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INTERIM (PROGRESS) EVALUATION OF THE APPLICATION OF THE COMMUNITY-LED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT METHOD

EVALUATION SUMMARY



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EVALUATION PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES AND SUBJECT

The **purpose of the evaluation** is to assess the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of Progress Measure No. 01-004-08-04-01 “Increasing public involvement in resolving local problems” (*hereinafter – the Progress Measure*) of the Public Governance Development Programme 2022–2030 (*hereinafter – the PGDP*). The evaluation also examines the measure's activities and implementation arrangements in contributing to the achievement of Objective 8.4, “To improve the public governance system and increase its efficiency and openness”, and Objective 2.7, “To strengthen social activity and social responsibility, and community spirit, in society”, of the National Progress Plan (*hereinafter – the NPP*).

In pursuit of the main objective of the evaluation, seven **evaluation objectives** are set:

1. to assess the relevance, adequacy and effectiveness of the Progress Measure in achieving Objectives 8.4 and 2.7 of the NPP;
2. to assess the relevance, adequacy, effectiveness and coherence of the Progress Measure’s activities in achieving Objectives 8.4 and 2.7 of the NPP;
3. to assess the relevance, efficiency and sustainability of the CLLD method in achieving Objectives 8.4 and 2.7 of the NPP, and in responding to the needs of local communities, and to put forward proposals for improving the application of the method;
4. to assess the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of urban Local Action Group (*hereinafter – LAG*) Local Development Strategies (*hereinafter – LDS*), and of the projects selected for their implementation, in reducing poverty among residents and addressing problems of exclusion through greater public involvement;
5. to identify existing, and put forward proposals for possible new, directions and activities for future (post-2027) European Union (*hereinafter – EU*) investment aimed at addressing residents’ poverty and exclusion;
6. to assess the interaction of CLLD with other public interventions and its integration into the national public governance system;
7. to analyse published documents on the new financial perspective and to draw conclusions on possible or non-existent points of contact between the LEADER measure implemented in rural areas and the CLLD initiative implemented in urban areas.

The **main subject of the evaluation** is the LDSs prepared and implemented by urban LAGs. These strategies aim to reduce social exclusion, strengthen community spirit and civic engagement, promote employment and social entrepreneurship within communities that helps address the exclusion of vulnerable groups at the local level, and enhance the social integration and entrepreneurship of urban communities while improving the labour market position of their members.

During the 2021–2027 programming period, the CLLD method is implemented through the LDSs prepared by urban LAGs. The urban LAG LDSs and the projects implemented under them are prepared, implemented and administered through the activities of the Progress Measure. These activities not only achieve the objectives of the Progress Measure but also contribute to the implementation of the PGDP and Objectives 8.4 and 2.7 of the NPP.

EVALUATION METHODS

The evaluation applies a **theory-based approach**. To analyse the impact of the LDSs prepared by urban LAGs and the projects implementing them on the social and economic development of local areas and the country as a whole, the evaluation draws on the Community Capitals Framework. This approach is based

on the interpretation of the Community Capitals Framework proposed by M. Roseland et al.¹, which distinguishes eight forms of community capital, thereby extending the classical Community Capitals Framework.

The evaluation included an analysis of primary and secondary sources (including legislation, previous evaluations, policy documents and other relevant materials), statistical and monitoring data (*covering planned investments for the 2021–2027 programming period and actual implementation data as of 31 December 2025*), and the intervention logic. It also comprised questionnaire surveys of representatives of urban LAGs, rural LAGs, municipal administrations and local development project beneficiaries; semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions; roundtable discussions; case studies of selected foreign countries (Slovenia, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands); expert assessment; and a meta-analysis. **The evaluation team sincerely thanks all participants who contributed to the evaluation for their time and for sharing their valuable insights.**

