing evidence, strategic stakeholder engagement, and communication tailored to specific decision-makers. Ultimately, the success of the approach depends not only on the availability of data, but also on the ability to interpret and present that evidence at the right moment within the policy-making process.

Panel Debate - Responding to the rural needs and shaping future rural development policies

The main messages from the panel include:

Strengthening the visibility and use of the Rural Pact, launching the Rural Pact at the national level
The Rural Pact was recognized as a valuable but underutilized instrument that should be promoted more actively, particularly at regional and local levels where awareness and engagement remain relatively limited. Participants emphasized the importance of establishing the Rural Pact in Croatia through cooperation with ministries and public authorities, while building upon existing networks, coordination mechanisms and stakeholder platforms.

Strengthening Local Approaches and the Role of Smart Villages

LEADER-CLLD and Smart Villages were recognized as approaches that enable stronger involvement of local communities in development processes and strengthening local initiatives. It was emphasized that future development should be focused on functional local units and cooperation between rural and urban areas, with the need to strengthen and secure financing for LEADER-CLLD and a clearer place for Smart Villages in the future legislative framework of the European Union.

From Project-Based Funding to Development Driven by Local Vision

It was emphasized that local development should not be focused solely on the implementation of individual projects, but on long-term development visions of local communities. The need to create more flexible and long-term planning models that enable more sustainable and strategic development of rural areas was emphasized. Implement mandatory rural proofing and territorial impact assessment in all EU policies and funds.

Panelists:

- **Lidija Pavić Rogošić**, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)
- **Radim Sršen**, Member of the European Committee of the Regions and Rapporteur on the Future of Rural Development Beyond 2028
- **Piotr Sadłocha**, President of ELARD and the Polish Network of Local Action Groups
- **Edina Ocsko**, Member of the Smart Villages Network Services and Vice-Chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group (RPCG)
- **Betty-Ann Bryce**, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Panel facilitator:
Pawel Krzeczunowicz, koordinator politika, Ured za potporu Ruralnom paktu

Simplifying Implementation Through Standardization

Using the example of the Czech Republic, models for simplifying multi-fund CLLD through standardization of procedures and strengthening of coordination between different ministries and governing bodies are presented. It was emphasized that integrated approaches do not necessarily create additional bureaucracy if there is effective coordination and clearly defined implementation processes. Participants noted that development strategies in earlier programming periods were often excessively detailed and administratively demanding, whereas subsequent standardization significantly reduced documentation requirements and simplified implementation.

Strengthening Cross-Sectoral Integration and Cooperation

The panel emphasized that sustainable development depends on stronger cooperation across policy sectors. Participants acknowledged that current governance structures do not sufficiently encourage such collaboration and stressed the need to overcome the prevailing "tunnel vision" approach to policy design.

Defining Rural Areas Through a Functional Approach

Participants highlighted the importance of combining territorial and functional definitions of rural areas by taking into account actual patterns of living, employment and mobility that frequently extend beyond administrative boundaries. It was pointed out that rural areas include different types of space - from peri-urban to remote and border areas - and that future policies should better take into account their specificities and interconnections.

Changing Perceptions of Rural Areas and Increasing Their Visibility

The panel stressed that rural areas should not be associated solely with agriculture. Instead, greater recognition should be given to their broader economic, environmental and social contributions, while improving their visibility within public policies and public discourse.

Strengthening Advocacy and the Political Voice of Rural Areas

Participants concluded that joint advocacy initiatives and coordinated campaigns have already demonstrated their capacity to influence political decision-making. However, they emphasized the need to further strengthen advocacy efforts in order to translate political commitments into concrete legislative measures and sustainable financial support for rural development.



Rural development policy today and after 2027 in Croatia

REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA
Ministarstvo poljoprivrede, šumarstva i ribarstva

New MFF and CAP with a focus on generation renewal

Silvio Šimon, Head of the Sector for Implementation of Rural Development Measures and Interventions, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery of the Republic of Croatia



In his presentation, Silvio Šimon outlined the key changes introduced by the new Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period beyond 2027, with particular emphasis on their significance for the Republic of Croatia.

He explained that the MFF represents the European Union's fundamental financial framework, defining its priorities and the allocation of available resources. The proposed model will introduce significant changes to the planning and implementation of EU policies, particularly through the establishment of National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) as the central strategic instruments of the new system.

The NRPPs were presented as an integrated framework for implementing different European Union funds, including the Common Agricultural Policy, cohesion policy and other relevant instruments, thereby introducing a more coordinated approach to development. In this context, Šimon highlighted an important change in the financing model: payments to Member States will be linked to the achievement of defined objectives and results. This represents a departure from the existing system and requires a stronger focus on implementation effectiveness and performance.

As part of the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, he presented the main elements of the future system, including a stronger reliance on performance-based strategic planning, the protection of farmers' income support, the simplification of rules and procedures, stronger synergies between different policy areas, and increased resilience of the agricultural sector to crises and market disruptions.

Particular attention was given to the simplification of the system. The proposed framework is expected to reduce the number of strategic documents and administrative requirements while strengthening coordination between different levels of governance and policy sectors.

Šimon also addressed the position of the LEADER approach within the new legislative framework. He noted that its implementation will remain mandatory for Member States, although the proposal does not define a minimum financial allocation at the European Union level. While this arrangement provides Member States with greater flexibility in planning, it also creates certain risks concerning the level of funding available for LEADER, depending on the priorities established by each Member State.

