



THE LAG'S STAFF EXCHANGE PROGRAM

– GENERAL GUIDELINES

Background

International networking is the one feature of the LEADER approach that is often neglected. Many Local Action Groups (LAGs) see it as something complex, time-consuming and expensive. It is common that the number of international cooperation project initiated is significantly lower than the general objective set in the country strategy. Partly this is due to the complicity of the rules regulating the international projects. Furthermore the language and cultural barriers are sometimes seen as insuperable. Nevertheless, surpassing these barriers can offer significant advantages when cooperation networks with other European rural actors are established. Languages can be learned and cultural barriers can easily be overcome when people from different countries come together. Once the networks are established, exchanging experiences and know-how with European colleagues does not seem overwhelming anymore. Thus, cooperating internationally can also enhance the other objectives of the LEADER approach e.g. capacity building of the rural citizens, promoting innovation and, of course, creating networks among other things.

The European Union emphasizes the dissemination of the European good practices in all its actions and programs. Thus, an increased cooperation between European LAGs can work as evidence of the added value of the LEADER program. On the other hand, failing in this task can question the proper functioning of the program in the eyes of the European decision-makers. This is only one of the reasons why ELARD believes that



international cooperation should be an obligatory feature of every LAG's activities. Most importantly ELARD sees that by promoting the networking and cooperation of its members it can help the LEADER methodology to reach its full potential in Europe.

Aim of the initiative

The aim of the present initiative is to offer European LAGs a possibility for reciprocal, international staff exchange in order to promote their formation and training as well as exchange of experiences, know-how and new ideas. By going on exchange to a LAG in another EU country the LAG staff can get valuable perspective to the work they do on their local territory, improve their language and intercultural skills and establish networks.

The initiative aims to offer the members of ELARD a low-threshold opportunity to cooperate and network on the international level without having to necessarily create cooperation projects of their own. Naturally, the exchange can work as the first contact with another European LAG and new cooperation projects can later be developed on this basis or more permanent "twin LAG" relationships can be established.

The overall objective of the initiative is to promote transnational cooperation between LAGs, to enhance the dissemination of the LEADER methodology and its different instruments and applications as well as to further develop the methodology itself by collecting good European practices. The lessons learnt during the exchange will later be put together and published in order to further disseminate the positive experiences of the LEADER program from different countries of Europe.



Specific objectives

1. Identification of the interested LAGs and their characteristics and interests.
2. Exchange of information and know-how on the questions of common interest.
3. Identification and collection of data on characteristics, projects and best practices in the target territory.
4. Establishment of new contacts with host LAG's local, regional and national stakeholders e.g. local population, entrepreneurs, authorities, schools as well as regional and national agencies etc.

ELARD's role

ELARD coordinates the staff exchange and works as a contact point helping LAGs with similar interests to get in contact. LAGs interested in sending their staff member to this exchange should fill a partner identification form in order to explain what kind of expectations and objectives it has for the exchange and what are the specific fields of interest it hopes the exchange will focus on. Suitable areas or actors with similar characteristics or interests are then identified in order to find potential topics of mutual interest and joint learning opportunities. This way the initiative aims to guarantee that the exchange addresses issues and themes important for every participating rural area. When suitable partners are found, ELARD will put them in contact with each other and a cooperation agreement defining the roles and responsibilities of each partner will be signed.



Form of the exchange

The staff exchange will take the form of **educational visits of three weeks arranged between two participating LAGs**. The exchange will be reciprocal meaning that the same LAG both sends and receives a visitor. The objectives of the exchange will be defined in an agreement in advance and a program for the exchange will be provided by the receiving LAG before the exchange takes place. The objective of the exchange is, not only to offer the staff members a possibility to meet their colleagues in another EU country, but also to create more tangible results e.g. to carry out analysis of common challenges that the territories of the sending and receiving LAG face and introducing the solutions both LAGs have found in terms of carrying out successful and innovative projects.

For this purpose the staff member of the visiting LAG will be asked to keep a diary on the activities, experiences and lessons learnt and best practices identified during the exchange. The visiting staff members are also encouraged to carry out interviews of the different stakeholders they meet during the exchange and when possible, to take photographs and/or to make videos of the meetings with them. Thus, these documents can be published in a section dedicated to the exchange on ELARD website.

Practical financial issues

The LAG investment required will be limited to the travel costs of the staff member sent to exchange and the normal daily allowances as well as the cost that will incur for hosting the visitor.



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The LAG sending its staff member to the exchange will take care of all the travel arrangements and cover the travel costs, insurances as well as the daily allowances of its employee. The receiving LAG organizes the accommodation and takes care of the possible cost incurred. Of course, whenever there is a possibility for family accommodation this will lower the cost substantially.