MAIN EVALUATION CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The **interventions envisaged under the Progress Measure** primarily focus on increasing employment, strengthening social inclusion, promoting civil society and civic engagement, and fostering cross-sectoral cooperation. The **Progress Measure seeks to address** insufficient public participation in public governance processes and the low level of civic engagement. **It is designed to respond to the need** to strengthen citizens' motivation to participate in addressing local issues, develop attractive forms of civic participation, and build capacities for civic cooperation. The **Progress Measure is implemented in accordance with the CLLD approach**, whereby local communities themselves identify priority issues and propose solutions to address them. Accordingly, the **activities financed under the Progress Measure** are designed to strengthen cooperation among communities, non-governmental organisations (*hereinafter – NGOs*), businesses and local authorities. They include the preparation, implementation and administration of LDSs, as well as capacity-building for LAGs.

According to the intervention logic, participation in CLLD activities is expected to foster sustained civic engagement and long-term public participation in addressing local issues. Community action and partnerships are expected to strengthen social capital, mutual trust and community cohesion. It is also assumed that some project participants will remain active after project completion by continuing to participate in the labour market or in social integration activities. In this way, the Progress Measure is expected to contribute to the achievement of Objective 8.4 of the NPP and to long-term improvements in indicators of civic engagement, including the target of increasing the proportion of citizens participating in addressing local public affairs to 45% by 2030 and strengthening civic empowerment. The CLLD approach can be regarded as an appropriate instrument for contributing to the achievement of Objective 8.4 of the NPP, as it is fundamentally based on community empowerment, participatory governance and cross-sectoral cooperation. At the same time, it is expected that newly created jobs, social enterprise initiatives and social integration activities will contribute to improving the labour market integration and broader social inclusion of vulnerable groups. However, given the anticipated limited coverage of these groups, this contribution is expected to remain modest. Consequently, the contribution of both the Progress Measure and the CLLD approach to the achievement of the Objective 2.7 of the NPP should be regarded as indirect, operating through strengthened social inclusion, employment and community engagement.

¹ *Toward Sustainable Communities: Solutions for Citizens and Their Governments, Fifth Edition : Solutions for Citizens and Their Governments*, Mark Roseland, Margaret Stout, Maria Spiliotopoulou, 2023.

It should be noted that, **although the Progress Measure's intervention logic assumes that reducing social exclusion and increasing civic engagement are mutually reinforcing processes, in practice these outcomes depend on a wide range of external factors.** Social exclusion, employment opportunities and citizens' participation are influenced by the broader policy environment, including social protection, education, employment, local government and regional development policies. Consequently, the Progress Measure addresses social exclusion and poverty primarily through indirect means, namely by promoting social inclusion, community-based services, employment initiatives and social entrepreneurship. This means that the **Progress Measure creates its greatest added value not as a financial social assistance instrument, but as a model of community governance that strengthens the capacity of local organisations, residents and municipalities to jointly identify local challenges and develop appropriate solutions.** Accordingly, the Progress Measure's contribution should be regarded as important but complementary to the effects of other public interventions, rather than sufficient on its own to achieve significant changes at the national level or fully deliver the relevant NPP objectives.

It should also be noted that, during the programming period under evaluation, reducing social exclusion was consistently identified by both urban LAGs and local development project beneficiaries as one of the principal objectives of the CLLD approach. However, the **evaluation findings suggest that the key actors involved in CLLD implementation do not share a common understanding of the fundamental purpose of urban LAGs and the implementation of LDSs.** In practice, CLLD is more frequently perceived and implemented as a project administration and financing mechanism focused on delivering investments than as a territorial development approach based on participatory governance, local partnerships and citizen engagement. According to LAG representatives, the principal benefits of CLLD lie in strengthening NGO activity, community initiatives and cross-sectoral cooperation. By contrast, considerably less emphasis is placed on its contribution to improving the quality of local governance, strengthening democratic participation, fostering innovation or increasing trust in public institutions. Representatives of municipal administrations broadly confirmed these findings, although they more frequently than LAG representatives emphasised CLLD's contribution to strengthening citizens' trust in local institutions. Furthermore, different institutions and implementing bodies interpret the functions of LAGs, the scope of their responsibilities and the added value they generate in different ways. This conceptual ambiguity has implications for subsequent public policy decisions.

