THE LEADER/CLLD APPROACH AS A MECHANISM FOR SUPPORTING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS

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Abstract. The sustainable development of rural areas requires a comprehensive support mechanism that combines local initiative, partnership-based interaction, integrated use of available resources, and the systematic application of data for evidence-based management decisions. *The purpose of the article* is to substantiate the LEADER/CLLD approach as a comprehensive mechanism for supporting the sustainable development of rural areas by combining partnership governance, strategic planning, financial instruments, systematic use of data, and support for local innovation. The objectives determine the logic of the study, covering the theoretical, methodological, and regulatory foundations of LEADER/CLLD; its practical implementation mechanism and European experience; and directions for introducing LEADER/CLLD in Ukraine, including institutionalisation, use in post-war recovery, and subsequent scaling. *The research methodology* is based on general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, generalisation and systematisation, as well as systemic, institutional, comparative legal, spatial, and process approaches. These methods were applied to analyse EU legislation and programme documents, materials of the European Commission, the EU CAP Network, the European Court of Auditors, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and to review scholarly publications and compare the organisational and legal models of Local Action Groups in EU Member States. *The findings* show that the effectiveness of LEADER/CLLD is underpinned by the combination of a territorial approach,

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the bottom-up principle, multi-sector partnership, integrated planning, networking, cooperation, and the use of local data. Data are used at every stage of local development, from identifying needs and setting priorities to selecting operations, monitoring implementation, evaluating performance, and adjusting management decisions. The model proposed for Ukraine envisages functionally coherent territories comprising several neighbouring communities, non-profit Local Action Groups, data-driven community-led local development strategies, transparent selection of operations, multi-source financing, digital support, and independent evaluation. *Practical significance.* The proposed provisions can be used by public authorities, territorial communities, Local Action Groups, and development partners to institutionalise LEADER/CLLD in Ukraine, prepare community-led local development strategies, and improve financing, digital support, monitoring, and evaluation. *Value/originality.* Integrating European experience with the conditions of Ukrainian decentralisation, wartime risks, and post-war recovery tasks makes it possible to view LEADER/CLLD as a comprehensive mechanism capable of ensuring evidence-based local priority setting, dissemination of innovation, economic diversification, stronger social cohesion, and greater resilience of rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary academic discourse, rural development should be regarded not as a subsidiary area of agricultural policy but as an independent strategic priority. Rural areas are integrated socio-economic and spatial systems that combine agricultural production, the population's living environment, social infrastructure, a system of socio-economic relations, cultural heritage, and natural resources. Their viability therefore determines not only the gross value added of agriculture but also demographic resilience, the quality of human capital, environmental conditions, and the economy's long-term competitiveness.

For Ukraine, these issues are especially important because of depopulation, labour migration, uneven spatial development, infrastructure destruction, and the need for post-war recovery. Sectoral support instruments focused mainly on subsidising production do not comprehensively address the causes of rural vulnerability, including limited access to basic services, weak entrepreneurial ecosystems, excessive dependence on particular forms

of employment, the digital divide, and insufficient public participation in management decision-making.

An alternative is a place-based approach under which policy is designed with due regard to the characteristics of a functional territory, its resource potential, and the agreed interests of local stakeholders. LEADER/CLLD is one of the best-known mechanisms for implementing this approach. The name LEADER derives from the French *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*, meaning "links between actions for the development of the rural economy", while CLLD (*Community-Led Local Development*) means "community-led local development" and refers to an approach in which local partnerships play the leading role in defining territorial priorities, preparing community-led local development strategies, and implementing development measures. LEADER/CLLD is not limited to supporting individual operations; it is a comprehensive multi-level governance mechanism combining strategic local development planning, public–private partnership, competitive selection and financing of operations, innovation, networking, cooperation, and accountability [1; 5; 6; 15].

The purpose of the study is to provide a theoretical substantiation of the LEADER/CLLD approach as a comprehensive mechanism for supporting the sustainable development of rural areas, to systematise European experience, and to develop proposals for an institutional model for its implementation in Ukraine. To achieve this purpose, systemic, institutional, comparative legal, spatial, and process approaches were applied, together with an analysis of official European Union documents, materials of the European Commission, the EU CAP Network, the European Court of Auditors, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and scholarly publications.

Sustainable rural development cannot be achieved solely by increasing agricultural output, because even economically successful agriculture does not always create enough jobs, guarantee access to social services, or stem youth out-migration. Sustainable development policy must therefore encompass not only support for productive enterprises but also the rural territory as an integrated socio-economic and spatial system that includes local labour markets, population mobility, education, culture, the environment, and the quality of governance.

1. Theoretical, Methodological, and Regulatory Foundations of the LEADER/CLLD Approach

LEADER/CLLD should be defined as an institutionally organised mechanism for local development in which a territorial partnership is empowered to develop and implement a community-led local development strategy, select operations, and mobilise resources in line with jointly defined territorial priorities. LEADER's effectiveness arises not from any single instrument but from the interaction of seven interrelated key features: a territorial approach; bottom-up initiative; local partnership; an integrated and multi-sectoral community-led local development strategy; innovation; networking; and interterritorial and transnational cooperation [6; 13; 20].

Under the LEADER approach, a territory is viewed not as a passive administrative unit but as a functional socio-economic system with shared challenges, resources, potential, and identity. The endogenous approach involves identifying, activating, and mobilising the internal potential of territories, including residents' knowledge and skills, local networks of interaction and trust, local brands, cultural heritage, natural resources and landscapes, productive capabilities, and entrepreneurial initiatives. In this approach, external financing has a catalytic function: it strengthens a territory's capacity for self-development rather than replacing its internal potential [1; 12].

The central instrument for implementing LEADER/CLLD is the community-led local development strategy, which links the results of territorial diagnosis with defined objectives, priorities, resources, a budget, a portfolio of operations, and a system of performance indicators. The integrated nature of the approach lies in the interconnected consideration of the territory's economic, social, environmental, cultural, and spatial dimensions. For example, the development of agritourism can simultaneously create jobs, support local processing and marketing of agricultural products, preserve cultural heritage, and maintain landscapes, thereby generating synergies for territorial development [1; 11].

