The third in a series of four planned Thematic Labs considered the ways that LEADER and Local Action Groups (LAGs) can contribute to effective local action addressing youth and depopulation. Participants were updated on how the future programming framework under the CAP Strategic Plans (CAP SPs) can enable LEADER to contribute with local solutions.

Practitioners from Finland, Spain, Germany and Austria described local initiatives addressing depopulation and youth issues led or supported by LAGs, demonstrating their varied experiences and lessons learnt. Participants engaged in workshop discussions focusing on key success factors and how these can be activated in the LEADER delivery framework under the CAP SPs in the upcoming programming period.

Event Information

Date: 20 February 2020

Location: Brussels, Belgium

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point

Participants: Representatives of LEADER LAGs and beneficiaries, National Rural Networks, EU-wide networks, universities, delegates from Managing Authorities of the RDPs and EU institutions (DG AGRI).

Outcomes: Practical examples and recommendations on the use of LEADER to provide local solutions in working with youth and combatting rural depopulation.

Web page: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-leader-thematic-lab-youth-and-depopulation_en

Setting the scene

Veronika Korcekova (ENRD CP) gave context for the day's discussion providing some of the background information as to why it is necessary to address rural youth and depopulation. She noted that the situation varies across and within regions of the 27 member states.

Orsolya Somogyi-Frizon (DG AGRI) shared the key considerations on youth and depopulation from the European Commission's perspective. The root causes of rural depopulation are complex and therefore require complex solutions that must be based on trust, involvement and engagement. She explained that LEADER has the opportunity to become part of the solution through co-creation with young people, allowing strategic thinking and championing innovative actions. LEADER's ability to provide multi-actor and multi-sectoral interventions that are locally relevant is a key strength.

LEADER initiatives in working with local youth and combatting rural depopulation

LAG Keskipiste, Finland

The guiding principles for the LAG's youth initiatives in remote rural areas are trust and the involvement of young people in designing and implementing their own initiatives. The LAG's very own Youth Action Team has been instrumental in developing various youth entrepreneurship initiatives. They also select mini-projects for micro-grants which are supported by local and national funds (over 350 have already been supported). The LAG has also set up a cooperative of young people (SILTA), youth innovation camps and developed a Youth Board and Manifesto. The LAG is developing a youth strategy for 2021-2027, written by local young people.

LAG Leipziger Muldenland, Germany

This LAG worked with another German LAG to improve connections and exchanges between the local youth and local decision-makers. Project ideas have been developed in a youth council. In the 'JU&ME' scheme, young people act as mentors to local decision-makers, ensuring that the local youth's needs and ideas are incorporated into the strategic thinking of the local authorities.

Pueblos Vivos project, Spain

The project is 'keeping village communities alive'. The LAGs developed a set of integrated actions, including collating and sharing online information for potential new settlers on the 'local offer' (e.g. housing, local facilities, services), reaching out to potential new settlers through social media, news media and advertising campaigns, and holding meetings for new settlers. The project also 'mapped' local services, facilities and needs (e.g. related to mobility, housing, etc.) and develops and shares with authorities proposals to improve local services, in order to increase the attractiveness of the area. Local people are being involved throughout the process.

LAG Nockregion-Oberkärnten, Austria

To design its Local Development Strategy (LDS), the LAG developed a 'demographic check' with the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (Vienna). Actions include information campaigns, flexible day care for children, mobility services, small project support for local associations, and community nursing for the elderly. The LAG also explicitly involved representatives of different age groups in the development of the LDS.

LEADER working with youth & depopulation: challenges and success factors

In a facilitated panel discussion and in parallel working groups, participants discussed LEADER interventions related to youth and depopulation, current challenges and success factors, and the future. To make sure that all the success factors listed below are considered when planning LEADER in the context of the **CAP Strategic Plans**, participants agreed that LEADER stakeholders need to get involved in their respective national design processes now.

LAGs act as **'creative cells'** stimulating networking and knowledge sharing, both locally and outside the LAG boundaries. Local action supported by LAGs should be **complementary** to public and private sector interventions on youth and depopulation. LAGs do not exist primarily to fill the gaps – in services, facilities, etc. – left by the public sector, rather to work together with all relevant stakeholders locally in order to find integrated solutions.

Building trust is a key element of this: Managing Authorities trusting LAGs, LAGs trusting local actors (including young people), trust in innovative projects, trust in using simplified cost options. If trust towards LEADER LAGs has been declining at the EU or at the national level, the first step to regain it is using local networks to achieve joint objectives locally and then demonstrate these achievements to regional and national authorities through data collection and self-assessment.

Collaboration in local networks of LEADER stakeholders is also important to make youth and depopulation initiatives work when LAGs have limited human resources (managers or facilitators) to animate their territory. To overcome limited **capacity**, LAGs need to work as a network, building on local stakeholders' relevant knowledge and capacities.

Innovative solutions include working with volunteers, implementing local projects in partnership with local NGOs, authorities or businesses, and funding animators through the LAG's own projects.

Attitudes towards the youth need to change. Youth should be considered not as a target group, but as an active participant: local development with and by young people. The existing LEADER principles and structures are in most cases adequate for addressing youth and depopulation issues locally, however local youth 'councils' (as e.g. in Finland, Germany, Estonia, Croatia, Romania) can be a good way to involve youth in the work of local municipalities as well as in LAG boards. The youth in each local territory needs to be **involved** from the stage of Local Development Strategy (LDS) design, and their involvement maintained through social networks, meeting places, online platforms and voluntary associations during the implementation phase of the strategy.

Inter-generational linkages and 'educating' local decision-makers improve local networking.

Communicating about the benefits of rural areas to both the urban and rural populations can contribute to improving the image of rural areas. It is important that young people are involved and that communication campaigns are organised at multiple levels - local, regional, national and EU.

Planning and targeting interventions on youth and depopulation require a good **diagnosis** of the local specificities of the challenge. While the diagnosis should be part of the LDS planning, it is also an ongoing activity of 'permanent scanning' of the situation (relevant socio-economic trends, initiatives, etc.). In order to design and launch relevant actions to genereate local participation, there first needs to be an appropriate level of local awareness.

To be initiators and 'drivers' of targeted action, LAGs need **continuity** both in terms of funding and organisational structure – to act as reliable partners to other local stakeholders. LAGs need to receive sufficient support for running costs to attract quality human resources. This can be particularly important when aiming to improve the 'image' of rural territories (through best projects awards and better, more positive communication) or planning relevant service infrastructure with other local partners (both important parts of strategic approaches dealing with depopulation).

Local networks can also provide **funding** to relevant initiatives, and LAGs need to be able to supplement their EAFRD funding with other EU, national, regional as well as local funding sources. 'Mini-projects' with small budgets can make a big difference in the quality of rural life. Methods to involve / reach populations which have difficulties to benefit from LEADER could include simplified cost options, step-by-step financing and mentoring.

Conclusions and next steps

- Youth is not a target group, but an actor in addressing youth and depopulation issues. Young people need to be part of the LAGs and be involved right from the start in planning and throughout the implemention phase, including in communication.
- Youth and depopulation actions can start with small steps. Innovative actions developed together with various sectors of the local economy are essential, and these actions need to be part of a long-term, strategic approach.
- Changing the narrative related to rural areas to a more positive, 'brighter' one is key.
- Participants aimed to share these messages with their respective LAGs, relevant national institutions and authorities as well as rural youth, using meetings and social media. The ENRD could collect and disseminate inspiring LEADER examples and target them directly to MS authorities and decision-makers to help build trust in LEADER and reduce the quantity of rules related to LEADER projects.