In light of these findings, it is recommended to strengthen strategic dialogue among all stakeholders involved in CLLD implementation in order to reach a common understanding of the institutional role of CLLD and its relationship with other local development structures. This dialogue should address, in particular, the following questions: 1) should CLLD primarily be regarded as a participatory governance and local democracy instrument, or as an administrative mechanism for implementing thematic interventions; 2) how should the role of CLLD (and of LAGs) be distinguished from other institutions, partnerships and community organisations operating within the local government and territorial development system; 3) how does CLLD, as a territorial development approach and an instrument for implementing public policy objectives, relate to the broader local governance and territorial development framework. Once a common strategic understanding of CLLD has been established, it is important to ensure that this understanding is consistently reflected in the legal and regulatory framework and in governance practice.

PREPARATION OF LDSs

Under Activity No. 1 of the Progress Measure, "Application of the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) Method: Support for the Preparation of Local Development Strategies", 44 grant agreements were concluded with LAGs in 2023 to support the preparation of LDSs. The **total value of these projects** amounted to EUR 434,954.61, of which EUR 342,228.44 was financed by the EU. It should be noted that **eight LAGs prepared their LDSs without EU financial support.** According to the LAG survey, this was mainly due to limited awareness of the availability of such support, the use of alternative

funding sources, and other factors, such as insufficient capacities and administrative capabilities of previous LAG management teams.

In most cases, the **preparation of LDSs was based on an analysis of the social and economic situation of the territory and involved the participation of residents and other stakeholders**. The preparation process contributed to strengthening local partnerships by engaging representatives of municipalities, NGOs, local communities, social partners and businesses. Consultations, public events and discussions provided opportunities to identify the most pressing local challenges. **More than 3,000 residents** participated in various stages and formats of the strategy preparation process. Nevertheless, although community involvement was documented in the LDSs, in some cases it primarily served to fulfil procedural requirements, while its influence on the formulation of strategic priorities was not always clearly demonstrated.

The CLLD approach provides flexibility and the potential to respond to the diverse needs of local communities. The LDS preparation process enabled each territory to identify its specific social challenges and select interventions most appropriate to local circumstances. This place-based approach helps avoid the application of uniform solutions across territories with differing social, economic and institutional conditions. **The range of activities planned in the LDSs is sufficiently broad to reflect the multidimensional nature of social exclusion.** Planned interventions include the development of social services, employment promotion, social enterprise initiatives, community-based activities, volunteering, the development of social skills, and various measures to support the integration of vulnerable population groups. This comprehensive mix of interventions allows for a more flexible response to the specific needs of different territories.

However, the **evaluation findings indicate that this potential has only been partially realised in practice**. During the LDS planning stage, the institutional and economic potential of the territories is not assessed in sufficient depth. The situational analyses presented in the LDSs are generally based on official statistical data, but insufficient attention is paid to interpreting these data and analysing the underlying development challenges specific to each territory. In some strategies, target groups and planned interventions were determined not on the basis of an assessment of local needs, but rather by the priorities and eligible activities established under the 2021–2027 EU Funds Investment Programme.

To strengthen the analytical basis of future LDSs, greater emphasis should be placed on interpreting statistical data and demonstrating their relevance to the proposed interventions, rather than on presenting descriptive statistical information alone. It is also recommended to systematically strengthen the capacities of LAGs in the areas of needs assessment, target group identification and intervention logic through practical training, advisory support and methodological guidance.