The Local Action Group (LAG) serves as the institutional form of territorial partnership and the mechanism for collective decision-making, which includes representatives of local authorities, businesses, civil society organisations, educational and cultural institutions, farms, and

local residents. LEADER's added value may emerge in three interrelated dimensions: stronger social capital, improved local governance, and better results and long-term impacts from implementing the community-led local development strategy. However, the existence of a partnership alone does not guarantee these effects; their actual scale and effectiveness must be established through appropriate monitoring and evaluation [10; 17].

The support function of LEADER/CLLD encompasses four interrelated dimensions of sustainable rural development: economic, implemented through diversification of income sources, development of small businesses, optimisation of value chains and cooperation; social, through improved access to services, resident participation in management decision-making, and the integration of young people and vulnerable groups; environmental, through prudent resource use, climate-change adaptation, and support for nature-based solutions; and institutional, through stronger local self-government, partnership development, and greater capacity of territorial stakeholders to define and implement development priorities independently [8; 22; 25].

In this context, sustainable support requires aligning the short-term results of individual operations with the territory's long-term strategic interests. Support for an individual enterprise will have limited systemic effect if it is not linked to human capital development, workforce training, the formation of local supply chains, infrastructure development, and broader market access. LEADER/CLLD creates the institutional preconditions for combining these elements within a community-led local development strategy and forming a portfolio of complementary operations aimed at the territory's integrated development [10; 17].

One of the least visible yet decisive prerequisites for LEADER's effectiveness is social capital – the aggregate of trust, norms of reciprocity, horizontal ties, and participants' capacity for collective action. Rural areas may possess substantial natural, productive, and cultural resources, but without mechanisms for cooperation and coordination these resources remain fragmented and do not generate synergies. A LAG creates an organised space in which different groups within the territorial community identify common problems and priorities, agree on rules for interaction and resource allocation, and move from situational interaction to long-term partnership [2; 8; 27].

It should be noted that social capital is not homogeneous and develops at different levels of interaction. Bonding ties strengthen solidarity and mutual support within a particular group, but excessive closure may limit access to external resources and interaction with other social groups. Bridging ties connect farmers, entrepreneurs, civil society organisations, young people, educational institutions, and public authorities, creating conditions for exchanging knowledge, resources, and competencies. Linking ties integrate local initiatives into regional, national, and European governance systems, opening access to broader financial, informational, and institutional resources. An effective LAG should develop all three types of ties while ensuring openness, inclusiveness, and transparency in the partnership and preventing it from becoming a closed circle of permanent participants [10; 12].

Social capital can be assessed through the regularity of joint initiatives, the diversity and representativeness of participants, trust in decision-making and operation-selection procedures, the number of partnership applications for support, the ability to attract new participants, the intensity of cross-sectoral interaction, and the share of decisions adopted following consultation with the local community [10].

Sustainable development entails not only growth in aggregate economic indicators but also equal access to economic, social, and institutional opportunities for different social groups. Particular attention should be paid to involving young people, women, veterans, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, older residents, and inhabitants of remote settlements. Their participation must be ensured at every stage of LEADER/CLLD implementation – from diagnosing territorial needs and designing the community-led local development strategy to selecting, implementing, and evaluating operations [12; 13].

Practical instruments for ensuring inclusiveness may include targeted consultations with specific social groups, accessible communication formats, targeted representation mechanisms or minimum representativeness requirements, dedicated calls for small-scale operations, mentoring for potential applicants, and financing for the preparation of applications for operational support. It is important, however, to assess not only formal representation in LAG bodies but also the actual influence of represented groups on agenda-setting, decision-making, and resource allocation.

Overall, LEADER's inclusiveness should be determined not by the mere fact of representation but by the extent of different groups' actual participation in and influence over territorial development [10; 11].

LEADER's economic function is not to replace investment or agricultural policy but to complement them territorially by identifying and activating local links among producers, processors, service providers, tourism operators, and consumers. A community-led local development strategy should identify where value is lost along local value chains, which activities should be localised or developed locally, and which operations can bring about such changes. These directions may include primary processing, packaging, logistics, certification, joint marketing and branding, tourism services, development of local retail networks, or digital sales channels [12; 13; 17].

Short supply and value chains, cooperative models, local food networks, and territorial brands are particularly promising for retaining added value within a territory. Realising their potential requires an integrated combination of measures to ensure product quality, develop business competencies, build appropriate infrastructure, promote marketing, and strengthen trust among participants [12; 13].

Diversification of the territorial economy may also include non-agricultural activities: repair and household services, care services, creative industries, crafts, digital services, recreation and rural tourism, as well as renewable-energy generation and related services. Supporting these areas will help reduce seasonal employment, expand opportunities for young people and other social groups, create new income sources, and strengthen the resilience of the territorial economy to price fluctuations in agricultural markets.

LEADER's environmental dimension should be integrated into all priorities and measures of the community-led local development strategy rather than confined to separate environmental calls. Community-led local development strategies should consider the condition of soils and water resources; risks of drought, flooding, and fire; landscape degradation; biodiversity-conservation needs; waste-management problems; and energy vulnerability. Environmental and climate risks should therefore be included in the territorial diagnosis and, where relevant data are available, supplemented by mapping ecosystem services, natural resources, and areas of climate vulnerability [12; 13; 17].

The portfolio of operations may include restoring riparian buffer strips and small watercourses, developing agroforestry, improving the energy efficiency of public buildings, creating local energy cooperatives, composting, water conservation and efficient irrigation, resource reuse, and implementing nature-based solutions. Operations should be selected with regard not only to their immediate environmental effects but also to their capacity to reduce long-term costs and environmental and climate risks, and to improve resource efficiency and the resilience of the territorial community [13; 17].

For Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, the environmental dimension of LEADER/CLLD acquires additional importance and should include determining the safety and suitability of land for further use, assessing contamination levels, restoring damaged ecosystems, conserving natural areas, and preventing unsustainable development. In this context, a LAG can provide local coordination, involve residents in setting priorities, facilitate partnerships, and support relevant initiatives. At the same time, demining, assessment of technological and war-related risks, specialised clearance work, and other security and recovery measures must be undertaken by authorised public bodies and specialised institutions within their defined mandates [13; 18].

