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Shaping LEADER added value: insights from the fifth Good Practice Workshop

The Good Practice Workshop on ‘How to assess LEADER added value’, organised by the EU CAP Network on 23-24 November 2023 in Luxembourg, dived into good practices and lessons learnt from the 2014-2022 CAP programming period and offered insights into the future trajectory of LEADER in the new CAP framework.

Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies, and Local Action Group (LAG) representatives showed great interest in the meeting, which was facilitated by the European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP. In total, 86 participants from 26 Member States participated in engaging debates and insightful presentations.



Mr. Serrano-Padial from the European Commission (DG AGRI) opened the discussion, setting the context and highlighting the need to demonstrate LEADER added value, which was scrutinised in a [report](#) by the European Court of Auditors. He shared various challenges for evaluating LEADER added value, such as the complexity and wide range of intervention logics, the low uptake to capture its effects or the quantification of LEADER added value.

On the first day, several studies were presented to the participants, including one examining [the costs and benefits of LEADER implementation](#). In addition, evaluations from Austria, Finland, Lithuania and Sweden provided insights into the lessons learned and methodological approaches employed. The second day of the workshop focused on the evolving landscape of LEADER evaluations in the current CAP programming period, with a spotlight on the refinement of indicators.

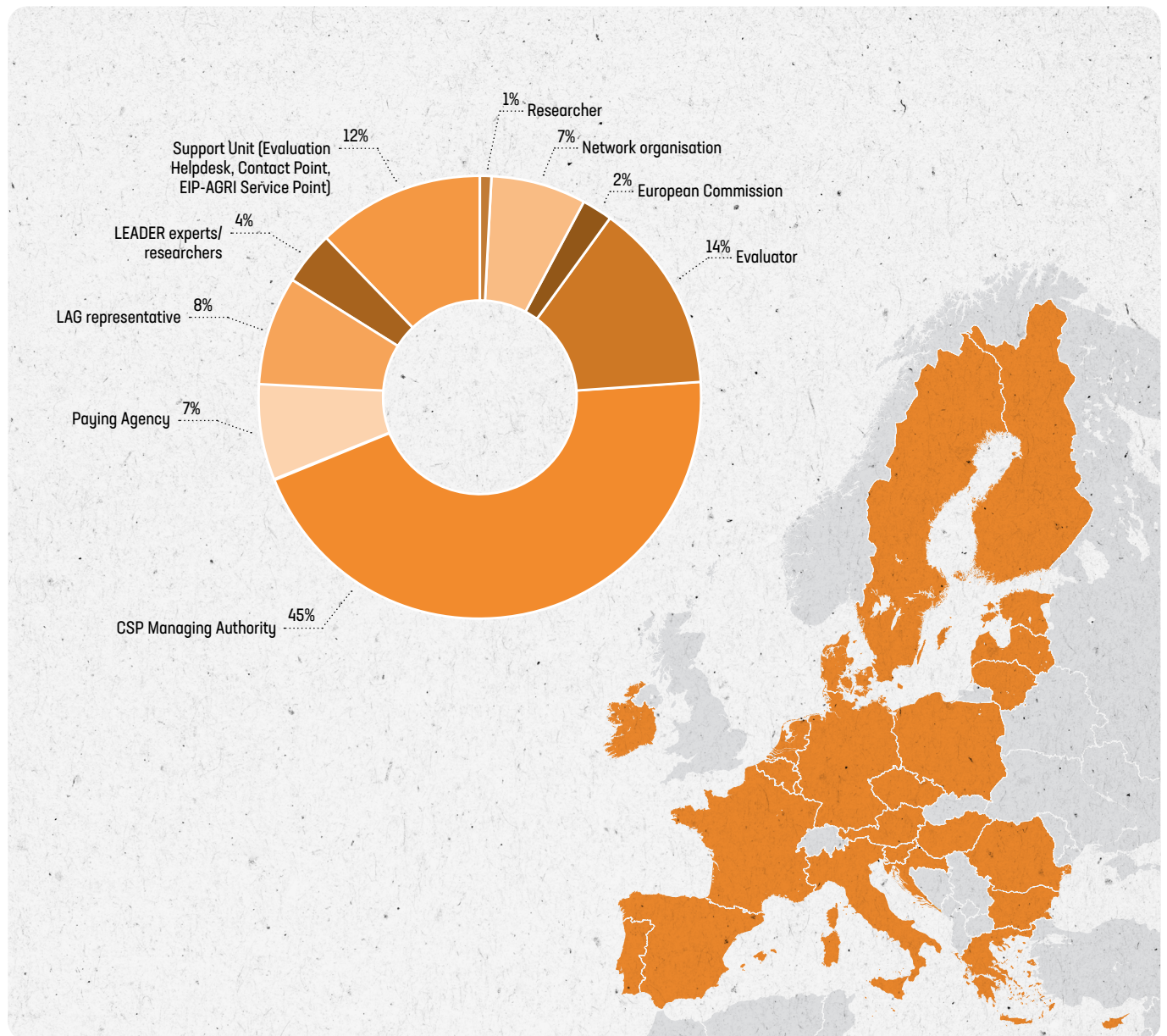


The Good Practice Workshop highlighted several key messages crucial for assessing LEADER added value effectively. It first emphasised the significance of understanding key concepts like social capital, governance and enhanced results while constructing logical models to illustrate the connections between various LEADER activities and the realisation of added value elements. Secondly, the workshop underscored the necessity of identifying factors of success contributing to added value and devising metrics - considering the intangible nature of many features. Finally, it recognised that LAGs bear the primary responsibility for data collection and stressed the importance of simplification, objectivity and continuity of data selection to lessen their workload.

Check out the full report of the Good Practise workshop on [‘How to assess LEADER added value’](#).



Participants to the Good Practice Workshop per role and Member States





An evaluation support study on LEADER's costs and benefits reveals added value insights

