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"Local, bottom-up initiatives can make rural and fisheries communities more resilient to challenges such as climate change, social exclusion, disinformation, or conflict."

Local development is more than just policy—it's about giving people the tools to shape their own future. Approaches such as LEADER and CLLD have shown how bottom-up initiatives can make rural and coastal communities more resilient, innovative, and connected.

At the forefront of this discussion is Urszula Budzich Tabor, Senior Policy Analyst at AEIDL. With over 30 years of experience in rural and fisheries development, Urszula has supported local action groups, analysed EU programmes, and helped communities turn ideas into lasting change.

In this conversation, she shares her insights on the power of bottom-up development, the challenges of capturing real impact, and the importance of keeping rural voices at the heart of European policy.

What are the main features that make the LEADER approach unique in fostering rural development, and how have these influenced its replication in coastal and fisheries areas through CLLD?

The LEADER approach is a distinctive method of local development, viewing an area holistically rather than focusing on specific sectors, and giving decision-making power to the local community instead of relying on top-down guidance from national or regional authorities. This integrated, bottom-up, partnership-based model can be applied across rural, coastal, and even urban neighbourhoods, provided they are not too large and share a strong sense of local identity.

Applying this approach is not without challenges. It often requires a shift in mindset, particularly among programme authorities and auditors, who must accept that key decisions rest with local partnerships. Most managing authorities build trust in Local Action Groups (LAGs) over time, though some still attempt to dictate which projects can be supported or scrutinise every decision. On the ground, CLLD demands strong mobilisation and strategic thinking from local actors, and LAGs need time to gain credibility. Yet the results are evident: where the approach has taken root, local decision-making fosters ownership and responsibility, while broad participation—including from vulnerable groups—drives creativity and innovation.

Across the EU, the fishing sector faces complex challenges, from declining fish stocks to an ageing workforce and environmental pressures. Tested successfully in remote and declining rural areas, the LEADER approach can help fisheries-dependent communities address these issues by integrating the sector into the local economy, improving the image of fishers, supporting new income-generating activities, and helping communities valorise and preserve their natural assets.

In what ways has Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) contributed to empowering coastal and fisheries communities, particularly under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)?

Since 2009, the bottom-up, integrated, partnership-based approach modelled on LEADER has been applied in fisheries areas. At the time, it was not yet called CLLD; the term was introduced in the 2014–2020 financial framework, though in rural areas it continues to be known as LEADER. From 2014, it also became possible to combine multiple funding sources into a single local development strategy, known as "multi-funded" CLLD. Unlike the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), where LEADER is mandatory, neither the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) nor its successor, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), required Member States to implement CLLD in fisheries areas. Nevertheless, during 2014–2020, 348 Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs) were established across 19 Member States, covering not only coastal regions but also some inland areas with aquaculture production.

The new generation of FLAGs for 2021–2027 is just beginning, making it easier to review the 2014–2020 period, which effectively ended in 2023. Nearly 350 areas across Europe saw fisheries and aquaculture representatives collaborate with other sectors to

develop ideas for real change, supported by EMFF funding. On average, each FLAG managed a budget of around €2.2 million. In total, over 14,000 local projects were supported, ranging from investments in sustainable fishing techniques and promoting fishing as a profession to attract young people, to developing new income streams (such as tourism and other blue economy sectors), valorising environmental assets, and improving local governance.

In some remote EU regions, simply being eligible for EU funding due to a fisheries focus boosted recognition of the sector. Even where fishing represents a small share of the local economy, its traditions, heritage, and fish-based cuisine contribute significantly to regional identity and tourism appeal. Moreover, inter-regional and transnational cooperation—a key feature of LEADER/CLLD—enabled these communities to connect with others facing similar challenges, learn from each other, and gain inspiration, fostering confidence and innovation in addressing local issues.

How does the integration of environmental sustainability and blue economy principles shape local development strategies in coastal and fisheries areas?

Most fisheries communities are already aware that the sector must become more sustainable, and they are keen to seize opportunities offered by the blue economy. Consequently, local strategies in many FLAGs are exploring new solutions, such as combining entrepreneurship with sustainability through the circular economy or creating green jobs for vulnerable citizens. Many FLAGs are also investigating a wide range of sustainable energy options. Another key feature of fisheries CLLD—shared with LEADER in rural areas—is the development of short food chains, which add value to fish caught by low-impact coastal fishers and reduce food miles.

Over the years, the European Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET), and – since 2022 – its successor FAMENET have compiled a collection of more than 250 inspiring practices, mainly from the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 periods (few projects funded under the current EU budget have yet been documented). These examples, available on FARNET 1, FARNET 2, and FAMENET, often emphasise sustainability. FLAGs adopt different approaches to achieve this: they may bring together entrepreneurs and researchers to develop environmentally friendly solutions or organise study visits for fishers to learn from sustainable practices in other countries. Some FLAGs have even embedded sustainability criteria—such as the use of renewable energy—into their project selection processes.