LEADER was launched in 1991 as an experimental European Community initiative aimed at finding an alternative to overly centralised rural-development policies. Under LEADER I (1991–1993), the approach covered 217 Local Action Groups in disadvantaged rural areas; LEADER II (1994–1999) expanded its use to 906 Local Action Groups and placed greater emphasis on innovation, pilot initiatives, and cooperation; LEADER+ (2000–2006) extended the approach to all EU rural areas and covered 1,153 Local Action Groups, strengthening the importance of integrated, innovative, and participatory strategies, networking, interterritorial cooperation, and transnational cooperation. In the 2007–2013 programming period, LEADER moved from being a stand-alone initiative to a mandatory axis of rural development programmes financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), covering 2,402 Local Action Groups [1; 4; 11; 13; 32].

In the 2014–2020 programming period, the LEADER methodology was expanded within Community-Led Local Development (CLLD),

enabling community-led local development strategies to be supported by resources from several European Structural and Investment Funds. In the 2021–2027 programming period, the general legal framework for CLLD is established by Regulation (EU) 2021/1060: Articles 31–34 govern community-led local development, the content and selection of community-led local development strategies, the composition and functions of Local Action Groups, and forms of support from the funds. Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 links LEADER to CLLD within the meaning of Article 31 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 and classifies it among the cooperation interventions provided for in Article 77. Under Article 92 of Regulation (EU) 2021/2115, at least 5% of the total EAFRD contribution to the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan is reserved for LEADER [5; 14; 15; 16].

Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 remains an important legal source for analysing the 2014–2020 programming period, although in the current cycle it has been repealed by Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 subject to transitional provisions. The monitoring and evaluation system of the current Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is specified in Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1475, which lays down detailed rules for evaluating CAP Strategic Plans and providing information for monitoring and evaluation; it provides for the assessment of LEADER added value, while Article 14 and Annex VII define the composition and format of data on Local Action Groups and their activities. Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2021/2290, in turn, establishes methods for calculating the common output and result indicators set out in Annex I to Regulation (EU) 2021/2115, providing a harmonised basis for measuring the performance of CAP interventions, including LEADER [14; 16; 26; 31].

Thus, LEADER's evolution demonstrates a consistent transition from a pilot initiative to an institutionalised element of the EU Common Agricultural Policy and the broader community-oriented system of territorial development. At the same time, institutionalisation creates a risk of "administrative imitation", whereby outward compliance with procedures is not accompanied by an adequate level of autonomy for local partnerships, innovation, participation, and mutual learning. This requires assessing not only the absorption of funds and the number of operations implemented, but also the quality of the method itself, including the level of local stakeholder

participation, partnership development, social capital, institutional capacity, and territories' ability to pursue self-development [8; 9].

Overall, the LEADER/CLLD principles form an integrated system in which local stakeholder participation is combined with partnership, balanced representation of interests, innovation, networking, and a clear allocation of powers among governance levels. The institutional core of this system is the Local Action Group (LAG), which ensures practical implementation of these principles by developing and implementing a community-led local development strategy.

The starting point of this system is the bottom-up principle, under which local stakeholders participate directly in diagnosing territorial needs, defining priorities, preparing the community-led local development strategy, setting criteria, and selecting operations. Central and regional authorities, meanwhile, create the necessary legal, institutional, and financial framework without substituting for local choice and responsibility in setting territorial development priorities. Effective participation depends on open consultations, accessible information, effective feedback mechanisms, and transparent reporting of how proposals from local residents and stakeholders were taken into account in management decision-making [1; 11; 14].

Implementing the bottom-up approach requires a multi-sector partnership bringing together representatives of the public, private, and civil-society sectors and ensuring balanced representation of their interests in management decision-making. Under Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, no single interest group controls the selection decisions. Formal requirements alone do not eliminate conflicts of interest; they must be complemented by declarations of interest, recusal, publication of decisions, and independent audit [3; 4; 11; 15].

A balanced partnership creates an organisational environment for innovation, networking, and cross-sector cooperation. LEADER/CLLD's innovative potential can be realised through technological, social, organisational, and marketing dimensions and embodied in new forms of cooperation, collective brands, digital services, resource-sharing models, and partnerships with Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). Interterritorial and transnational cooperation is an important complement to local initiatives, promoting the exchange of knowledge and experience, the dissemination and adaptation of successful practices, joint

promotion of local products and services, and the formation of resilient horizontal networks among territories [1; 11; 14; 15].

For these principles to function as a unified system, functions and responsibilities must be clearly allocated among governance levels. At European Union level, the regulatory framework, strategic guidelines, and performance evaluation system are defined; the national or regional managing authority organises competitive selection of community-led local development strategies, approves Local Action Groups, sets procedural requirements, and monitors programme implementation; the paying agency verifies the legality and eligibility of expenditure and makes payments; at local level, the LAG animates the territory, develops and implements the community-led local development strategy, advises potential applicants, selects operations, and conducts self-assessment, while rural development networks facilitate knowledge dissemination and the exchange of experience and good practice [2; 3; 4; 15].

This allocation of functions should ensure a balance between local autonomy and accountability: excessive centralisation risks turning LEADER into a mechanism for implementing administrative directives, while excessive autonomy without adequate oversight risks concentrating resources and influence among local elites. Institutional balance is achieved when higher governance levels establish common rules, guarantee financial discipline and performance control, while the local partnership retains genuine room to define territorial priorities and how they are to be implemented [8; 10].

The practical expression of this balance is the principle of subsidiarity, under which decisions should be taken at the lowest governance level that has sufficient powers, competencies, and resources to implement them effectively. The national or regional level should ensure consistent rules, sound financial administration, and compliance control, while the LAG should adapt support measures to the specific characteristics and needs of the territory. A clear division of competencies helps avoid duplication of functions and excessive checks, reduces the risk of shifting responsibility among institutions, and creates the necessary conditions for preserving local autonomy.

At local level, the combination of participation, partnership, autonomy, and accountability is institutionalised in the Local Action Group as the

centre of territorial interaction and implementation of the community-led local development strategy. A LAG may include representatives of local self-government bodies, farms, small and medium-sized enterprises, civil society organisations, advisory services, educational and cultural institutions, youth and women's organisations, and other representatives of the local community [3; 4; 15].