The central part of the presentation focused on generational renewal in agriculture**,** identified as one of the principal challenges for the sector's future development. Šimon stressed that the demographic structure of the agricultural population represents a serious concern, as the average age of farmers in the European Union remains high and the share of young farmers is insufficient to ensure the system's long-term sustainability.

In this context, he outlined the principal areas requiring action, including access to land, finance, knowledge and skills, the provision of an adequate standard of living in rural areas, and the facilitation of farm succession and transfer.

He emphasized the importance of the new European strategy for generational renewal, which envisages a range of practical measures, including a starter package for young farmers**,** together with various forms of financial and advisory support. Such measures could make a significant contribution to attracting young people into agriculture. However, their effectiveness will depend on the broader institutional and social environment, since key challenges such as access to land and quality of life in rural areas extend beyond the agricultural sector alone.

In conclusion, Šimon emphasized that the new framework presents significant opportunities to improve the system, while also introducing a number of challenges concerning implementation, coordination and decision-making at the national level. He stressed that the final impact will largely depend on how effectively Member States use the flexibility available to them and ensure coherence between different policies and development priorities.

IRMO

Croatian experience with EU teritorial tools – some lessons for the future

Jakša Puljiz, Institute for Development and International Relations

In his presentation, Jakša Puljiz reviewed Croatia's experience in using the territorial instruments of cohesion policy, with the aim of identifying key lessons for the forthcoming programming period.

At the outset, he stressed that territorial instruments should not primarily be viewed as funding mechanisms, but rather as tools for designing and implementing public policies. Their financial component represents only one element of a broader territorial development approach.

Puljiz then presented the evolution of the territorial approach within cohesion policy. He explained that the first instruments of this kind emerged in the late 1980s and during the 1990s through initiatives such as URBAN and LEADER**.** However, their full significance was formally recognized only during the 2014–2020 programming period, when territorial instruments were integrated into the mainstream cohesion policy framework. Particular emphasis was placed on the requirement to allocate at least 5% of the European Regional Development Fund to sustainable urban development.



This represented an important step in moving territorial instruments beyond their previous experimental status and incorporating them into regular policy implementation. Puljiz subsequently presented Croatia's approach to implementing territorial instruments.

This approach enabled cities to assume a more active role in project selection. At the same time, however, it required substantial administrative adjustments, including accreditation procedures and the development of institutional capacities. In practice, this represented a significant challenge for local authorities that had previously lacked established systems for managing EU-funded projects.

Regarding the territorial scope of investments, Croatia opted for a model based on functional urban areas, linking cities with their surrounding territories. The objective was to strengthen development relationships that had previously been weakened by the administrative fragmentation of the territory.

This model enabled more integrated development planning, although it initially encountered some resistance at the local level, particularly due to concerns that individual local authorities might lose part of their autonomy.

Particular attention was given to the development decisions that shaped the implementation of territorial instruments in Croatia. Under the ITI mechanism, support was concentrated on a limited number of major urban centres in order to achieve a stronger development impact through the concentration of financial resources.

As an important complement to this approach, Croatia developed a dedicated program for small towns in areas affected by the war. This represented a national policy innovation intended to stimulate development in some of the country's most disadvantaged territories. Small towns were recognized as essential drivers of development across wider rural areas and as the "connective tissue" supporting the functionality and sustainability of their surrounding territories.

In the section focusing on implementation, Puljiz highlighted the challenges arising from the complexity of integrated investments, particularly where several funds were used simultaneously. Although the multi-fund approach enabled the financing of different types of initiatives, including infrastructure and so-called "soft" projects**,** its implementation proved demanding due to complex procedures and the need for coordination between multiple institutions and levels of governance.

A further challenge arose from the subsequent withdrawal of the European Social Fund from certain aspects of implementation. This reduced the overall level of integration and limited opportunities to invest in human capacities alongside physical infrastructure.

Despite these difficulties, Puljiz emphasized that territorial instruments also generated significant positive effects, particularly by strengthening administrative capacities and establishing new forms of cooperation between local authorities.

The implementation of the ITI mechanism led to the creation of coordination structures and cooperation networks that had not previously existed. Although difficult to quantify, these institutional and relational effects represent an important contribution to the long-term development of local communities.

In the final part of his presentation, Puljiz outlined several key lessons for the future. He emphasized that the success of territorial instruments depends heavily on the level of local ownership, the quality of territorial strategies, and the capacities available for their implementation.

Predefined territorial allocations can support more effective and predictable planning. However, they may also create certain risks, including reduced competition and a possible decline in project quality. He therefore stressed the importance of continuous capacity building and effective coordination between different levels of governance.

In conclusion, Puljiz emphasized that territorial instruments should not be reduced to an additional source of financing. Instead, they should be understood as essential tools for managing development and strengthening territorial identity.

Their full potential can only be realized through continuity of implementation, stronger institutional capacities and a change in the prevailing mindset—particularly at the decision-making level—where it remains necessary to move beyond the narrow understanding of development policies as purely financial instruments.

