



**European Leader Association  
for Rural Development**  
Brussels, [www.elard.eu](http://www.elard.eu)

**FRENCH  
PRESIDENCY**  
2023-2024



# 2023 ACTIVITY REPORT

**ELARD**

# EDITO

*In the life of each association, there are important moments which mark new stages. 2023 was a year that will count for our federation. Indeed, ELARD has grown, and 2023 was a year of recognition and transition.*



*In the continuation of the dynamics of the federation, and under the leadership of the French Presidency which made it possible to strengthen the technical team and made networking and policy-making a priority, 2023 was a year of recognition. More than ever, ELARD has become an essential contact for European decision-makers on the implementation of European policies in favor of rural areas. The success of the European Leader Congress greatly contributed to this.*

*Throughout the year, we tried to be proactive for the start of this new programming period and multiplied proposals in favor of a simplified and locally anchored rural development policy post 2027.*

*2023 was also a year of transition because the development of our federation imposes new challenges and issues on us that we will have to maintain for the coming years.*

*The richness of the Leader program comes from its methodology but also from the strength of its network.*

*This document is a faithful witness to our mobilization and our actions. You can count on our determination to continue working for this program and continue our commitment to Europe and rural areas.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thibaut Guignard'.

Thibaut Guignard



Head office of the French presidency  
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22150 Plœuc-L'Hermitage

# ELARD in 2023

**32** members (29 European countries and beyond)

+ *Network of Local Action Groups of Serbia (associated member)*

+ *Association of Rural Municipalities of Ukraine (honorary members)*

**1** European LEADER Congress

**3** General Assemblies (1 in Strasbourg)

**6** Council Meetings

**1** **Position** Sigüenza opinion on LEADER and CLLD within European policies post 2027

**1** **Resolution** Brussels Declaration on LEADER and CLLD within European policies post 2027

**58** face-to-face and videoconference meetings

**12** countries in which Elard participated in a meeting

- **Policy & advocacy work**
- **Representation**
- **Networking**
- **Cooperation**
- **Project**
- **Direct financial support from French ministries**

# PRIORITIES

**ELARD's priorities have always been advocating for rural development, promoting LEADER-CLLD methodologies for local development, and being the voice of rural and local Europe in policy making at European level by representing and defending the interests.**

2023 was an important year with the start of the new European programming and the preparation of the 2024 European elections.

The future of LEADER post 2027 and securing its financing were among priorities. That is why we remained proactive and continued to make proposals in favour of a simplified and locally rooted rural development policy post-27, via the different groups in which we are involved. For instance, we have taken an active role within the CAP network's Assembly and its LEADER subgroup, initiated discussions with MEPs and Commissioners to make our voices heard regarding the future of LEADER beyond 2027. We also organised the first European LEADER Congress, and drafted a contribution on added-value for the CAP Evaluation Helpdesk, and published the Brussels Declaration.

Our priorities were also to continue building a real network of LAGs in Europe, but also to strengthen collaboration with non-EU member states while expanding the use of LEADER. For instance, we welcomed the Association of Rural Municipalities of Ukraine as a new honorary member within ELARD.

Of course, it was important for ELARD to keep our projects running but also to continue developing new ones, as well as innovation, while promoting cooperation and good practices. The HUB stayed active and kept being involved in projects.

# ACTIVITIES

Along the year, ELARD has been active in the following fields :



## Policywork:

- Promotion of the philosophy and principles of LEADER-CLLD as development tools in local development
- Recognition of rural society
- Strengthening position of ELARD and LEADER approach improvement
- Raise awareness at the European level
- Support and influence of EU politics in favour of rural development



## Representation

- Voice of LAGs in policymaking at EU level
- Confirmation of ELARD as a reference in the rural development ecosystem by intensified meetings with MEPs and commissioners, and participation in EU working groups and forums;



## Networking

- build & reinforce a real network of Local Action Groups in Europe (and beyond)



## Cooperation

- Promotion of common projects
- Experience sharing
- Guiding and helping on innovation

# POLICY AND ADVOCACY WORK

Networking and policy-making being our priority, we have started making our way into influencing the drafting of the future policies linked to rural development.

Along the year, we continuously asked for :

- **Strengthening the role of LEADER-CLLD in European policies ;**
- **Recognizing the Local Action Groups as essential partners for rural areas and their active involvement in governments and institutions in a more transversal way ;**
- **Developing new financial resources for LEADER-CLLD ;**
- **Simplifying the framework for LEADER-CLLD, and having better working conditions;**
- **Harmonising the rights when preparing new Local Development Strategies.**

During the year, we also defended the **LEADER logo** and advocated for keeping it.

We made contributions to the European Commission on the **added value of LEADER**.

We followed the discussions about the **geography of discontent**, as this theme refers to and influences policies regarding rural areas. We disseminated the article - *Geography of Discontent of "Place that don't matter"*- written on that matter by our Spanish representative Maria Jose Murciano Sánchez.

