ESF+ Support Centre

Study visit 'Simple functional model of CLLD in ESF+: Minimum administration, maximum added value'

7-8 September 2026, Prague (Czechia)

Flash report

The ESF+ Support Centre organised a study visit in Prague, Czechia, hosted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs' Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) and Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) Projects' Unit. The visit examined how CLLD can combine minimum administrative burden with maximum added value for social inclusion initiatives.

The visit brought together managing authorities, national and regional bodies, Local Action Groups (LAGs) and their networks from Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia and Czechia, alongside the European Commission, DG EMPL.

The study visit was organised in response to the expression of interest from these organisations.

Participants explored:

- **the Czech ESF+ delivery model, including the changed role of LAGs, simplified CLLD architecture and cooperation across ministries and levels of governance.**
- **approaches to programme design with practical strategies to community work, social inclusion and local capacity-building.**
- **lessons that could be transferred to other contexts and actions for the next programming period.**

This report summarises the content of the study visit, highlighting the main themes that were presented and discussed. The facilitated joint discussion focused on three key themes: **1. the Czech path towards a simpler functional CLLD model for social inclusion and the concrete work of LAGs and their impact for communities and social inclusion, 2. the role of capacity- and trust building, 3. the future role of CLLD.**

1. The Czech ESF+ CLLD Model: a simplified, community-led approach to social inclusion

The Czech ESF+ Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) model aims to maximise the benefits of the bottom-up approach while reducing administrative complexity. It places local knowledge, partnerships and multidisciplinary cooperation at the centre of implementation, enabling solutions to respond to the specific needs of rural areas and smaller municipalities.

Key features of the model include:

- **A strengthened role for LAGs:** Rather than acting primarily as intermediary funding bodies, LAGs now directly implement projects and coordinate local stakeholders (i.e. neighbourhood initiatives, public officials, schools). This has increased their capacity in social inclusion and reduced administrative burdens for both local actors and the Managing Authority.
- **A focus on community-based solutions**: Activities supported by the ESF+ CLLD model include community work, social work in rural areas, support for vulnerable families, informal carers, debt counselling, home hospic and palliative care, labour market integration measures and community-based planning of social services. These interventions are shaped by local needs assessments and local development strategies. The same applies for the focus on target groups.
- **Innovative social work approaches**: One notable example is the use of shared social workers serving several small municipalities. This model improves outreach, enables early identification of social problems, provides support in people's natural environments and complements statutory social **work**.
- **Strong emphasis on evidence and learning:** Monitoring, evaluation and self-assessment are integrated into the model. Dedicated indicators track changes in individual well-being and community outcomes, while systematic exchanges of good practice and partnership with between LAGs and the Managing Authority support continuous improvement.
- **A multi-fund framework:** Several EU funds contribute to a common local development strategy while retaining their own procedures and administrative systems. This approach relies on interministerial cooperation and promotes integrated territorial development through coordination, cooperation and mutual trust rather than through common rules.

The Czech experience demonstrates that CLLD can support place-based, partnership-driven and flexible responses to social inclusion challenges, while also strengthening local capacities and integrated territorial development.

Box 1. Project examples from Czechia

LAG Brdy–Vltava (field visit to Dobříš)

LAG Brdy-Vltava showcased a broad portfolio of long-term social inclusion initiatives developed over more than a decade. These included community planning of social services, a regional social fund financed jointly by municipalities, support for long-term unemployed people, assistance for Ukrainian refugees and the operation of a community centre known as the “World of Good People”. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying local needs, developing strong partnerships with social service providers and municipalities, and creating integrated responses at community level. The LAG presented examples ranging from support for older people and people with disabilities to employment pathways for long-term unemployed individuals and educational initiatives. The experience demonstrated how LAGs can act as coordinators, service providers and catalysts for community resilience while ensuring that social interventions are closely aligned with local needs.

LAG Kraj živých vod presented the*ir* community project, which operates in a largely rural territory facing social exclusion, ageing populations and limited access to services. The project emphasises community work as a long-term process centred on listening to residents, building trust and supporting local initiatives. It was highlighted that meaningful social inclusion cannot be fully planned in advance and therefore requires flexible funding, professional community work and evaluation systems that recognise gradual social change. A practical example from the village of Dobrá Voda illustrated how community meetings evolved into resident-led clean-up initiatives, energy poverty interventions and the emergence of local leadership. Key lessons included the importance of local presence, participation, flexibility and the role of LAGs as intermediaries between communities and public authorities.