Right to stay. Developmental indicators of different types of rural areas in Croatia

Aleksandar Lukić, Department of Geography Faculty of Science University of Zagreb, Croatian Section of the European Council for the Village and Small Town (ECOVAST)

In his presentation, Aleksandar Lukić focused the discussion on the concept of the "Right to Stay," emphasizing that the opportunity to enjoy a dignified, high-quality life in rural areas is not universal. Rather, it is directly shaped by the specific development characteristics and type of rural area in which people live. From this perspective, he stressed that rural areas are not homogeneous but highly diverse, requiring differentiated approaches to development policy.
In this context, Lukić highlighted the importance of a place-based approach**,** under which development interventions cannot be based on uniform solutions applied to all rural areas. He noted that European strategic documents clearly recognize rural diversity as a key consideration and emphasize the need for locally adapted policies reflecting the actual needs and potential of individual territories.



A particular section of the presentation addressed the definition of rural areas. Lukić pointed to the limitations of standard statistical approaches, such as the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA**)** classification. Although such models enable comparisons across the European Union and provide an initial overview of the population's urban-rural structure, they do not adequately reflect the actual complexity of territories at the local level.
As an illustrative example, he noted that administrative units formally classified as urban or intermediate may contain a large number of distinctly rural settlements. As a result, the rural character of these areas becomes statistically "hidden."

He therefore emphasized the need to move beyond simplified classifications towards more detailed analytical models capable of capturing the internal diversity of rural territories. In this context, he presented a typology of Croatia's rural and urbanized settlements developed at the level of individual settlements and based on a broad range of demographic, economic, spatial-functional and infrastructure indicators. This approach enables a more precise understanding of development patterns and the identification of the specific needs of different types of settlements.
The analysis identified several types of rural areas, including dynamic and comparatively stronger territories located close to urban centers, areas dependent on daily commuting, market-oriented agricultural areas, tourism-diversified areas, and territories characterized by demographic stagnation and rural peripherality.
Lukić emphasized the significant differences between these types in terms of demographic trends, economic activity, access to services and infrastructure provision. These differences directly shape development opportunities and residents' quality of life.
Particular attention was given to access to essential services and functions. Lukić noted that many rural settlements lack access to key facilities and services, including healthcare, education and public administration. The analysis indicates that most such functions are concentrated in a relatively small number of central settlements, leaving a considerable share of rural territory functionally dependent on more distant centers.
This spatial distribution further deepens development inequalities and makes balanced territorial development more difficult to achieve.
The presentation also emphasized that development disparities do not occur only between urban and rural areas, but also within rural areas themselves. While certain types of rural territories record positive development trends, others face intensive depopulation.
Rural peripheral areas were identified as particularly vulnerable. Although they account for a significant share of the national territory, they contain only a very small proportion of the population, further complicating their long-term sustainability and development prospects.
In the final part of the presentation, Lukić emphasized that spatial typologies can provide a valuable basis for designing more effective and targeted rural development policies. They enable decisions to be based on the actual characteristics of territories rather than on administrative boundaries or simplified statistical categories.
At the same time, he acknowledged several limitations of such approaches, including their dependence on data availability and the methodological complexity involved in their development, which can create challenges for their wider application.
In conclusion, Lukić stressed that achieving the "Right to Stay" in rural areas requires precisely such a differentiated and analytically grounded approach—one that recognizes the diversity of rural territories and enables development policies to be tailored to the specific needs of individual areas.

The National Foundation's contribution to rural development through social innovation support programs: experiences and perspectives for the future

Branko Logarić, National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society



In his presentation, Branko Logarić outlined the role of the National Foundation for Civil Society Development in strengthening regional development and empowering civil society organizations, with particular emphasis on less developed and rural areas. He noted that, for more than two decades, the Foundation has systematically invested in local community development, recognizing local communities as key drivers of social change, more balanced regional development and long-term sustainability. Particular emphasis was placed on institutional support as the foundation for the stable operation of civil society organizations.

Logarić explained that this form of funding enables continuity of work, investment in human resources, long-term planning and the development of sustainable programs.

In doing so, it creates a stable infrastructure for implementing social and development initiatives at the local level.

He stressed that such support enables organizations to assume an active role in the development of their communities, particularly in rural areas where institutional capacities are often limited.

The presentation also addressed the Foundation's role in the management of European Union funds, where it acts as an Intermediate Body Level 2 within the European Social Fund system. Through this function, the Foundation facilitates the implementation of projects focused on social inclusion, employment and skills development, providing civil society organizations with additional opportunities to strengthen their programs and create new social and economic opportunities in local communities.

The central part of the presentation focused on the Community Potential Programme, developed in response to challenges identified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its purpose is to strengthen the resilience of local communities and prepare them for future development challenges.

The program is implemented in several Croatian counties and cities and focuses on mobilizing local resources and strengthening the capacities of organizations and individuals who act as agents of change in their communities. Logarić emphasized that it promotes cooperation between citizens, civil society organizations and public institutions and supports initiatives responding to the concrete needs of local residents.

Particular attention was given to the program's contribution to strengthening social cohesion and improving quality of life in rural areas.

Logarić also presented the international Interreg Central Europe project LEADER, which focuses on strengthening social entrepreneurship and promoting digital transformation in rural and less developed areas. The project facilitates the exchange of knowledge and good practices among partners from several European countries and supports the development of training programs, digital tools and pilot initiatives for local communities. In this way, it further empowers local stakeholders and encourages the development of innovative solutions.

A further focus of the presentation was the development of social entrepreneurship and social innovation**.** Logarić highlighted the role of the Croatian Social Entrepreneurship Support Center as a key instrument providing training, mentoring and professional assistance to organizations and initiatives seeking to develop sustainable social enterprise models.