We clearly expressed our **opinion in Sigüenza** on LEADER and CLLD within European policies post 2027 and published our **Brussels Declaration** at the end of the year.

Both our Opinion and Declaration stated the ELARD position.

## OPINION & POSITION PAPER

**Expressing our opinion, and strengthening our position in written statements play a great role in ELARDs work.**

2023 was marked by the interventions during the two Rural Pact Conferences, which took place in Uppsala (Sweden) and Sigüenza (Spain). During these interventions, ELARD clearly stated its position.

During the year, ELARD also published a press release about the report done by the European Commission report on the European Rural Development LEADER Program which stresses the importance and effectiveness of the implementation of this program in Europe.

ELARD ended 2023 with the Brussels Declaration reaffirming our position and work done along the year.

## SIGÜENZA

High-level conference "*Shaping the future of rural areas*" took place in Sigüenza in September. This event was co-organised by the Spanish Presidency of the Council and the European Commission (DG AGRI). This conference sought to analyze the progress in each Member State regarding to the Rural Pact launched by the EU COM in 2022.

During this event, we welcomed the Rural Pact and the Long Term Vision but strongly highlighted our hope for them to make things change. We recalled the persistent difficulties the rural areas are facing and expressed our needs. ELARD shared its opinion on LEADER and CLLD within European policies post 2027 and called for a simplified framework, better working conditions, and for independent, sufficient and sustainable financial resources. Despite the fact that it had been already recognised, we also asked again to have indicators to quantify the contribution of the Cohesion Policy to rural areas.

ELARD also gave practical policy recommendations/ideas to enable Member States to move forward in implementing the vision and strengthen support for rural areas.





The implementation of LEADER, its additional costs and risks it entails having been questioned by the European Court of Auditors, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development decided to write and to publish a report analyzing the benefits of the approach.

Unsurprisingly, and in relation to the general (top-down) EU funding programs, the benefits and the added-value of LEADER have been highlighted and confirmed by the European Commission in its report.

The document not only stresses the importance and effectiveness of the implementation of this program in Europe, but also that LEADER is not the most expensive measure of the EAFRD.

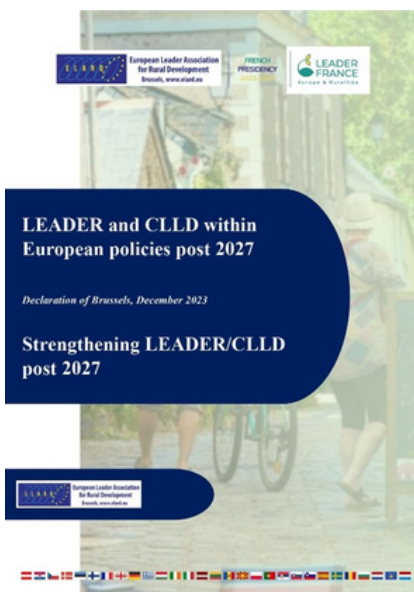
ELARD welcomed this publication in a press release and agreed with DG AGRI's recommendations.

## BRUSSELS DECLARATION

Voted in the hemicycle of the European Parliament in front of the representatives of rural areas and of the European institutions, the Brussels Declaration not only represented the conclusions of the year, but was also meant to strongly reaffirm ELARD position on the European stage. An opportune time a few months before the European elections.

This resolution is based on the following principles: strengthening the role of LEADER-CLLD in European policies, developing new financial resources,

simplifying and facilitating access to funds, and launching now the work on the future of LEADER in order to have time to consider all the proposals.





# INTERNAL MEETINGS

Internally ELARD held at least 11 meetings (Council meetings, General Assemblies and working group on statutes). These internal meetings are guiding the work of the presidency.

## ***General assembly in Strasbourg (March 2023)***

A physical General Assembly was organised in Strasbourg on the 13th & 14th of March. In addition to the internal meeting, discussions with MEPs from the REGI and AGRI Committees and various political parties on the future of LEADER in European Politics were organised.

Roundtables and workshops for the members also took place, focusing on LEADER added-value, the future of the cohesion policy, and ELARD activities. During the latter, it was agreed that ELARD should focus more on communications and cooperation, lobbying activities for LAGS at European Level, and projects.



# REPRESENTATION & EVENTS

As a result of the continuous work done, ELARD representatives get invited a lot to different stakeholders and events. Indeed, ELARD and LEADER-CLLD is an obvious partner to different actors at the European institutions, being asked to be the Voice of rural Europe. This year's objective was also to strengthen the participation of Council members through delegation to represent ELARD at different forums and on specific topics.