IMPLEMENTATION OF LDSS

At the time of the evaluation, **all 52 LDSs had entered the implementation phase**, with total allocated funding exceeding EUR 55.3 million (including EUR 38.3 million in EU funding, EUR 8.8 million in national co-financing, EUR 6.5 million from municipal budgets, and EUR 1.6 million in private contributions from project beneficiaries). **The evaluation examined 262 CLLD projects for which grant agreements had been concluded by 31 December 2025 (inclusive)**. It should be noted that, at the time of the evaluation, the **overall implementation progress of the Progress Measure remained limited, as the vast majority of local development projects were still under implementation and calls for proposals for some local development projects had not yet been launched**. Consequently, the evaluation could assess only the initial implementation results.

The 262 local development projects analysed are primarily focused on socio-cultural activities (including arts activities, cultural events, camps, educational excursions and the operation of

multifunctional youth centres), **health promotion** (including various therapeutic activities, healthy lifestyle training and sports events), and **the development of residents' skills**. **Project activities remain broadly similar across territories**: 80% of projects include practical activities and workshops, 61% promote volunteering, 44% organise study visits or camps, and 41% provide training courses or seminars.

The analysis indicates that CLLD projects contribute most significantly to strengthening human and social capital within communities, while placing considerably less emphasis on the development of organisational, cultural and financial capital. Interventions aimed at strengthening natural and political capital are virtually absent. Although the CLLD approach can be successfully applied to strengthen individual forms of community capital, balanced and sustainable community development requires attention to all components of the Community Capitals Framework. It is therefore important for public authorities, urban LAGs and other stakeholders to establish a shared understanding of the primary objectives of the CLLD approach.

Based on the output targets set out in the 52 LDSs, **local development projects implemented under the CLLD approach are expected to engage more than 11,500 residents by 2029, including almost 1,000 individuals experiencing social exclusion or social risk**. It should be noted that output targets under the previous programming period were exceeded several times, suggesting that actual participation is likely to surpass current projections². Nevertheless, **viewed at the national level, the planned number of participants represents less than 2.5% of the population living within the 52 LDS territories, and less than 0.5% of Lithuania's total population**. This indicates that, while **CLLD interventions may generate substantial impacts within specific target territories and communities, their overall reach remains limited at the national level**.

A proportion of local development projects also seek to strengthen local economic activity. According to the LDSs, **by 2029 local development projects are expected to provide support to 245 enterprises, while 142 social enterprises are planned to receive support for their establishment or expansion**. These targets suggest that the CLLD strategies are likely to contribute to strengthening local economic and social resilience. However, **these targets should also be considered in a broader context. Supporting 245 enterprises and 142 social enterprises represents an ambitious objective to significantly expand the social enterprise ecosystem**³. This suggests that the LDSs are intended not only to strengthen existing social enterprises but also to stimulate the creation of new initiatives. At the same time, this ambition raises questions regarding the sector's absorptive capacity, the maturity of the social enterprise ecosystem, and the long-term sustainability of newly established initiatives beyond the funding period.

Implementation of local development projects is constrained by the fact that the **geographical scope of CLLD interventions is largely limited to the administrative boundaries of the LDS territory**. These administrative boundaries do not always reflect actual functional relationships between neighbouring areas, patterns of population mobility, service use or labour market dynamics. Consequently, some residents who are functionally connected to the LDS territory are not eligible to participate in CLLD

² For example, under the Operational Programme (OP), the target value for the indicator "Participants in CLLD project activities (including all target groups)" was 4,174, while the value planned under signed grant agreements increased to 31,803. By the end of 2022, the indicator had already reached 41,872. According to the evaluation Assessment of the Achievement of the Objectives of the 2014–2020 EU Funds Investment Operational Programme, commissioned by the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania and carried out by BGI Consulting.