He noted that such programs increase the visibility of social entrepreneurship, facilitate access to support and contribute to the development of policies strengthening the social and solidarity economy, particularly in rural and less developed areas.

In this context, he also referred to the 3P4SSE project**,** implemented in cooperation with regional partners and focused on developing public-private partnerships in the field of the social economy. The project supports organizations and initiatives in developing sustainable operating models while strengthening their visibility and capacity to act within local communities.

In the final part of his presentation, Logarić emphasized the importance of an integrated approach to rural development beyond 2027, including stronger cooperation across sectors and levels of governance.

He stressed that closer synergy between Local Action Groups and the National Foundation could significantly improve the use of development resources, strengthen the capacities of civil society organizations, entrepreneurs and producers, and stimulate innovative projects in rural areas.

In conclusion, Logarić emphasized that more resilient, inclusive and sustainable local communities can be created by connecting local communities, civil society organizations, public institutions and international partners. Within this process, social innovation and social entrepreneurship will play an increasingly important role in the future development of rural areas.

Panel debate – Rural development in Croatia today and in the new programming period

During the panel discussion, Vedran Kršek, representative of the Ministry for Regional Development and EU Funds, presented the key elements of Croatia's integrated territorial approach in the current 2021–2027 programming period, focusing on the various mechanisms and instruments used to promote development.

He explained that the Integrated Territorial Programme encompasses a broad range of instruments, including the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) mechanism, territorial strategies for islands, industrial transition plans, and territorial plans for a just transition. Together, these instruments seek to address the specific development needs of different types of territories.

Kršek emphasized that the integrated territorial approach represents a major step forward in strengthening the territorial dimension of development in Croatia, particularly by empowering regional and local stakeholders. In this context, investments are based on a bottom-up approach, giving local communities a greater role in defining their own development priorities and deciding how available resources should be used.
Within the ITI mechanism, cities actively address contemporary challenges such as climate change, pollution and disaster risks. A total of 22 cities are involved, with EUR 680 million available for investments in green infrastructure, the revitalization of brownfield areas, and the strengthening of economic, tourism and social infrastructure.
A further EUR 150 million has been allocated to the development of islands across seven coastal and island counties, with investments focused on energy efficiency, public infrastructure and healthcare infrastructure.
In the field of industrial transition, EUR 550 million has been made available for the development of regional value chains. An additional EUR 188 million has been secured through the Just Transition Fund, aimed at mitigating the consequences of the transition towards a climate-neutral economy.
In the final part of his contribution, Kršek addressed the forthcoming 2028–2034 programming period, noting that the European Commission's proposals remain under negotiation.
He emphasized that the new framework is expected to focus on simplification, greater flexibility and more efficient implementation, with stronger links between investments and reforms and a financing model increasingly based on achieved results. He also underlined the importance of preserving existing management structures to ensure the most effective possible transition to the new programming period.

The main messages from the panel include:

Strengthening the Territorial Approach and the Role of Local Stakeholders
Integrated territorial approaches were recognized as a major step forward in development policy, particularly through the involvement of local and regional stakeholders in decision-making. The bottom-up approach was identified as essential for better aligning investments with the actual needs of local communities.

Developing and Expanding Territorial Instruments as Key Policy Tools
Participants emphasized that territorial mechanisms have been significantly expanded during the current programming period. These include ITI, island strategies, industrial transition and just transition instruments, enabling more targeted responses to different territorial development challenges.



Panelists:

- **Vedran Kršek**, Ministry for Regional Development and EU Funds
- **Silvio Šimon**, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery
- **Jakša Puljiz**, Institute for Development and International Relations
- **Aleksandar Lukić**, Faculty of Science University of Zagreb

Panel facilitator:
Milan Medić, President of the TWG LEADER/CLLD NM CAP

Directing Investments Towards Concrete Development Challenges
Investments implemented through territorial instruments are focused on addressing specific issues such as climate change, pollution, economic development, energy efficiency and infrastructure improvement, thereby contributing to the resilience of local communities.

Simplification and Greater Flexibility in the Future Programming Period
The next programming period is expected to introduce simpler rules, greater flexibility and more efficient implementation, with particular emphasis on faster absorption of funds and adaptation to emerging challenges, including geopolitical and climate-related changes.

Strengthening Links Between Investments and Reforms and Focusing on Results
The discussion highlighted the need to establish stronger links between investments and reform processes. Greater emphasis should also be placed on disbursing funds based on achieved results and impacts rather than solely on the completion of planned activities.

Preserving Institutional Capacity and Continuity of Governance
Participants stressed that continuity in management structures and the preservation of institutional knowledge are essential for effective policy implementation. Frequent structural changes and the loss of experienced professionals can significantly delay development processes and reduce the quality of implementation.

Building Trust and Improving Dialogue Between Levels of Governance
Successful implementation depends on trust between national and local authorities. Participants emphasized the need to move beyond a formalistic approach towards more substantive dialogue that supports faster and better-informed decision-making. Role of Local and Sub-national Actors need to be to be strengthened. Local and regional stakeholders play a central role in maintaining institutional knowledge and continuity of implementation, particularly during periods of change at the national level.

Limitations of the Existing Support System for Young Farmers
Participants noted that the current eligibility criteria for „young farmers", including the age limit of 40, the requirement to enter the sector for the first time, and additional education-related conditions, considerably narrow the pool of potential beneficiaries. In practice, this results in a relatively low number of applications despite the availability of funding.