- **European Rural Parliament** : member of the ERP steering group. This year was focusing on following-up on the dissemination in Brussels, as well as creating an action plan for the year, compiling all the information related to national issues and national rural parliaments, preparing the mid-term event and the next ERP gathering, strengthening the network.
- **High-level group on the Future of Cohesion Policy** : ELARD was invited as expert to attend a meeting of this high-level group, and to give a presentation and contributions, which enabled to draft a final report with recommendations to shape the future of the Cohesion Policy ensuring its effectiveness to tackle the multiple challenges identified in the 8th Cohesion Report.
- **EU CAP Network** : member of the EU CAP Network steering group, General Assembly and, LEADER and territorial development subgroup. ELARD has also been nominated to represent the LEADER subgroup at the General Assembly as the most inclusive and coherent NGO present in this subgroup. Through this group, ELARD is bringing forward the voice of all of its members directly to the EU table.
- **Civil Dialogue groups** : ELARD is participating to three civil dialogue groups on Quality and Promotion, Climate and environment, CAP Strategic Plans.

# REPRESENTATION & EVENTS

- **Rural Pact Coordination Group** : ELARD is a member of the Rural Pact Coordination Group, which is the governance body of the European Rural Pact. The main work of this group is to steer and develop the Pact, and encourage learning and actions in rural areas.
  - Rural Pact conferences : Participations to the two conferences organised : the first one took place in Uppsala (Sweden), and the second one Sigüenza (Spain) where ELARD clearly stated its position on LEADER and CLLD within European policies post 2027.
- **Thematic Work Group on Added-Value** : member in the stakeholder board of the thematic Working Group on added-value, with two representatives of ELARD. The main work was a contribution for the European Commission (CAP evaluation helpdesk) on LEADER's added value showcasing how LEADER contributes to an area's development aside from its financial contributions.
- **EU/African Summit in Rome (Italy)** : 2 representatives of ELARD were present to explain and promote LEADER, and to answer questions from African countries which aim to implement it.
- **2023 Week of European Regions and Cities** : ELARD organised a workshop entitled « Beating the odds with LEADER -The Visionary Rural Europe ».
- **Events & Forums** : ELARD participated and was represented at diverse events along the year, such as the Civil Society Days in Brussels, the European Start-up Village Forum, the European Congress of Local Governments in Poland, and many more.

# 2023 EUROPEAN LEADER CONGRESS

One of the main objectives of 2023 was to organise the first European LEADER Congress in Brussels, solely dedicated to the Leader programme and community-led local development during which Local Action Groups from all over Europe and beyond could meet, exchange and cooperate.

With the intention to organise this Congress as a political statement, it took place at the heart of the European institutions. Indeed, for the first time since the beginning of the program in 1991, the European representatives of the LEADER program were welcomed in the hemicycle of the European Parliament, the beating heart of European democracy, for a plenary session on the 18th December. On the second day, 19th of December, **16** workshops on various topics were organised in the Committee of the Regions and in the European Economic and Social Committee.

**650** delegates from **36** countries were present, representing about 2600 LEADER Local Action Groups in and beyond Europe, rural networks, representatives of managing authorities, the Committee of the Regions, the European Commission, the European Parliament and of the European Economic and Social Committee.

The main goal of this Congress was to put rural areas at the heart of community policies, and to send a strong message to both the representatives of rural areas and to the European institutions a few months before the European elections.

It was also the opportunity for the various stakeholders present to discuss the challenges of LEADER on a European scale and to exchange best practices from each country, as well as their different difficulties.

The event highlighted the importance of the LEADER program and, more broadly, the role of rural development in Community policies. As part of the consultation on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy post-2027, this congress was an opportunity for the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union to reiterate their support towards rural development actors.



# 2023 EUROPEAN LEADER AWARDS

In November 2023, ELARD, in collaboration with the national federations of LAGs, launched the European LEADER Awards.

This award ceremony aimed to reward the most impactful and innovative European projects of the 2014-2020 programme and highlight concrete achievements funded by the LEADER 2014-2020 programme. Indeed, ELARD wanted to give all European LAGs the opportunity to publicise their achievements in terms of projects that were funded via the LEADER approach in 2014-2020.

More than **115** projects have been submitted to the competition.

The results and the winners were exclusively announced at the Awards Ceremony during the 2023 European LEADER Congress in Brussels, Belgium, on the 18th of December, within the Hemicycle of the European Parliament.

**4** prizes were then awarded :

- The People's Choice Award, thanks to the online vote of the public ;
- The 3 Jury's Choices Award.

It is the project Technology Club Albrechtice nad Orlicí – Tékáčko, from the Czech Republic, who won the People's Choice Award.

The first prize for the Jury's Choices Award is the project Villages of Portugal from Portugal. The second award went to Spain with The Green Experience project, and the third award to France with Accompagnement la mobilité en zone rurale project.

*Thanks to this historic moment, ELARD and thus LEADER & CLLD is more well-known and prominent than ever.*









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