To what extent do current monitoring and evaluation systems capture the real social and territorial impact of CLLD and LEADER projects?

Measuring the impact of LEADER and CLLD is notoriously challenging. The results of (F)LAG activities vary significantly across regions, are often intangible or difficult to quantify, and can take years to become visible. The European Court of Auditors highlighted this in its Special Report 2022 noting that "LEADER and community-led local development facilitate local engagement, but additional benefits are still not sufficiently demonstrated." In response, the European Commission and its experts have been exploring ways to better capture the wider benefits these programmes bring to local communities.

While it is standard practice to evaluate each local partnership individually, the real challenge lies in comparing results across areas and drawing conclusions at national or EU level, given that each area may pursue entirely different objectives and methods. For instance, how can we meaningfully compare the value of designing a more fuel-efficient fishing boat engine with organising a dialogue between fishers, authorities, and environmental NGOs about seal-related damages? Clearly, designing an effective system to capture CLLD impacts begins with asking the right questions.

In fisheries areas, FAMENET (the European Fisheries and Aquaculture Monitoring, Evaluation and Local Support Network) conducted a large-scale study to assess CLLD results and understand what the participatory, bottom-up approach brings to communities and the EU. The study focused on four key questions: Have FLAGs successfully mobilised stakeholders to drive local development? Have they empowered people to launch initiatives beneficial to their community? Have they improved socio-economic and environmental dynamics in fisheries and aquaculture areas? And have they helped bring communities closer to Europe?

The study, published in May 2025, provided positive answers to all four questions, based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, including project reports, information from FLAG managers, and surveys of local stakeholders. From 2025 onwards, data will be collected systematically from FLAGs each year, enabling the observation of long-term development dynamics. However, the process is only beginning, and much work remains to develop reliable methods for capturing the full impact of CLLD.

What mechanisms are needed to strengthen knowledge-sharing and networking among rural and coastal development actors across Europe?

LEADER has been operating for over 30 years and is well established among stakeholders at various governance levels, in part thanks to the foundational work of the LEADER Observatory managed by AEIDL. For many fisheries communities and the authorities managing fisheries funds, the approach was entirely new, and progress would have been difficult without strong support from the European Commission (DG MARE). The Commission established the European Fisheries Areas Network (FARNET) and a dedicated service unit to provide information, training, and opportunities for learning and experience exchange.

FLAG seminars, FARNET events, access to good practices, and practical guides have helped local communities understand the challenges facing fisheries areas, develop forward-looking strategies, and implement methods for community animation, support to potential beneficiaries, and selection of high-quality projects. Equally important, FARNET created a space for managing authorities and paying agencies to ask questions and share experiences with peers across Europe. This framework has been instrumental in putting fisheries CLLD into practice and allowing communities to initiate meaningful change. Much of this work continues today under FAMENET, sometimes in a slightly different format, with AEIDL still actively involved.

Finally, looking ahead: what gives you hope—and what concerns you most—about the future of local development in rural and fisheries areas in the EU?

I firmly believe that local, bottom-up initiatives can make rural and fisheries communities more resilient to challenges such as climate change, social exclusion, disinformation, or conflict. Experience shows that top-down solutions, implemented through bureaucratic procedures, often fail. These local initiatives do not necessarily require large budgets—when communities are fully mobilised around a project, voluntary work and in-kind contributions from local actors can get initiatives off the ground with minimal external funding.

Yet there are reasons for concern regarding the future, particularly when examining the European Commission's recent proposals for the 2028–2034 EU funding period. In this new framework, which emphasises competitiveness and security, the role of territorial tools such as LEADER and CLLD is not guaranteed. Experts repeatedly stress that long-term competitiveness and security cannot be achieved if local communities are left behind.

Under the new setup, it may be up to individual Member States to decide whether to implement these local tools. While there is strong mobilisation of local actors around LEADER and CLLD across the EU, it remains unclear to what extent their voices—and the growing evidence of the approach's positive impact—will influence national decisions. Some countries may embrace territorial tools more extensively, while others may hesitate without clear EU incentives, risking a widening gap between communities across the Union.

In this context, peer learning and capacity building for managing authorities, carried out through FAMENET, along with policy discussions organised under the Rural Pact, are crucial to ensure the long-term success and equitable application of local development approaches across Europe.

AEIDL has been working in LEADER and CLLD projects since 1991. To find out more about our involvement in LEADER, see our webpage dedicated to it. You can also find a wealth of LEADER and CLLD publicatons and more on our Resource Centre.