Insufficient Support for New Farmers from Outside Agriculture
The current system does not adequately recognize people seeking to enter agriculture from other sectors, including those making a career change later in life. Appropriate support mechanisms for such new farmers are currently lacking.

The Potential for a Broader Understanding of Generational Renewal
The discussion emphasized that generational renewal should not be limited exclusively to young people. It should also include those entering agriculture later in life, particularly in the context of labor-market changes and technological transformations that may encourage career transitions into the sector.

Underuse of Available Funding as an Indicator of Structural Problems
Participants pointed to cases in which a significant proportion of available funding remains unused because of an insufficient number of applications. This suggests structural problems in the definition of target groups and eligibility criteria rather than necessarily indicating a lack of interest in agricultural activity.
Underutilization of available funds as a signal of a system problem

Together in the dialogue on the position of rural areas in policies after 2027.

Good practice example: Catalan Rural Agenda 2030, a joint governance system in 2024 to implement the territorial Rural Agenda and address the needs of rural areas

Eduard Trepat Deltell, Rural Development Network of Catalonia, Spain



In his presentation, Eduard Trepat Deltell introduced Catalonia's experience in developing and implementing the Catalan Rural Agenda 2030**,** highlighting the transition from national-level policy discussions to practical regional and local governance models. He emphasized that the Agenda is not merely a strategic document but a functional governance framework designed to ensure the effective implementation of rural development policies. The opening part of the presentation introduced the role of ARCA, the network bringing together 11 Local Action Groups (LAGs) and 5 Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs)**,** which serves as a key link between local stakeholders and the regional level of governance.

It was noted that rural areas account for approximately 75% of Catalonia's territory, while accommodating only around 10% of its population, creating a pronounced territorial imbalance and reinforcing the need for targeted rural development policies.
The central focus of the presentation was the Catalan Rural Agenda, a strategic framework aimed at promoting territorial balance and ensuring equal living conditions between rural and urban areas. The Agenda is structured around seven major development challenges and includes nearly 900 concrete measures and actions, developed through an extensive participatory process. Particular emphasis was placed on its bottom-up approach, with citizens, civil society organizations, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders actively involved in its preparation.
The Agenda was developed between 2020 and 2022, involving more than 1,200 participants and over 300 organizations, which collectively submitted more than 4,000 proposals that were subsequently consolidated into the final package of

measures. It was emphasized that the process was initiated and led by civil society, while public administration joined at a later stage, thereby ensuring the authenticity and relevance of the proposed solutions.
The governance system established for implementing the Agenda is based on a three-pillar model involving civil society, the regional government and the Parliament, thereby ensuring coordination and oversight from multiple institutional perspectives.
Civil society is organized through a "Steering Committee", bringing together a broad range of organizations responsible for monitoring implementation, promoting dialogue and contributing to policy development. The regional government operates through an interdepartmental commission for rural governance, while the Parliament performs an oversight role by monitoring implementation and ensuring policy coherence.
It was emphasized that this governance structure is not merely formal but operates actively through regular meetings and operational cooperation among stakeholders, addressing concrete implementation challenges, particularly administrative barriers and policy coordination issues. At the same time, the presentation acknowledged the ongoing difficulties associated with coordination between different government departments, illustrating the inherent complexity of integrated governance approaches.
Particular attention was given to the current transition from the Catalan Rural Agenda towards the Catalan Rural Pact, which seeks to operationalize the Agenda's strategic objectives through thematic working groups, bilateral cooperation mechanisms and the systematic introduction of Rural Proofing into public policy-making. It was also noted that Catalonia has formally joined the European Rural Pact, thereby strengthening its alignment with European rural development policies.
The presentation highlighted several tangible achievements resulting from implementation, including the adoption of a legislative framework defining rural areas and strengthening the position of rural municipalities, the launch of the Rural Ticket program to promote entrepreneurship, the establishment of agricultural test farms, and the creation of thematic working groups addressing housing and mobility challenges. These examples demonstrated that the governance system is producing measurable results and tangible improvements on the ground.
Special emphasis was placed on the role of the LEADER approach, with Local Action Groups and Fisheries Local Action Groups recognized as key operational actors in implementing the Rural Agenda. It was stressed that LEADER contributes not only through project implementation but also through active participation in policy development, stakeholder coordination and the integration of different development strategies.
Through inter-territorial cooperation projects, LAGs have developed numerous models that subsequently served as the basis for identifying development challenges and designing measures within the Rural Agenda itself, confirming their strategic and operational importance.
Towards the end of the presentation, several key challenges for the coming period were identified, including the need to strengthen communication with citizens, regularly update the Agenda's measures, integrate local government more closely into the governance framework, and establish a comprehensive system for evaluating policy impacts.
In conclusion, Trepat Deltell emphasized that successful rural development requires strong leadership from civil society, political commitment at the highest level and continuous dialogue between all levels of governance and local stakeholders.
The presentation concluded with the introduction of the Mediterranean Call, an initiative advocating the preservation and stable financing of key rural and fisheries policy instruments during the 2028–2034 programming period, including LEADER and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), while opposing substantial reductions to their budgets. It was emphasized that the proposed funding cuts would directly threaten the sustainability of agriculture as well as small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors. Particular emphasis was placed on the crucial role of LAGs and FLAGs in strengthening territorial cohesion and fostering stronger links between rural, coastal and urban areas.