LAG Vizovicko a Slušovicko focused on the LAG's role as a coordinator and capacity-builder rather than a direct service provider. The presentation highlighted how local needs identified by residents and municipalities are translated into community activities through LAG coordination, methodological support and networking. Particular emphasis was placed on strengthening local leaders, fostering cooperation and creating conditions that enable communities to take ownership of solutions. It was argued that simplification should not only reduce administrative burdens but also free resources for meaningful community work. The presentation concluded with three recommendations: concentrate administration where expertise exists, keep decision-making close to communities, and invest in capacities that remain within the territory after project funding ends.

LAG Pomalší presented community work as an iterative process of observing local realities, engaging residents in dialogue, testing small-scale solutions and learning from experience. Rather than promoting a fixed methodology, the presentation emphasised adaptive and participatory approaches tailored to local circumstances. Practical lessons included the importance of engaging directly with communities, listening to both problems and opportunities, acting quickly on emerging ideas and building partnerships across sectors. The LAG also presented its work on developing a typology of community work approaches together with other Czech LAGs, covering participatory models, community hubs, hybrid social and community work, coordination models and community-based recovery approaches. The overarching message was that social inclusion is achieved by enabling communities themselves to become active agents of change.

2. Building capacity and trust

During the panel, plenary and working group discussions, participants noted that a simpler CLLD model does not remove administrative work but changes where that work takes place. In particular during the inception phase, managing authorities need to design a model that is suitable for their national context and invest effort in building strong relationships and a cooperation with other Ministries, LAGs and other relevant stakeholders. Meanwhile, if LAGs are expected to coordinate partners, implement complex projects and support vulnerable groups, they need stable staffing, professional skills and institutional recognition. Capacity-building must therefore be treated as part of delivery, not as an optional overhead. The discussion highlighted the following capacity-building recommendations:

- Invest in participation, community work and project-coordination skills, supported by continuing learning and professional supervision.
- Create peer-learning spaces, thematic days, study visits and practical networks that connect community workers, LAGs, managing authorities and policy specialists.

- Position the LAG as a neutral bridge between residents and public authorities.
- Provide hands-on, step-by-step support to vulnerable groups and less experienced applicants so that simplified opportunities are genuinely accessible.

Box 2. Experience from visiting Member States

Hungary: an urban multi-fund pilot

Hungary's 2014–2020 urban CLLD model combined ERDF investment in infrastructure and community spaces with ESF support for cultural, training and community activities. It established 98 LAGs and strategies in 97 cities and supported 2,810 projects. The model strengthened local partnerships, strategic planning, community ownership and social cohesion. Its two-stage selection process, separate administrative requirements, capacity constraints, COVID-19 and inflation also made delivery slow and demanding. Although the instrument was not continued in 2021–2027, its partnerships and methods influenced Sustainable Urban Development.

Belgium: broad participation and simple procedures

The Flemish evaluation of LEADER combined indicators, LAG self-evaluation and case studies. It assessed added value through three connected dimensions: social capital, participatory governance and enhanced results and impact. The findings confirmed strong network-building and local relevance, while also identifying the need to involve more businesses, knowledge institutions, young people and vulnerable groups, and to strengthen the LAG role beyond formal project assessment. The Flemish experience showed that the added value of local development lies beyond individual grants. Micro-projects attracted new actors, participatory processes improved ownership, and LAGs strengthened local networks. Further gains depend on broader representation, more informal exchange, stronger facilitation, follow-up after projects end and routes for successful ideas to scale.

Croatia: connect local enterprise and social goals

Drawing on the experience of LAG Vallis Colapis showed how Croatian LAGs have used ESF funding despite the absence of multi-funded CLLD. In the 2014-2020 period, 29 Croatian LAGs successfully accessed more than €28 million through open ESF calls, supporting projects on social inclusion, employment, volunteering, youth work and social entrepreneurship. The LAG highlighted that ESF funding accounted for more than half of all investment mobilised in its territory during the period, demonstrating that rural LAGs have the capacity to manage complex social projects. One example illustrated how LAGs can connect ESF-type objectives with local economic development. A small family-owned dairy used support for women's entrepreneurship to move towards a social-enterprise model, retain jobs, build staff capacity and strengthen links with local milk producers. The LAG experienced a sharp decline in ESF opportunities in the current programming period, with very limited possibilities for the type of activities implemented before. Looking ahead, it suggested that LAGs could play a stronger role again in the new programme period if the programme opportunities were less restrictive with regards to beneficiary, target groups and cooperation criteria.