Such an institution should be formed in stages. The initial stage involves mobilising local participants, defining the functional territory, agreeing partnership rules, and establishing and legally formalising the LAG. Next, the organisational structure and LAG office are formed, staff functions are defined, the community-led local development strategy is developed, consultation and digital interaction tools are introduced, and a monitoring and self-assessment system is established. Once organisational preparations are complete, the LAG submits the community-led local development strategy and the required supporting documents to the competent authority for competitive selection. In this way, LEADER/CLLD principles acquire concrete institutional, organisational, and procedural expression in the territorial development governance system [1; 11].

2. European Experience in the Practical Implementation of LEADER/CLLD

European Union law does not contain a universal legal concept of a "LEADER region". In regulatory and conceptual contexts, it is more appropriate to use the terms "CLLD territory", "territory covered by a community-led local development strategy", or "territory of a Local Action Group". In the practice of certain EU Member States, including Germany and Austria, the term *LEADER region* refers to the territory in which the relevant Local Action Group operates and a community-led local development strategy is implemented. Such a territory should be clearly defined, functionally coherent, and have sufficient population, resources, and organisational capacity. Its boundaries, however, need not coincide with administrative-territorial boundaries [3; 4; 11; 15].

Indicative population parameters may be used in the programme design of LEADER/CLLD in EU Member States, including a range of 10,000–150,000 inhabitants, but specific limits and exceptions are determined by the relevant regulatory and programme rules. This range

should not be regarded as a universal requirement for every LEADER/CLLD implementation model. Within the relevant programme system, LAG responsibility for the community-led local development strategy and its functionally coherent implementation territory should be unambiguous, avoiding duplication or conflict between areas of responsibility [3; 11].

A LEADER/CLLD territory should be formed not only on the basis of administrative boundaries but primarily on actual economic, social, and institutional links among settlements and communities. Relevant criteria include labour mobility, logistical and economic links, shared natural and climatic conditions, historical and cultural identity, interaction among local economic actors, and existing forms of intermunicipal cooperation. The territory should be compact enough to enable regular interaction among participants while possessing the necessary resource, financial, and staffing capacity to implement the portfolio of operations set out in the community-led local development strategy. Final recognition of the LAG territory, the LAG itself, and the corresponding community-led local development strategy should be granted by the competent managing authority following a transparent competitive process involving independent experts and publication of results [1; 11; 17].

The practical implementation of LEADER/CLLD takes place as a continuous cycle of designing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting a community-led local development strategy. Unlike a linear planning model, this approach provides for continuous feedback between implementation results, performance evaluation, and subsequent adjustment of strategic priorities and measures. The general logic of this cycle is shown in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, the LEADER/CLLD implementation cycle combines consecutive but interconnected stages – from mobilising the local partnership and diagnosing the territory to implementing the strategy, monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment of priorities. The outputs of each stage provide the informational and organisational basis for the next, while monitoring and learning generate feedback throughout the cycle.

The initial stage of the cycle is mobilisation of the local partnership, including identifying and mapping stakeholders, informing and engaging residents and organisations, forming an initiative group, and agreeing rules of representation. This creates the institutional basis for the future LAG and

ensures that stakeholders whose interests must be properly represented are included in the strategic process.

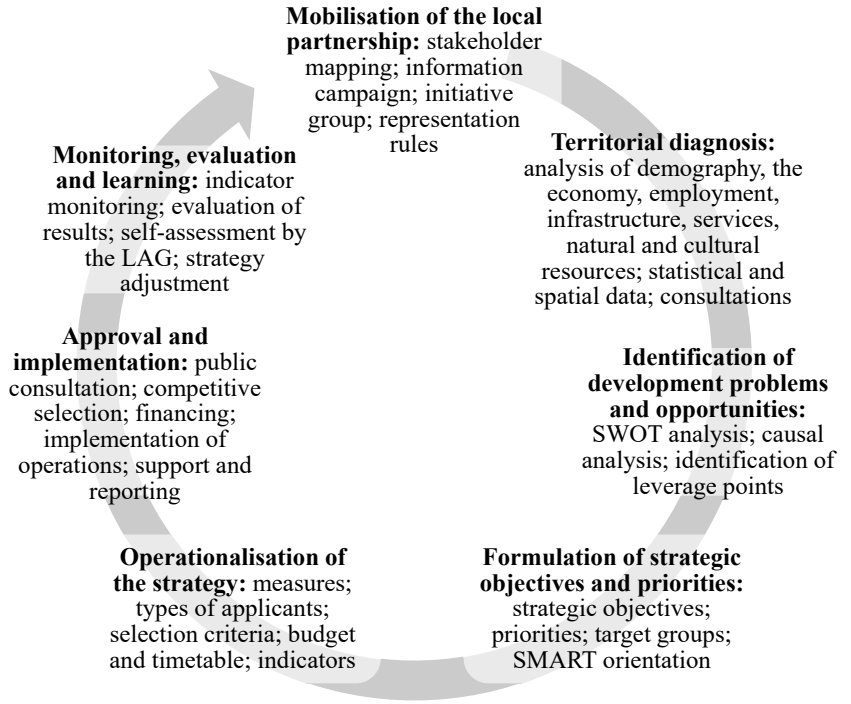


Figure 1. Cycle for Developing and Implementing a Community-Led Local Development Strategy within LEADER/CLLD

Source: compiled by the authors using sources [7; 10]

The established partnership then proceeds to territorial diagnosis, aimed at comprehensively identifying the territory's resource potential, needs, problems, and structural constraints. The analysis generally covers demographic processes, the economy and employment, infrastructure, access to services, and natural and cultural resources. Combining statistical, administrative, and spatial data with consultation results complements quantitative assessment with local knowledge.

The diagnosis results provide the basis for identifying development problems and opportunities. At this stage, SWOT analysis should not merely describe territorial characteristics but reveal causal relationships among problems, resources, and possible intervention areas, thereby helping identify key bottlenecks and points of influence.