Final institutional remarks for future action and policies

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Željka Gudelj Velaga, Director of the Directorate for Support to Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery of the Republic of Croatia



In her closing address, Željka Gudelj-Velaga reflected on the conference's principal messages, emphasizing that the forthcoming programming period will introduce substantial changes requiring adjustments to existing working methods and stronger cooperation among all stakeholders involved in rural development.

She noted that, in the forthcoming period, the LEADER approach will no longer be positioned exclusively within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy. This development reinforces the need to consider its role from a broader perspective and to strengthen its position as an instrument for territorial development.

Gudelj Velaga emphasized that, under the new circumstances, all stakeholders are now "on the same side of the table," united by the common objective of demonstrating the added value of the LEADER approach. In this context, she highlighted the importance of actively involving local partnerships not only in project implementation but also in the design of development policies. Local Action Groups have a central role in identifying needs and challenges on the ground.

Particular emphasis was placed on strengthening coordination and cooperation between different levels of governance and across policy sectors, which was identified as one of the principal challenges in implementing development policies.
Evaluation was highlighted as an important tool in this process. It should not serve solely to review activities that have already been implemented, but also provide a basis for improving future policies and decision-making processes. In this regard, Gudelj-Velaga stressed the need for more concrete, robust and higher-quality evaluation approaches.
Regarding preparations for the new programming period, she highlighted challenges arising from changes to the financial framework and funding management model, including potential risks associated with shorter implementation periods and greater flexibility in the allocation of resources.
She emphasized that such changes require timely planning and strong evidence-based arguments to ensure that the LEADER approach is preserved and further developed as an important instrument of rural development.
Partnership was also highlighted as a fundamental operating principle. Gudel Velaga stressed that partnerships must be representative, timely and substantive, allowing participating stakeholders to exert genuine influence on decision-making.
In this context, she emphasized the need for continuous dialogue and the joint development of solutions that respond to the actual needs of rural areas.
In conclusion, Gudel Velaga noted that, although the forthcoming period will be challenging, it also provides an opportunity to further strengthen rural areas through the coordinated action of all stakeholders. She emphasized the importance of farmers and local partnerships as key drivers of development and expressed confidence that continued cooperation would contribute to creating more vibrant, connected and resilient rural communities.

Raffaele Fitto, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission for Cohesion and Reforms

In his video address to conference participants, Raffaele Fitto emphasized that rural areas form a fundamental part of Europe's society, economy and identity. He highlighted their essential role in providing food, energy and natural resources and in preserving Europe's cultural heritage.
Fitto noted that rural areas remain a long-term priority for the European Commission, with the objective of strengthening their connectivity, resilience and economic vitality.
He emphasized the importance of cohesion policy as a key instrument for investment in rural areas, complementing the Common Agricultural Policy by enhancing regional attractiveness, increasing productivity and supporting reforms.
Despite the investments already made, Fitto noted that rural areas continue to face numerous challenges, including depopulation, shortages of labor and skills, the digital divide, and limited access to essential public services such as healthcare, education and transport.
The central message of his address concerned the concept of the "Right to Stay", which he presented as a fundamental objective of the European Commission's future policies. He emphasized that every person should have the opportunity to live, work and develop in the place they consider home, with access to the conditions required for a high quality of life, including employment opportunities, public services and an attractive overall living environment.

In this context, Fitto announced the launch of a broad consultation process in May 2026 to support the development of a Right to Stay Strategy**.**
All stakeholders, including representatives of rural areas, were invited to participate actively and contribute to shaping future policies.
In conclusion, he emphasized the need for collective action to ensure that the Right to Stay becomes a reality for all citizens of the European Union



Join the National CAP Network, Croatia
https://nrm.hr/#Membership

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

Day 3: Presentation of projects for the development of rural areas financed by the EU funds and other sources

More Than a Village: Smart, competitive and attractive villages in Central Europe – Insights from the Interreg Central Europe Programme

Daniela Angelina Jelinčić, Danijela Hrman, Institute for Development and International Relations



The presentation introduced the More Than a Village project, funded under the Interreg Central Europe Programme, which aims to foster smart, competitive and attractive rural areas through innovative solutions and digital technologies, with a strong emphasis on community engagement. The project seeks to revitalize rural areas by reducing the digital divide, promoting entrepreneurship, retaining young people, and addressing negative demographic trends.

It was emphasized that the Smart Villages concept is not about applying technology for its own sake, but rather about developing solutions that respond to the specific needs of local communities by making effective use of available resources and strengthening cooperation among stakeholders.

Within this framework, several development models were presented, including Smart Villages in tourism, the agri-food sector, and rural business support services.

The project has produced a number of practical applications, including digital platforms connecting producers and consumers, systems for reducing food waste, and innovative solutions designed to strengthen entrepreneurship and improve digital literacy.

Particular emphasis was placed on establishing local innovation hubs and community centers that serve as spaces for education, knowledge exchange and stakeholder networking, thereby encouraging more active participation in local economic and social development.

The project has also developed practical tools intended for long-term use, including manuals, implementation guides and policy recommendations that facilitate the transfer of knowledge and experience to other rural communities.

These resources provide practical methodologies, examples of good practice and guidance on engaging local communities in development processes.