Across the examples, participants distinguished between elements that appear broadly transferable and those that would need to be adapted to national governance and delivery systems.

What appears transferable:	What must be adapted:
• A strong local partnership and a clear coordinating role for the LAG. • Integrated strategies that connect investment in places with investment in people. • Low-threshold entry points, micro-projects and tailored applicant support. • A mixed evidence model covering outputs, governance, social capital and longer-term effects.	• National governance, fund architecture and the legal role assigned to LAGs. • Administrative systems, conflict-of-interest safeguards and audit requirements. • The maturity and staffing of LAGs and their networks. • Territorial needs, service systems and relationships with municipalities.

3. The future role of CLLD for social inclusion

The future outlook for CLLD was a central theme of the study visit. The presentation by the European Commission placed the discussion in the emerging 2028–2034 architecture. Member States will prepare National and Regional Partnership Plans with national, sectoral and, where relevant, regional and territorial chapters. They will decide how CLLD is integrated. Participants therefore saw the current period as the time to assemble evidence, build alliances and define a workable offer, rather than wait for the final regulations.

Key messages discussed for the future were:

- The importance of keeping CLLD local and people-centred even within a more integrated or centralised planning architecture.
- The need to use simpler and, where possible, more coherent rules so communities can focus on outcomes instead of identifying which fund pays for each element.
- The widely-shared aim to protect space for small and socially innovative projects that may not produce large headline indicators but can unlock participation and prevention.
- The recognition of LAGs as conveners, bridges and local development actors—not only project-selection or funding bodies.
- The importance of strengthening vertical links between LAGs, municipalities, specialised ministry departments, managing authorities and the European Commission.

During the working group discussion, Czech representatives and participants from the visiting countries shared their experiences on how to cooperate with relevant stakeholders to create an effective CLLD models for the future. Groups mapped common approaches or widely-shared perspectives in 'cooperation roadmaps'. The following table aims to sum up the groups' results:

What should change	Who needs to act	First practical steps
Earlier joint planning across funds	Managing authorities and coordinating ministries	Convene cross-ministry working sessions with LAG representatives before programme choices are fixed.

A clearer evidence base for CLLD added value	LAGs, evaluators, managing authorities and networks	Combine common indicators with case studies and self-evaluation; communicate credible success stories.
Stronger implementation capacity	Member States, LAG networks and the ESF+ Support Centre	Map capacity gaps; organise peer exchanges, thematic support and targeted bilateral learning.
Rules proportionate to local delivery	National authorities and the European Commission	Test simplified project architecture, cost options and combined assessments while retaining clear accountability.

Throughout the discussion, participants showed cautious optimism rather than certainty. Participants saw real opportunities in a more integrated funding architecture, but also risks, such as weak ring-fencing, too rigid centralisation, competition between funds and a preference for large projects that are easier to count. The practical response is early coalition-building and a clear, evidence-based CLLD proposition.

Key takeaways and conclusions

The exchange highlighted that, in the context of CLLD in ESF+, simplification does not mean the absence of controls. It is a deliberate redesign that concentrates administration where capacity exists, gives local partnerships room to respond to needs and supports accountability through proportionate rules, evidence and continuous dialogue. In the presentations, panel, plenary and working group sessions a variety of success factors and challenges were identified:

Success factors	Challenges
• Political and managerial support for a locally led approach. • A clear role for LAGs as coordinators and trusted local partners. • Early co-design and regular dialogue across ministries and with LAG networks. • Proportionate controls, simplified costs and fewer administrative layers. • Stable local capacity and professional support for community workers. • Evidence that captures social capital, governance and lived change.	• Different fund rules, systems and institutional cultures. • Uneven LAG capacity and insufficient operating resources. • Balancing flexibility with accountability for public money. • Monitoring systems that can distort relational community work. • Sustainability and scaling after project funding ends. • Uncertainty over CLLD's place and resources after 2027.

These factors vary depending on national contexts. Therefore, good practice and successful models of CLLD in ESF+ cannot be simply replicated into another national setting. Nonetheless knowledge-sharing was seen as essential. The Czech hosts and the European Commission invited participants to continue the exchange through the ESF+ Support Centre, including targeted peer reviews, bilateral learning and other formats shaped around specific implementation questions.