

Polish Rural Forum

Discussing future rural development policy

Acting in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Polish LAG Network, the Polish Rural Forum organised a conference on the '**LEADER approach in Poland**' that was held in Ossa near Rawa Mazowiecka on 1-2 December 2016. The conference aimed at reviewing the 12 years of implementing LEADER in Poland, discussing the initial experiences of the approach in the 2014-2020 funding period, as well as launching exchanges about the LEADER / CLLD approach after 2020.

Representatives of about 350 Local Action Groups and Fisheries Local Action Groups participated in the event. It was also attended by representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Maritime Economy and Inland Navigation, the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture, regional governments, the Foundation of Assistance Programmes for Agriculture, the Agricultural Advisory Centre and other institutions involved in rural development.

The Polish Rural Forum organised a **discussion panel** on 1 December 2016 to address the challenges emanating from the Cork 2.0 Declaration and the European Rural Parliament Manifesto.

Representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture estimated that Poland was doing quite well in implementing Cork 2.0, although much remains to be achieved as regards green employment, shortening the food distribution chain and innovative initiatives. The implementation of the LEADER approach in Poland is also well perceived in other European countries, although there is a need for LAGs to participate more at the European level. The future of the approach needs to review the efficiency of the multi-fund approach, as well as deciding whether greater rights – and thus also greater responsibility – should be given to the LAGs.

Representatives of the Polish Rural Forum noted that apart from placing greater emphasis on agriculture and forestry, the second Cork Declaration was a statement of continuity, unlike the initial 1996 Declaration. Both documents are written using difficult, expert language, as opposed to the European Rural Manifesto, elaborated in a participative process by the European Rural Parliament.

The Polish Rural Forum also noted that many of the barriers related to implementation are related to the fear of audits and controls. The discussion on implementation needs to include auditors so that they may come to understand the specificities of the approach. There is also a need to identify indicators that would allow for the measurement of its effects.

The Polish Rural Forum encourages active participation in the discussion regarding the future of the agricultural policy after 2020. It is not clear in what form the LEADER approach will be continued; it is possible that it might concentrate on innovative measures. LAGs are not always well perceived, perhaps because they do not all operate to the same standards. The issue is not the amount of funding available, nor whether the multi-fund approach is applied – it is about the way the approach is applied. There is a clear need for lobbying on behalf of the approach in Brussels.

The Polish LAG Network sees value in increased funding, but it would need different principles to be applied. LEADER is a valuable approach to support integrated projects (e.g. closed loop economy) as well as strengthening human capital. The approach further allows for learning how others resolve issues, leading to better quality solutions. The fact that the LEADER approach is positively perceived by increasing numbers of people – the May 2016 European Parliament resolution on territorial instruments was Approved by 85% of those voting.

The discussion among participants looked at ways to increase youth participation in LEADER, with some examples mentioned regarding the inclusion of those as young as 14. While youth learn skills related to public participation, the difficulty lies in finding topics that are likely to engage their attention (such as sport). Other participants noted that some areas of Poland there are no family farmers left, just large-scale farming operations. LAGs play an important role in encouraging entrepreneurship and overcoming the barriers (including of the administrative variety) that entrepreneurs face.

Panel participants: Joanna Gierulska and Paweł Ściański (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development), Urszula Budzich-Tabor and Ryszard Kamiński (Polish Rural Forum), Janusz Bartczak (Polish LAG Network); Andrzej Hałasiewicz, moderator