In conclusion, the presenters emphasized that Smart Villages represent an approach based on gradual development, cooperation and adaptation to local circumstances. The key to success lies in actively involving local residents and developing solutions that address genuine community needs rather than replicating universal development models.

The Renoverty project and the importance of LAGs in the establishment of Energy Communities and citizen-led renovation

Maja Čičko, LAG Sava, Mirna Kirigin, North-West Croatia Regional Energy and Climate Agency (REGEA)

The presentation introduced the Renoverty project, which focuses on developing models for energy renovation in rural areas, with particular emphasis on addressing energy poverty.

It was noted that energy poverty disproportionately affects rural and peri-urban areas due to an ageing housing stock, low levels of energy efficiency, and limited access to financial and technical assistance. Additional challenges include administrative complexity, unresolved property ownership issues, and insufficient coordination between different levels of governance.

The project has developed practical renovation models tailored to vulnerable households, carried out energy assessments, and implemented activities designed to raise awareness and encourage citizens to participate in the energy transition.



Particular emphasis was placed on the establishment of the SAVA Energy Community, the first initiative of its kind in Croatia, providing an operational model for local energy governance and the use of renewable energy sources.

The role of Local Action Groups (LAGs) was identified as crucial, as they provide the organizational and social infrastructure needed to connect stakeholders, identify local needs and implement practical solutions.

Combined with energy communities as technical and financial instruments, LAGs facilitate the development of locally adapted models that contribute to lower energy costs and a fair energy transition.

The operational aspects of the project were also presented, including the establishment of the energy community, the development of renewable energy sharing models, and educational activities targeting both public authorities and local residents. Special attention was given to community engagement through information campaigns, education and facilitation processes, encouraging citizens to participate actively in energy renovation initiatives.
In conclusion, the presenters emphasized that citizen-led renovation models represent an important instrument for the long-term transformation of rural areas. They also stressed the need for further development of financial instruments, stronger capacities among local stakeholders and wider replication of similar initiatives in other communities.



Logreener (Composing Local Energy Trasition) – an innovative approach for local transition towards green energy

Heidi Eterović, LEADER Network Croatia



The presentation introduced the LOGREENER project, funded under the Interreg Euro-MED Programme, which focuses on developing tools for planning the energy transition at the local level.
The project brings together partners from several Mediterranean countries with the objective of enabling local communities to make evidence-based decisions that reflect their actual needs and development priorities.
The project's principal output is a comprehensive planning tool that supports citizen and stakeholder engagement, indicator-based planning and the identification of financing opportunities for the energy transition.
The tool enables the assessment of different development scenarios, ranging from a business-as-usual scenario to a full energy transition, thereby supporting strategic planning adapted to local conditions.
It was emphasized that this approach enables local authorities to reduce costs, increase resilience to climate change and lower greenhouse gas emissions while simultaneously promoting economic development and creating new employment opportunities.
The project also provides technical support in preparing key strategic documents such as Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAPs), thereby facilitating access to European Union funding.
As an example of practical application, the presenters described an assessment carried out for the Town of Duga Resa, where specific energy transition measures were identified, including investments in solar energy systems, the development of agrivoltaic projects, the transition to electric vehicles, and the introduction of energy-efficient heating systems.
The consultation process also revealed considerable public interest in participating in energy projects through community investment schemes.
In addition to climate change mitigation measures, the project also addresses adaptation measures, including water resource management, early warning systems, climate-resilient urban planning and public awareness activities, thereby providing a comprehensive response to climate challenges.
In conclusion, the presenters emphasized that the tools developed through the project enable systematic and long-term planning of the local energy transition through community participation, evidence-based decision-making and adaptation to specific local conditions, ultimately increasing the effectiveness and sustainability of local development policies.

Next Stop Local – transfer of Scandinavian Youth LEADER experiences

Matija Zamljačanec, LAG Izvor, Josip Marušić, LAG Vallis Colapis

The presentation introduced the Next Stop Local (Youth LEADER) project, a transnational cooperation initiative involving Croatia, Finland and Sweden that aims to strengthen the role of young people in local development.
The project seeks to increase young people's motivation to participate in development processes, strengthen their knowledge and skills, and foster a greater sense of belonging to their local communities.
It was emphasized that the project responds to several key challenges facing rural areas, including the insufficient involvement of young people, their limited motivation to remain in rural communities, and the need to develop the competencies required for active participation in LEADER/CLLD initiatives.
Particular emphasis was placed on transferring experience from Scandinavian countries, where youth engagement models are more developed and systematically integrated into local development processes.
The project included training activities, workshops, study visits and exchanges of good practice, enabling young people to acquire practical knowledge and participate directly in local initiatives.

The target group included young people between the ages of 18 and 30, representatives of Local Action Groups and members of the wider local community, ensuring stakeholder participation at multiple levels of the development process.
The principal results included improved knowledge and skills among young participants, stronger motivation to engage in local activities, and increased cooperation between young people and local stakeholders.
Special attention was given to the introduction of practical participation mechanisms, including small grants for youth-led projects and the establishment of local funds enabling young people to put their ideas into practice.



The final part of the presentation addressed several remaining challenges, including the lack of effective mechanisms for involving young people in decision-making. Future development priorities include expanding the model to a larger number of LAGs, creating shared platforms, and strengthening the role of young people at the national level.
In conclusion, the presenters emphasized that meaningful youth participation is a fundamental prerequisite for the long-term sustainability of rural areas and successful generational renewal.

