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## 2024 ELARD Declaration on the Future of CLLD within European policies

In the spirit of the 2016 Tartu Declaration, the 2023 Brussels Declaration and following significant developments within the EU and rural areas, we, the representatives of Local Action Groups (LAGs), reaffirm our commitment to ensuring vibrant, sustainable, and resilient rural communities across Europe, using CLLD-LEADER as a tool to this end. As living countrysides are the basis of Europe's security and crisis resistance, they need to know and feel, now more than ever, that they are being supported. Indeed, our countryside is facing a comprehensive triple challenge (ecological, economic and social, including to cite a few: depopulation and ageing, deterioration of public services, climate change, robotisation, rise of artificial intelligence), causing uncertainty. With greater reason, a tailored development approach adapted to local needs is what is required now – which is what LEADER-CLLD represents, and its added-value must be recognised and acknowledged.

As the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is being debated, we put forward the following points to shape future EU policies on rural development:

### Engaging Local Stakeholders for a Targeted Response to Rural Needs

To ensure the sustainable development of rural areas, it is crucial that future funding frameworks include robust mechanisms for the active engagement of local stakeholders and organisations that represent them. Local actors are best positioned to understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by rural areas, ensuring that funding is responsive to local realities and needs. By formally incorporating rural stakeholders not only as participants in planning but also as direct beneficiaries, we can strengthen local capacities, improve economic resilience, enhance security, and foster social cohesion, driving long-term community development. To quote the European Commission (2023) *“Local development strategies are a key tool used in the CAP Strategic Plans to respond to the multiple needs of rural areas [...] but LEADER is expected to do more with less”*. We urge that rural development funding is allocated with specific measures to engage local stakeholders at every stage, from design to implementation, ensuring their perspectives shape the direction of programs. This approach guarantees that investments are more transparent, accountable, and tailored to the needs of rural populations, fostering resilience and cohesion.

### Dedicated and increased Funding for Rural Development

To meet the growing needs of rural communities, we urge the European Union to allocate more financial resources specifically for rural development. This can be achieved through earmarking or ring fencing within future MFF discussions for Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)-LEADER. Rural development funding must be prioritised, ensuring a dedicated stream of resources to foster the economic, social, and environmental well-being of rural areas. Rural regions, where live about 30% of European citizens, must no longer be left behind—without substantial financial investment, we cannot hope to achieve balanced territorial development across the EU. Furthermore, the diverse activities to improve the quality of life in rural areas and their success must continue to be ensured. We also urge the EU to recognize the success of CLLD-LEADER as an effective tool for addressing the specific challenges faced by rural areas across Europe, which require place-based solutions.

### A Clear Definition of Rural Development

The European community must agree on a single definition of rural development that encompasses more than agriculture—it is about enhancing the quality of life for all rural inhabitants. This includes



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services, infrastructure, digital connectivity, and local job creation, all of which underpin thriving agricultural sectors.

### **Europe closer to citizens**

LAGs, as local development engines, must be recognized as essential institutions within the EU framework. We call LAGs to be formally recognised as the main contact point in rural areas regionally, nationally and at EU level, covering all rural development issues, given their critical role in participatory bottom-up development, community mobilization, and local governance. LAGs are the real showcase of the EU in rural areas, they need to be recognised as such.

### **Streamlined Governance Structures**

There should be less intermediaries between the European Union and LAGs. Where managing authorities are regionalised, they should agree on a unique delivery system equal for all, and in any case national governments must not duplicate their role and rules. It is essential to maintain either state or regional managing authorities, but not both, to prevent politicization and bureaucratic inefficiency. Managing authorities must fully understand and support the principles of bottom-up, community-led development to ensure effective and depoliticized administration of rural development programs.

We urge the EU and its Member States to integrate these principles into their upcoming policies and the next programming period, ensuring that rural Europe can thrive in a sustainable and inclusive future.



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## ELARD

*ELARD is a European association that represents nearly 2,600 Local Action Groups (LAGs) from 29 countries, including countries in the European Union's neighbourhood, which have adopted and implement the LEADER methodology for local development by local actors.*

*We are actively working to make the LEADER approach better known among European decision-makers in order to guarantee its funding in European rural development policies. We support actor-led local development and represent the interests of LAGs to national governments and European institutions.*

*Since 1 January 2023, ELARD has been chaired by the French network, Leader France, which actively worked, during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2022, to promote the place of rural areas in European policies. The French Presidency of this European network is an opportunity for France, at the initiative of the programme in the 1990s, to promote LEADER and, more broadly, local development by local actors.*

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