³ It should be noted that, in 2025, there were only a few dozen officially registered social enterprises in Lithuania (according to the analytical review *Social Enterprise Regulation in Lithuania: Analytical Review and Recommendations* published by the Innovation Agency; available here: https://inovacijuaagentura.lt/site/binaries/content/assets/analitika/verslo-aplinka-new/socialinio-verslo-reglamentavimas_analitine-rekomendacija_ia_2025-m.-1.pdf). By June 2026, however, the number had increased to 323, according to publicly available information published by the Innovation Agency (available here: <https://socialinisverslas.inovacijuaagentura.lt/>).

activities. **Consideration should therefore be given to introducing a functional territorial approach, allowing participation not only by residents officially registered within the LDS territory but also by residents of neighbouring areas where justified by functional territorial linkages.** When preparing future legislation, it is recommended to consider enabling the planning and implementation of LDSs on the basis of functional territorial relationships rather than administrative boundaries alone.

At present, **the greatest impact of local development projects is associated with socio-cultural activities, community-building initiatives and leisure activities, which account for the largest share of the project portfolio.** By contrast, activities aimed at developing vocational skills, supporting labour market integration, promoting social innovation and other interventions capable of generating structural change account for a much smaller share of projects, despite offering the greatest potential to contribute to long-term social and economic transformation. Overall, the current project portfolio appears to be more strongly oriented towards strengthening social inclusion and community engagement than towards achieving lasting structural social and economic change.

The expected sustainability of project results varies considerably across different types of local development projects. The most durable impacts are anticipated from activities involving the introduction of social innovations and the development of infrastructure: **more than 80% of LAGs consider these interventions likely to generate long-term benefits for local communities.** Although such projects represent a relatively small proportion of the overall portfolio, they are expected to deliver the greatest long-term value. By contrast, the impacts of cultural, educational, health promotion, leisure and social integration activities are more frequently regarded as short- or medium-term. For most interventions, the expected duration of impact is estimated at two to five years, suggesting that long-term effects largely depend on whether projects generate lasting structural changes, such as infrastructure, social enterprise models, cooperation networks or other solutions with enduring value. In this regard, the establishment of cooperation networks stands out as one of the most sustainable "soft" interventions, with 60% of LAGs assessing their impact as medium- or long-term.

The evaluation identifies one of the **most significant systemic challenges in CLLD implementation: the sustainability of project results beyond the funding period is not sufficiently ensured.** Although projects create capacities, partnerships and infrastructure with the potential to generate long-term benefits, their continuation is constrained by the interaction of three factors: the limited financial and human resources of project beneficiaries, the absence of a systematic approach to transferring and mainstreaming successful activities, and the lack of a sufficiently clear vision at national and municipal levels regarding the continuation of the social services and initiatives established through the projects. **To ensure that successful local development initiatives continue beyond the end of project funding, it is recommended that the planning of result sustainability become a mandatory component of LDS implementation.** In addition, alternative funding sources for successful initiatives should be systematically identified. During the implementation of LDSs, initiatives generating the greatest social impact should be periodically reviewed, and their long-term financing and continuation assessed well in advance.

ADMINISTRATION OF LDSS

Experience gained during the previous programming period significantly facilitated preparations for the implementation of the LDSs. Nevertheless, LAGs continue to face several systemic challenges, including shortages of human resources, insufficiently clear legal and regulatory provisions, and inadequate preparation time. Although LAGs generally assess the system of training and advisory support positively, approaches to monitoring and administrative processes remain inconsistent across organisations. This indicates a continued need to strengthen methodological support, particularly for LAGs with more limited administrative capacity.

Most LAGs assessed the LDS preparation process as moderately difficult or difficult. The main challenges identified were unclear legal and regulatory requirements, limited human resources and insufficient preparation time. These factors affected both the quality of the strategies and the readiness of LAGs to implement them. The analysis of the LDS selection criteria also revealed shortcomings in methodological consistency. Some criteria overlap, while others place disproportionate emphasis on procedural compliance rather than the strategic quality of the LDS. In addition, several criteria are formulated too broadly, increasing the scope for subjective assessment. Particular attention should be drawn to the allocation of additional points for municipal financial contributions, which may undermine the principle of horizontal partnership by giving a competitive advantage in the selection process to strategies supported by greater financial contributions from a single partner. It is therefore recommended that the selection criteria be reviewed to improve their clarity, consistency and proportionality.