Strategic objectives and priorities are formulated on the basis of the analysis. They should be interconnected, oriented towards specific changes, and meet the criteria of specificity, measurability, achievability, relevance, and time-boundness. The next step is to operationalise the community-led local development strategy by translating priorities into concrete measures, each with defined eligible types of operations and applicants, selection criteria, sources and volumes of financing, timelines, expected results, and indicators.

Following public consultation, the community-led local development strategy is submitted to the competent authority for evaluation, competitive selection, and approval. Its implementation encompasses launching calls, receiving and evaluating applications for operational support, selecting operations, supporting beneficiaries, monitoring implementation, and reporting.

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning are cross-cutting and accompany every stage of the cycle. The resulting data are used to determine progress, deviations, and causes of insufficient performance, to support LAG self-assessment, and to adjust the strategy. Thus, completion of one cycle of developing and implementing a community-led local development strategy within LEADER/CLLD creates the information base for the next [7; 10].

The practical implementation of LEADER/CLLD is based on combining strategic planning, territorial diagnosis, partnership interaction, financing of operations, and evaluation of achieved changes. The methodological basis for managing this process is intervention logic, which makes it possible to trace causal links between mobilised resources, activities undertaken, immediate outputs, results, and long-term impacts. A general scheme of the intervention logic in the LEADER/CLLD mechanism is shown in Figure 2.

Resources enable planned activities to be carried out, producing immediate outputs. Use of these outputs by target groups should generate the expected results, and their accumulation over the long term should produce broader territorial changes. For example, financing, staffing, and expert

knowledge are resources; advisory support and applicant training before a support decision, and implementation of operations by beneficiaries after financing is approved, are activities; consultations delivered, operations supported, facilities created, or services introduced are immediate outputs. The creation of enterprises and jobs, income growth, and wider access to services are results, while reduced population outflow, greater territorial resilience, and improved quality of life constitute long-term impacts. Distinguishing among these levels is essential for sound evaluation because the production of an output alone does not guarantee the expected results and long-term impacts [7; 10].

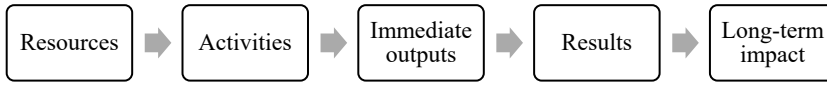


Figure 2. Intervention Logic and the Formation of Results in the LEADER/CLLD Mechanism

Source: compiled by the authors using sources [7; 10]

These considerations make it necessary to establish a monitoring and evaluation system capable of tracking not only funds absorbed and the number of supported operations, but also the results achieved, long-term impacts, and LEADER added value. Such a system should reflect the intervention logic and combine indicators of resources, immediate outputs, results, and impacts.

Resource indicators may include budget volume, number of LAG staff, co-financing volume, and expert resources mobilised. Immediate output indicators include the number of consultations held, applications for support received, operations supported, partnerships created, and services introduced. At result level, it is appropriate to track enterprises and jobs created, service users, income growth, and the participation of young people and women in governance. Impact indicators may describe changes in entrepreneurial activity, household income, access to basic services, migration dynamics, environmental resilience, and trust in local institutions.

At the same time, evaluation of LEADER added value cannot be limited to quantitative indicators. It should be complemented by interviews, surveys

of participants and non-participants, network analysis, case studies, and, where possible, counterfactual comparisons with similar territories where LEADER is not applied. LAG self-assessment should be combined with independent periodic evaluation [8; 10; 17].

Financing effectiveness also depends on the LAG's ability to form not a random collection of grants but an interconnected portfolio of operations aligned with strategic objectives. Thematic calls, preliminary requests for operation ideas, applicant-preparation mechanisms, and a reserve of funds for experimental initiatives may be used for this purpose. Under this approach, small operations can be linked by a common logic and generate a cumulative territorial effect.

The cycle for selecting and implementing operations should begin with territorial animation – theme-based meetings, consultations, partner searches, and preliminary development of operation ideas. This function distinguishes LEADER/CLLD from an ordinary grant competition: the LAG does not merely receive applications for operational support but helps shape operations aligned with the community-led local development strategy. At the same time, advice to potential applicants must be functionally separated from assessment of submitted applications [1; 10; 11].

Selection of operations may include an administrative check, assessment of alignment with the strategy, score-based evaluation, and a decision by a collegial body. The criteria, their weights, and the minimum passing score should be published before the call opens. Minutes should record voting results, recusals, and the rationale for decisions, while the appeal mechanism should address procedural compliance without replacing expert assessment.

Control should be proportionate to the amount of financing and to the complexity and risk of the operation. For small operations, simplified cost options, lump sums, or results-based financing should be provided where permitted by the regulatory rules. A risk-based approach should also prevent duplication of identical checks by the LAG, the managing authority, and the paying agency [8; 10].

Finally, a LAG's capacity to perform these functions depends on stable multiannual financing for animation, advisory support, administration, monitoring, and cooperation. At the same time, management costs should be assessed in relation to territorial coverage, the quality of animation, the performance of the operations portfolio, and the added value created, so

that the financial model does not encourage expansion of the administrative apparatus for its own sake.

Thus, LEADER/CLLD performance is determined not only by the volume of financing mobilised or the number of operations supported, but also by added value created in three interrelated dimensions: stronger social capital, improved local governance, and better results and long-term impacts from implementing the community-led local development strategy. Assessing these effects requires combining quantitative indicators with qualitative methods, conducting comparative analysis with similar territories, and accounting for the influence of other programmes, migration dynamics, economic conditions, and the security situation [8; 10; 17].

At the same time, the common LEADER/CLLD principles are implemented in EU Member States through different organisational and legal models of Local Action Groups. They differ in the legal status of the LAG, the degree of partnership autonomy, the role of public authorities, the professionalisation of management, and the method of integration into the national or regional administrative system. Despite this diversity of forms, the functional core remains common: a defined territory, a balanced partnership, a community-led local development strategy, powers to select operations, and accountability for results. The main models are summarised in Table 1 [11; 14; 15; 17; 20].

