



## “It is not a matter of continuing LEADER, but of reinventing it”

**Yves Champetier, Board Member of AEIDL & former Team leader of the LEADER Observatory**

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*ARCA has recently published a series of interviews for the 30-year anniversary of the LEADER programme. In these interviews, different experts reflect on the distinctive features of the LEADER programme in the European and Spanish context, building on the Catalan example. They discuss how the LEADER programme has evolved over the last 30 years, and how to ensure its good continuity*

**Yves Champetier was the coordinator of the European LEADER I and LEADER II network from 1992 to 2000. Since then, he has worked in FARNET (network of territories dependent on fisheries and aquaculture), in the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), and implementing similar approaches in Tunisia and Latin America. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the European Association for Information on Local Development (AEIDL).**

**LEADER needs to rejuvenate and reinvent itself for the future.**

**What is your link with the LEADER programme and how do you remember the origins of the LEADER programme?**

I have been involved in local development in rural areas for 45 years. I was engaged in actions that, before LEADER, were harbingers of what should be done to stimulate and support the revival of initiatives in rural areas. All this became possible in the 1980s at the initiative of the European Social Fund, especially in the French Pyrenees, allowing experimentation in the particular dimensions of: support to local initiative,

local partnership, and bottom-up approaches. The cross-border cooperation dimension was also taking its first steps. I remember having taken part in several meetings or training days for “development agents” in Catalonia during those years, as well as in many European exchanges on all these themes.

Over the last 30 years, I have been involved in LEADER in one way or another. The birth of LEADER was on 19 March 1991. It was at the beginning of 1992 that I joined Brussels and AEIDL (European Association for Information on Local Development), which had just been entrusted by the European Commission with the coordination of the European LEADER network. For 8 years, I had the immense opportunity to lead this network, initially composed of 217 territories, and later (LEADER II) of 906. It was a time of effervescence, unparalleled creativity, a “revolution”, as we often say in Spain!

**How has the LEADER programme evolved over the last 30 years?**

LEADER, a symbol of innovation, soon became and remains today, the benchmark for European intervention in local development in rural areas.



The progress made is impressive: from a “Community Initiative” which initially concerned a relatively limited number of territories, just over 200, we have moved on to an approach which covers almost all the rural areas of the Union, around 3 000 and, through a similar approach, almost all the coastal areas (FARNET network), as well as a certain number of urban territories and districts.

Even if it had a relatively modest budget for rural development policy, and of course much more modest than the CAP budget, LEADER maintains a very strong image and I am delighted about that.

Yet LEADER, which is only 30 years old, has in a sense grown old before its time! It has become rigid. The desire to cover all territories, whether or not the conditions are right, and administrative constraints, which have increased from one programming period to the next, hamper the capacity for initiative and innovation. Bureaucratic procedures take precedence over the project!

However, I do not underestimate the efforts here and there, particularly in Catalonia, to make the most of LEADER's potential. For example, the emphasis placed in your region on the need for cooperation between territories is an important benefit that should

be adopted in many regions in Europe.

### What are the distinctive features that the LEADER programme brings to rural development?

It was collectively with the local groups that we were best able to identify the ingredients of LEADER's success. The seven “specificities”, the “distinctive features” of the LEADER approach in comparison with other policies, well known to all LEADER teams, were highlighted:

1. territorial approach;
2. bottom-up approach;
3. public-private partnership, brought together in a local action group (LAG), with the qualification that no type of partner (public, private, associative) can be in the majority;
4. integrated multi-sectoral approach;
5. innovation;
6. networking and cooperation between territories;
7. local management of funding. This specificity, undoubtedly the most worrying for many Member States, was very quickly forgotten. However, it had played an important role in the revival of the initiatives

that characterised the first years of the programme.

Let us recall the desire, expressed in 1996 in the first Cork declaration, to generalise this approach in the new rural policies. We have come a long way, but we are far, far, far from the will expressed at the time.

### What would you propose for the good continuity of the LEADER programme?

I do not like the term “good continuity” at all! It is not a question of continuing LEADER, but it is a question of reinventing it!

It is a question of reinventing it because the world has changed, it is deeply shaken by multiple crises that intersect and add up: the COVID crisis that has weakened many companies, but above all many populations, the climate crisis, the accelerated deterioration of biodiversity, huge social and territorial fractures, and worrying democratic crises.

The political framework is deeply shaken. Europe has indeed been able to react, belatedly: it is still very fragile, but the Green Pact, the recently published long-term vision for rural areas, the impressive stimulus plans are undoubtedly a game-changer and open another stage in the construction of Europe. At last, Spain is mobilising to face the demographic challenges in rural areas. And Catalonia will be one of the first regions to have a real rural agenda.

Will all these policies be up to the challenges? Will there be enough leadership and political will at the time of implementation to respect the commitments?

Will the new CAP (more than 30% of the European budget!) contribute to the Green Pact? Or, on the contrary, will we have in 6 or 7 years a new report from the European Court of Auditors to denounce its too weak impact? Will there finally be a real European rural agenda or pact?

In any case, nothing will be possible if the citizens are not mobilised, and LEADER can be the means through which that happens!

For this, LEADER needs a thermal cure to reinvent itself, even though it is only 30 years old! This cure is not only needed for the local action groups, their teams, their boards of directors, but also and above all, for the management authorities and the audits, be they regional, national or European. Fortunately, in Catalonia, you have excellent spas to help recover or reinforce the tone, the dynamism, the flexibility, the openness.

Do not make LEADER a one-stop shop; the more traditional administrations can take care of this.

LEADER must be a “hub”, a “fab-lab”, a “Bauhaus”, a place of daily democracy where all those who act, imagine and build the future meet, cooperate, and create synergies. It should be for those that are experimenting with new activities, services, ways of living, creating, working. A reinvented LEADER also means contributing to rebuilding the European project with the citizens, from the territories, around the values of openness, inclusion, solidarity, ecology... From Catalonia and Spain, inspire us!

The new European Bauhaus is a creative and interdisciplinary initiative that creates a meeting space for designing future lifestyles, at the crossroads of art, culture, social inclusion, science and technology. It brings the Green Pact closer to our living spaces and calls for a collective effort to imagine and build a sustainable, inclusive and aesthetic future, for the heart and the mind.

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