The evaluation findings indicate that the procedures for selecting and appraising local development projects are generally regarded by project beneficiaries as clear and transparent. However, their efficiency is reduced by delays in the provision of information, technical shortcomings of information systems, and amendments to the legal framework introduced during project implementation. Together with limited applicant participation and uncertainty regarding municipal co-financing, these factors have contributed to slower-than-planned implementation of local development projects. This suggests that future efforts should focus primarily on simplifying administrative procedures.

To reduce the administrative burden and ensure the consistent application of legal requirements, it is recommended that national authorities continue developing harmonised methodological guidance, model documents and standardised templates applicable to all LAGs. The project administration process should also be systematically reviewed in accordance with the principle of proportionality, with a view to eliminating unnecessary supporting documentation. In addition, the relationship between the time allocated for the appraisal of local development project applications and the deadlines granted to applicants for addressing identified deficiencies should be reviewed to ensure that both are proportionate and consistently applied. Finally, the INVESTIS information system should be further improved with a stronger focus on user experience, including reducing the risks of data loss and system malfunctions, eliminating duplicate data entry, simplifying navigation and document submission, and enhancing the overall usability and administrative efficiency of the system.

CAPACITY AND COMPETENCIES OF LAGS

The evaluation also shows that the capacities of LAGs are not always sufficient to ensure the consistent and high-quality implementation of LDSs. Although the LAGs themselves assess their capacities positively, the analysis indicates that the greatest challenges remain in the areas of human resources, financial management and project management.

The evaluation findings indicate that maintaining the continuity of LAG operations between programming periods remains one of the most significant vulnerabilities of the system. While LAGs have accumulated substantial experience in administration, project management and community engagement, their operations remain heavily dependent on EU funding. Interruptions between programming periods create a risk of losing qualified staff, accumulated expertise and the trust of local communities.

Importantly, LAGs themselves recognise their potential to assume a broader role in local governance by coordinating local initiatives, strengthening the NGO sector, fostering cooperation networks and representing community interests. However, expanding this role will be difficult in practice without diversifying LAG funding sources and further strengthening their organisational capacities and competencies.

In light of these findings, **it is recommended to strengthen the organisational autonomy and strategic identity of LAGs**, recognising them not only as bodies responsible for administering EU-funded interventions but also as local development organisations capable of independently initiating projects, mobilising partnerships, and participating in national and international programmes. Where new responsibilities are assigned to LAGs or their role is expanded, additional functions should be accompanied by corresponding financial resources, human resources and organisational capacity-building measures. To ensure the continuity of LAG activities between programming periods, efforts should also focus on strengthening their capacity to diversify funding sources and on considering the establishment of a national transitional funding mechanism.

PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN LAGS AND MUNICIPALITIES

The role of municipalities and their financial commitments in implementing LDSs are not regulated in a sufficiently consistent manner. In practice, different funding models are applied, and the level of municipal engagement varies considerably across territories. In addition, **municipal financial contributions remain closely linked to short-term political decisions**, while mechanisms for ensuring long-term financial commitments are not clearly defined from the outset of LDS implementation.

It is therefore recommended to establish a clear and consistent model for municipal financial participation covering the entire LDS implementation period. To ensure stable implementation of LDSs and reduce the risk that project financing becomes dependent on short-term political decisions, municipal financial contributions should, in the next programming period, be established as one of the conditions for financing LDSs. At the same time, support should be provided to standardise municipal practices for participating in the implementation of the CLLD approach.