Table 1 shows that no organisational and legal model has an absolute advantage, since each embodies a particular balance among autonomy, professional capacity, institutional integration, and local stakeholder participation. The associative model offers high autonomy and openness but requires adequate professional and financial capacity. The flexible territorial-public model, based on existing intermunicipal bodies, natural parks, or development agencies, can draw on established infrastructure but increases the risk of public-sector dominance. The corporate model promotes professional management and financial discipline but may weaken direct local participation. The administratively embedded model facilitates alignment with public procedures while limiting the partnership's institutional autonomy.

Table 1

Main Organisational and Legal Models of Local Action Groups in EU Member States

Model	Examples	Organisational Basis	Advantages and Risks
Associative	Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Germany, Czechia, Slovakia, Romania, Austria, Sweden, Bulgaria	Registered non-profit organisation	High autonomy and open membership; risk of weak professional capacity in small groups
Flexible territorial-public	France, Belgium, Portugal	Association, intermunicipal body, park, or other existing structure	Use of existing capacity; risk of public-sector dominance
Corporate	Ireland, selected regions of Italy and Greece	Company without distributable shareholder profit, consortium, cooperative, or development agency	Professional management and financial discipline; risk of distancing from grassroots participation
Administratively embedded	Selected provinces of the Netherlands	Advisory committee attached to the provincial authority	Direct integration with administrative procedures; lower institutional autonomy

Source: compiled by the authors using sources [11; 14; 15]

Accordingly, Ukraine should borrow not the name of a particular legal form but the functional safeguards of LEADER/CLLD: clearly defined legal personality or a designated legal entity responsible for administrative and financial matters, autonomous partnership governance, non-dominance by any interest group, a professional secretariat, transparent selection of operations, stable financing, and proper accountability. At the initial piloting stage, preference should be given to a standardised non-profit association model, while other legal forms should be considered only after their capacity to provide these safeguards has been assessed [14; 15; 17; 20].

Comparison across EU Member States shows that the architecture of LEADER/CLLD depends substantially on the overall system of territorial governance. In more centralised models, the national authority sets rules,

organises selection of community-led local development strategies, and controls financing, ensuring procedural consistency but risking decisions being detached from territorial context. In federal and decentralised states, framework requirements are set nationally while regions conduct calls, approve community-led local development strategies, and support LAGs. This model better reflects regional characteristics but may produce procedural differences and complicate comparison of results [11; 17].

The experience of Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Romania, and the Baltic States, which underwent administrative transformation and developed local self-government, is particularly relevant for Ukraine. It shows that building a LAG network depends not only on financing but also on preparatory support, the activity of national associations, access to methodological materials, and rule stability. At the same time, delayed calls, the precedence of administrative over functional boundaries, weak youth participation, and formal compliance with the partnership principle demonstrate that rapidly creating many legal entities is not in itself an indicator of system maturity [8; 14; 16; 17].

The experience of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Ireland confirms that LAG functions can be integrated into different legal structures – associations, intermunicipal entities, development agencies, or non-profit companies. Regardless of form, a separate partnership body, transparent voting rules, a professional secretariat, and safeguards against dominance by the host institution remain essential [14; 15; 17].

A combined LEADER/CLLD architecture is appropriate for Ukraine: the national level establishes uniform regulatory requirements and a data system; the regional level provides coordination and technical support; and the LAG retains autonomy in developing the community-led local development strategy and selecting operations. During piloting, a standardised non-profit association model should be used, while other legal forms should be introduced only after their ability to guarantee balanced partnership, professional capacity, transparency, and accountability has been assessed.

3. Developing a National LEADER/CLLD Model in Ukraine

The introduction of LEADER/CLLD in Ukraine should be viewed as the phased development of a multi-level local development system

combining nationwide rules, regional coordination, and the autonomy of territorial partnerships. Its core components are functionally coherent territories, institutionalised LAGs, multi-source financing, professional support, transparent selection procedures, territorial diagnosis, open data, digital monitoring, and adaptation to security and demographic challenges.

An important prerequisite for this model's effectiveness is the active role of territorial communities as the basic actors of local development. Under decentralisation, territorial communities align economic, social, and environmental development priorities, mobilise local resources, involve citizens in decision-making, and form the partnerships required to implement LEADER/CLLD. Research on the role of territorial communities in ensuring sustainable development of Ukraine's agricultural sector confirms that strengthening their institutional capacity, developing partnership interaction, and using local potential effectively are key prerequisites for sustainable rural development [33].

The Strategy for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas in Ukraine until 2030 and its implementation action plan create a policy window for introducing LEADER. Methodological materials, coordination measures, and pilot partnerships launched in 2025–2026 form an initial institutional foundation, but transition to scaling requires a unified national model. Such a model should take account of decentralised governance, differing community capacities, war-related risks, and future integration into the EU Common Agricultural Policy [3; 21; 30; 33].

A functional area comprising several neighbouring territorial communities may provide an optimal basis for piloting. As a preliminary working benchmark for further regulatory and methodological development, it is proposed to combine 3–15 communities with a population of 10,000–150,000, and 30,000–60,000 for most territories. Within the relevant programme system, LAG territories should be defined so that they do not overlap; specific rules for community participation in multi-fund models should be established by the conditions of the relevant programmes. A district may encompass several LAG territories, whereas a region should be regarded as a coordination or delegated-management level rather than the territory of a single LAG [3; 11; 18].

Ukraine's LEADER/CLLD model should combine common baseline rules with territorial adaptation. The typology of territories should serve an

analytical rather than prescriptive function: differences in population density, access to services and markets, employment structure, natural conditions, demographic dynamics, and security risks should influence selection criteria, indicators, and support intensity, but should not predetermine thematic priorities. Specific development directions should be determined by the local partnership on the basis of territorial diagnosis.

Depending on territorial context, community-led local development strategies may combine economic diversification, development of local value chains, improved access to services, digitalisation, intermunicipal and cross-border cooperation, use of natural and cultural potential, and support for social cohesion. Territories facing heightened security or demographic risks require more flexible instruments for preparing and implementing operations and aligning them with recovery programmes.

Determining the optimal population size should not be reduced to a formal threshold. Critical mass means a sufficient number of potential applicants and future service users, together with adequate staffing and financial capacity. A territory that is too small may lack professional capacity and competition among applications for operational support, whereas one that is too large may weaken local identity and accessibility of participation. Territorial assessment should therefore combine population size with travel time to the interaction centre, transport accessibility, digital coverage, and opportunities for remote settlements to participate.