School cooperatives in LEADER/CLLD – a model of support for young people and generational renewal of rural areas

Sanja Rukavina, LAG Mareta



The presentation introduced a model for developing and supporting school cooperatives as a tool for strengthening generational renewal and involving young people in the development of rural areas. School cooperatives were presented as a form of extracurricular activity that simulates the operation of a real enterprise, enabling students to acquire practical knowledge, develop entrepreneurial skills and establish stronger links between education and the local economy.
Despite their considerable potential, it was noted that school cooperatives operate under significant constraints, primarily because they lack their own financial resources and depend heavily on the institutions responsible for establishing and financing schools.
It was also emphasized that systematic and continuous support for such initiatives at the national level remains insufficiently developed.
Through the activities of LAG Mareta, a practical support model was developed that included assessing the needs of school cooperatives, integrating them into the Local Development Strategy, and preparing and implementing dedicated calls for project funding.
Under this model, individual school cooperative projects received between EUR 6,250 and EUR 12,500, within a total allocation of EUR 75,000, enabling schools to implement practical activities and strengthen their institutional capacities.
Supported project activities include the development of school gardens, culinary and traditional skills, handicraft production, and entrepreneurial competencies through product marketing and sales.
Particular emphasis was placed on involving students in practical activities and connecting them with the wider local community through fairs and promotional events.
The added value of the LEADER approach was demonstrated through several elements, including the digitalization of cooperative activities, training tailored to students' interests, and capacity building for applying the Smart Villages concept.
Several unexpected positive effects were also identified, including the involvement of former students in educational activities, knowledge transfer between schools, and the active participation of students with disabilities in project implementation.
In conclusion, the presentation emphasized that school cooperatives represent an effective instrument for connecting education, local development and entrepreneurship.
Further progress will require continued development of support models, stronger partnerships and more systematic involvement of young people in rural development processes.

And where is the added value? - fisheries sector projects

Eliana Zec Solina, FLAG Vela vrata

The presentation examined the actual added value of the CLLD approach in fisheries-sector projects, noting that this added value is often difficult to identify at the level of individual investments.
Many projects are broadly similar to those supported through national measures, focusing on equipment, business modernization, improved working conditions and stronger competitiveness. This raises the question of where the specific added value of CLLD is actually generated.
It was emphasized that the answer requires a change in perspective—from assessing individual projects to examining the broader process created through the implementation of a Local Development Strategy.

From this perspective, added value does not arise from the investment itself, but from the effects it generates within the community, including stronger trust, cooperation and collective action among stakeholders.
The implementation of projects produced tangible changes in how the sector operates. Fishers increasingly began to view the Fisheries Local Action Group as a partner rather than merely as an administrative channel.
The development of this relationship of trust was identified as the foundation for further processes of organization and sectoral strengthening.
A further step was the organization of fishers themselves, resulting in the establishment of an association of professional fishers as a concrete form of collective action. This provided the sector with a structured organization capable of representing shared interests more effectively and developing joint initiatives.
At the same time, projects also helped open the fisheries sector to the wider community through activities positioning fisheries as a visible and active part of social and cultural life.



Examples included events such as "Dinner with a Fisherman" and promotional activities that strengthened the sector's identity and public recognition.
In conclusion, it was emphasized that the CLLD approach does not merely finance equipment and individual projects. It initiates a broader process of social change—from initial investments to stronger relationships, cooperation, organization and, ultimately, community development. The true added value of CLLD lies in this transformation: the change in how the sector operates and connects with its territory.

LAG TERRA LIBURNA

The importance of knowledge and experience transfer in delivering added value of LEADER/CLLD

Željko Marić, LAG Terra liburna



The presentation emphasized the transfer of knowledge and experience as a key element in generating the added value of the LEADER approach. The principal mechanisms identified were the organization of conferences, the implementation of cooperation projects and continuous engagement with local communities.
Particular attention was given to the conferences continuously organized by LAG Terra Liburna as platforms for knowledge exchange and stakeholder networking.
Among these was the international SEE LEADER Conference, held in 2019, which brought together more than 330 participants and included three study visits and three accompanying events.
This was followed by the INSPIRA LEADER conference series: the 2022 event attracted more than 90 participants and seven speakers; INSPIRA LEADER 2, held in 2023, brought together over 110 participants and ten speakers; and INSPIRA LEADER 3, held in 2025, attracted more than 130 participants and fourteen speakers.
In addition to conferences, the presentation highlighted inter-territorial cooperation projects that facilitate knowledge transfer between LAGs and the development of joint initiatives.
These included the LAG Academy, Club 7, Local2Local and KuHaČa projects, each involving between four and eight partners and covering a wide range of development themes—from training and capacity building to the development of local products and territorial identity.
A total of four cooperation projects were implemented, with a combined value exceeding EUR 539,000.
Practical examples demonstrated how these activities support the development of local products, tourism routes and experiences based on local heritage, thereby connecting different sectors and strengthening territorial identity.
At the same time, the presentation emphasized the importance of developing competencies for working with stakeholders, including communication and advisory skills, community animation and event organization. These capacities form a central part of the operational role of Local Action Groups.
In conclusion, it was emphasized that LEADER's added value is generated through continuous knowledge transfer, networking and relationship-building among stakeholders. These activities provide the foundation for the long-term development and resilience of local communities.