It should also be noted that municipal participation in LAG partnerships does not always ensure effective institutional cooperation. Although representatives of municipal administrations participate in LAG activities, communication of information back to municipal administrations and political decision-makers is often unsystematic. It is therefore recommended to strengthen both municipal involvement in CLLD implementation and accountability within the partnership framework. This includes systematically communicating the added value generated by CLLD for municipalities—particularly its contribution to the development of local services, social inclusion and territorial cohesion—and strengthening accountability mechanisms for municipal representatives appointed to LAGs by ensuring regular information exchange between LAGs, municipal administrations and political decision-makers.

POTENTIAL NEW DIRECTIONS FOR EU INVESTMENTS

The current geopolitical situation, persistent social exclusion, and low levels of civic engagement cannot be effectively addressed solely through infrastructure development or measures to improve access to public services. These challenges also require interventions based on the CLLD approach. **In the next programming period, it will be important to preserve the flexibility of the CLLD method while directing investments more explicitly towards emerging challenges faced by local communities. Potential new thematic areas for CLLD interventions include:** strengthening the resilience of eastern border regions; promoting environmental awareness and ecological competencies; advancing digital inclusion and the responsible use of artificial intelligence; enhancing community resilience and civil preparedness; using culture as a tool for social inclusion; and strengthening the institutional capacities of local implementing organisations and project applicants.

These priorities could be reflected in the introduction of new types of eligible activities. At the same time, the definition of eligible activities in the next programming period should remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate territory-specific needs, rather than relying on an exhaustive list of predefined interventions, while maintaining a clear thematic focus on strategic priorities. **It is also recommended to adopt a more**

flexible approach to defining the geographical scope of interventions by allowing participation in CLLD activities by individuals living outside the administrative boundaries of the LDS area where functional territorial links can be demonstrated. Such an approach would better reflect the core principle of CLLD by ensuring that interventions respond to actual local needs rather than administrative boundaries.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SYNERGIES BETWEEN CLLD AND LEADER IN THE NEXT PROGRAMMING PERIOD

During the 2021–2027 programming period, **both LEADER and CLLD are based on the same fundamental principles of community-led local development, namely local partnerships, participatory governance and a territorial approach to development. However, the objectives, types of supported activities, target groups, funding sources, administrative arrangements and territorial coverage of the two approaches differ considerably.** LEADER is primarily focused on rural development, whereas the CLLD measure administered by the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) is targeted at urban areas and focuses on social inclusion and employment objectives. Consequently, with the exception of a limited number of smaller municipalities, the two approaches are complementary rather than overlapping.

The changes proposed by the European Commission for the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) could create more favourable conditions for closer coordination between LEADER and CLLD. Greater discretion for Member States in planning interventions, together with the possible harmonisation of planning and administrative rules across different EU funds, could provide opportunities to strengthen national coordination of the two approaches, better align investment priorities, and develop more integrated monitoring systems.

The evaluation examined a range of possible options for closer integration of LEADER and CLLD, including three alternative approaches in each of the following areas: LDS planning, LDS administration, and coordination of the CLLD approach. These alternatives are not mutually exclusive and could be implemented either independently or in combination, depending on the future model adopted for CLLD implementation in Lithuania.

However, the evaluation indicates that there is currently no shared view, either at national or local level, regarding the need for closer integration between LEADER and CLLD or the most appropriate model for achieving it. The results of the focus group discussions and interviews revealed no clear support for more extensive integration among either local communities or the responsible public authorities. One of the principal reasons for this is that the strategic purpose of the CLLD approach has not yet been sufficiently clearly defined at the national level.

In light of these findings, it is recommended to initiate a strategic dialogue on the future relationship between CLLD and LEADER after 2027. The purpose of this dialogue should not be to predetermine a single institutional model, but rather to assess alternative scenarios for cooperation and integration, taking into account their respective advantages, risks and implications for the autonomy of LAGs, the administrative burden associated with implementation, and the preservation of the principles of local partnership.