The institutional LEADER/CLLD model should be based on a clear allocation of functions and guarantees of LAG autonomy. The national level establishes the legal, financial, and methodological framework and provides coordination, the data system, monitoring, and interaction with European institutions and donors. The regional level provides organisational and advisory support without interfering in local selection of operations. LAGs develop community-led local development strategies, mobilise partnerships, and select operations through transparent procedures without dominance by any sector or interest group [3; 4; 18; 20].

Until Ukraine gains full access to CAP instruments, the LEADER/CLLD financial model should be multi-source and medium-term, combining state and local budget funds, international technical assistance, donor programmes, and private contributions. Support should cover not only implementation of operations but also preparation of community-

led local development strategies, animation, training, administration, and cooperation; simplified and proportionate procedures should be applied to small operations [18; 19; 20].

LEADER/CLLD should be introduced sequentially: establish the regulatory, institutional, and methodological foundations; pilot the approach in different types of territories with preparatory support; independently evaluate procedures, costs, participation, and initial results; and scale only proven solutions. The digital system should enable submission and processing of applications, tracking of operations, recording of indicators, publication of decisions, and access to open data. At every stage, the national model must be compatible with CLLD requirements, the future paying agency, and the CAP monitoring system [3; 4; 6].

An agro-economic community profile could become an important information tool for strategic planning, monitoring, and evaluation of rural development. It should be regarded as a comprehensive analytical document describing the territory and its socio-demographic potential, economic operators, production, social and engineering infrastructure, employment conditions, land and resource assets, and promising directions for local economic development. Using an agro-economic profile provides a basis for systematic monitoring of economic, land-use, demographic, and logistical processes at the level of territorial communities, supports evidence-based management decisions, enables assessment of human potential and territorial resource endowment, facilitates analysis of agricultural producers, and informs sustainable local development strategies [33].

Frontline, de-occupied, and demographically weakened territories require adapted thresholds and instruments without abandoning the critical-mass principle. Priorities may include restoring local food chains, supporting veterans and internally displaced persons, social services, safe land use, local energy resilience, digital solutions, and preservation of human capital. LEADER does not replace major infrastructure programmes, but it can help ensure their local relevance and community support [13; 18; 19].

Building trust in selection procedures will be crucial in Ukraine. At the initial stage, standard LAG provisions, open matrices of selection criteria and their weights, public minutes, and external oversight of pilot calls should therefore be used. In parallel, a training system should be established for

community, business, and civil-society representatives so that participation in the partnership is not reduced to formal membership.

Within the post-war recovery system, LEADER/CLLD can serve as an intermediate mechanism between individual grants and major infrastructure programmes: coordinating local initiatives, identifying critical gaps in services and economic chains, involving residents in setting priorities, and improving the territorial relevance of investment. The approach does not replace state security and infrastructure programmes but complements them through local coordination and community support [13; 18; 19].

In de-occupied territories, strategic planning should begin with an assessment of security, demographic change, and the condition of housing, infrastructure, land, and local businesses. Pre-war plans cannot automatically form the basis for recovery because the population, labour resources, logistics, and demand have changed. A LAG can organise an updated diagnosis and consultations with local stakeholders on the sequencing of recovery.

Particular emphasis should be placed on operations supporting the economic reintegration of veterans, employment of internally displaced persons, restoration of food security, development of mobile social services, and local energy resilience. Financing should also follow the "build back better" principle by accounting for energy efficiency, accessibility, climate risks, and future maintenance costs.

For territories facing heightened security risks, community-led local development strategies should provide for resilience assessments of operations and LAG business-continuity plans. Resilience assessment should cover dependence on suppliers, budget flexibility, the energy autonomy of critical services, and the capacity to support vulnerable groups. LAG business-continuity plans should define data backup, remote governance procedures, alternative communication channels, and arrangements for adjusting schedules.

LEADER/CLLD should not create a parallel strategic-planning system. Community-led local development strategies should specify and implement national and regional policy objectives at local level while retaining autonomy in choosing how to achieve them. Alignment should be ensured with the Strategy for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas in Ukraine until 2030, the State Strategy for Regional Development,

the Ukraine Plan under the Ukraine Facility, regional strategies, territorial-community strategies, and recovery programmes [18].

To avoid duplication of measures, the community-led local development strategy should include an alignment matrix with higher-level documents, a list of complementary programmes, and a coordination mechanism with their managing bodies. At the same time, the strategy should remain a distinct practical instrument focused on competitive selection and financing of local operations and on measurable results [18; 20].

The pilot phase should be implemented over two to three years in four consecutive stages. The first stage establishes the regulatory, institutional, and methodological foundations: a coordinating body is designated, criteria for territories and LAGs and requirements for community-led local development strategies are approved, and rules for financing, monitoring, and managing conflicts of interest are adopted. The second stage provides for open selection of up to 20 diverse territories in at least six regions. At the third stage, LAGs are established and territorial diagnosis is conducted; at the fourth, community-led local development strategies are developed through broad consultation [19; 20; 21].

Following independent evaluation of the community-led local development strategies, the competent authority decides on their approval and formal recognition of the corresponding LAGs, after which financing agreements are concluded. The implementation stage includes local calls, advice to applicants before support decisions, support for beneficiaries after financing is approved, reporting, and regular analysis of indicators. The final evaluation should identify procedures suitable for scaling, areas for simplification, and a long-term financial model beyond 2028 [19; 20].

The sustainability of a LAG depends on a professional secretariat and access to systematic support. LAG staff should possess competencies in territorial analysis, strategy development, facilitation, financial management, monitoring, communication, and international cooperation. A common framework for training, certification, mentoring, and practical exchange with European LAGs should improve process quality without replacing partnership-based determination of local priorities [14; 19; 20].

A national framework for evaluating LEADER added value should be introduced, covering three interrelated dimensions: stronger social capital, improved local governance, and better results and long-term impacts from

implementing the community-led local development strategy. Publishing data in an open format will enable comparison among LAGs, identification of delays, and dissemination of effective solutions [7; 8; 10].

National coordination should be carried out by the central executive authority responsible for rural-development policy. Its functions should include regulation, organisation of competitions, interaction with the European Commission and donors, coordination of other authorities, monitoring, and evaluation. Regional authorities should provide information, advisory, and organisational support without interfering in local selection of operations [18; 20].

The national LEADER/CLLD network should operate as an open coordination and communication platform for LAGs, public authorities, businesses, civil society, academia, and international partners. Its tasks should include maintaining a LAG register, delivering training, disseminating good practices, providing analytical support, and supporting interterritorial and transnational cooperation. Operational work should be assigned to a dedicated support unit with clearly defined powers, stable financing, an approved annual plan, and public reporting [14; 20].

Monitoring and evaluation should combine tracking quantitative progress with analysing qualitative change. Alongside the number of established LAGs, community-led local development strategies, trained LAG staff, and partnerships, three dimensions of LEADER added value should be assessed: stronger social capital, improved local governance, and better results and long-term impacts from implementing community-led local development strategies. The combined indicators should determine whether the model is ready for further scaling [7; 8; 10; 19; 20; 21; 22].

The LEADER system should function as an environment of continuous learning. Knowledge is created not only through formal research but also through implementing operations, resolving conflicts, adapting calls, and interacting with beneficiaries. LAGs should document practical solutions, reasons for deviations from plans, and lessons that can be shared with other territories [10; 14; 15].

The national network can organise thematic communities of practice, peer reviews of community-led local development strategies, LAG staff placements, a case-study repository, and an annual forum. A peer-to-peer format, in which representatives of one LAG analyse another's processes

using an agreed methodology, is particularly useful. It strengthens trust in evaluation and accelerates the dissemination of innovation.

Cooperation with universities and advisory services should encompass applied research, data preparation, evaluation, and training. At the same time, analytical support should be understandable to practitioners and result in concrete recommendations, templates, or tools.

Small territorial communities are characterised by dense personal and business ties, so conflicts of interest are not exceptional but foreseeable governance risks. An integrity policy should require regular declarations of interests, a register of related parties, recusal procedures, quorum requirements excluding interested members, rotation of evaluators, and the possibility of external review.

Equally important is preventing the dominance of a particular interest group when that group does not formally violate voting rules but determines the agenda and competition criteria. Safeguards include broad membership, open working groups, public consultation on criteria, analysis of the distribution of funds across sectors and settlements, and regular renewal of governing bodies [8; 16].

LEADER communication should explain not only financing opportunities but also the logic of partnership itself. If residents perceive the LAG solely as another grant provider, participation is reduced to submitting applications. The communication strategy should demonstrate the links among diagnosis, priorities, criteria, decisions, and results.

Short reports in plain language should be published regularly, budgets and progress visualised, outreach meetings held in different settlements, reasons for rejecting applications explained, and both successful and problematic cases presented. Open discussion of failures strengthens institutional maturity and trust.

Scaling LEADER/CLLD in Ukraine should be gradual and cover only procedures and institutional solutions whose effectiveness has been confirmed by independent evaluation. National standards should guarantee representation, integrity, openness, monitoring, and audit while allowing territories room to define thematic priorities and animation formats. A decision to expand the programme should be based on the share of LAGs with representative partnerships, approved strategies, stable staffing, timely calls, and demonstrated territorial results [8; 10; 17; 22].

Financial scaling requires a medium-term budget framework, alignment with donor programmes, and preparation for CAP mechanisms. A unified catalogue of financing sources and rules for combining funds should be created so that a community-led local development strategy can draw on different programmes without double-financing the same costs [4; 18; 20].

Thus, developing a national LEADER/CLLD model in Ukraine requires combining functionally coherent territories, autonomous and professionally capable LAGs, multi-source financing, digital support, transparent procedures, and adaptation to security and demographic challenges. Phased piloting, independent evaluation, and scaling only proven solutions should ensure the institutional sustainability of the approach and its alignment with recovery policy and future CAP mechanisms.

CONCLUSIONS

LEADER/CLLD is a comprehensive mechanism for supporting the sustainable development of rural areas because it combines a territorial focus, local participation, multi-sector partnership, strategic planning, financing, and learning. Its advantage lies in its ability to transform fragmented local resources into a coherent portfolio of operations. The conditions for economic, social, environmental, and institutional results emerge when the seven features of the approach operate as an integrated system and the resulting changes are confirmed through monitoring and evaluation.

European experience confirms the diversity of legal forms used by LAGs while demonstrating the continuity of the common LEADER/CLLD principles: a clearly defined territory, non-dominance by any single interest group, a community-led local development strategy, transparent selection of operations, professional capacity, and accountability. Participation alone, however, does not guarantee effectiveness or efficient use of resources. The mechanism's effectiveness must be demonstrated by evidence of goal attainment and impact, while efficiency must be assessed through the relationship between results achieved and costs incurred.

For Ukraine, the model best supported by the analysis is one in which LEADER/CLLD territories comprise several neighbouring communities within a functional area, supported by a national regulatory framework, regional coordination, and an autonomous LAG [3; 18; 20; 33]. In post-war

recovery, such a mechanism can coordinate local solutions, identify gaps in services and economic chains, support the reintegration of veterans and the employment of internally displaced persons, contribute to restoring basic services, and strengthen territorial resilience.

The proposed model should ensure not only the creation of formal institutions but also the launch of a reproducible local development cycle: partnership – territorial diagnosis – community-led local development strategy – competitively selected portfolio of operations – financing – digital monitoring and evaluation – adjustment. Open data and digital support should ensure evidence-based decisions, transparency, and comparability of results. Frontline, de-occupied, and demographically weakened territories require differentiated thresholds and forms of support, resilience assessments for operations, and business continuity plans for LAGs.

Phased piloting, stable financing from a mix of sources, simplified support procedures for small-scale operations, professional staff training, independent evaluation, and integration with future CAP instruments will make it possible to use LEADER/CLLD not as a formal replication of European practice but as an effective mechanism for recovery, European integration, and the long-term viability of rural areas. Scaling should be based on tested procedures and demonstrated territorial results, since disregarding legal, financial, digital, staffing, or partnership prerequisites may reduce the approach to a formal grant scheme without the expected added value.

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