Researchers found that investing a higher share of resources in the organisational capacity of Local Action Groups improved multi-level governance, the quality of funded projects, and the ability to improve social capital.

LEADER is primarily aimed at stimulating the local development of rural areas by mobilising and developing local communities through public-private partnerships (Local Action Groups (LAGs)). Displaying the added value of LEADER is high on the European Commission's agenda, but only a few evaluations have focused on this. In July 2022, the European Court of Auditors published a [report](#) maintaining insufficient evidence of the benefits of the LEADER approach outweighing its higher costs, calling for a comprehensive evaluation.

The "[Evaluation support study of the costs and benefits of LEADER](#)" was carried out by a team of European LEADER experts between September 2022 and June 2023, covering the whole EU-27 (and the UK until the end of 2020) for the 2014-2022 Rural Development Programme (RDP) period.

The study's objective was to assess LEADER's added value and how much its benefits justify the additional costs of implementing the LEADER approach. It investigated the extent to which LEADER projects generate additional benefits compared to similar non-LEADER projects and studied the relationship between them and the specific costs sustained throughout LEADER implementation.

While it was less difficult to quantify LEADER results, e.g. in terms of project sustainability, innovativeness and involvement of new project promoters, assessing the less tangible benefits of LEADER related to governance and social capital represented a challenge for the study.



"The study team faced further challenges, relating to the availability of sufficiently detailed information on administrative costs and to the limited possibility of comparing LEADER projects with similar non-LEADER projects".

CARLOTTA VALLI

Study coordinator from the Evaluation Helpdesk

To alleviate problems and limitations, the study used data from various sources. Besides published data from official sources, a range of primary data was collected in the field through an EU-wide survey of Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies, followed by interviews with LEADER experts (e.g. National Rural Networks) and at the level of LAG areas, captured in 13 case studies in different EU regions through in-depth interviews and focus groups.



Overall, the findings confirm the value of LEADER operating at the local level since RDP M19 LEADER does not necessarily entail higher transaction costs than other RDP measures, such as M6, M7 and M16. According to the analysis, the most specific costs of LEADER are those borne by LAGs, with administrative costs representing the largest share of such costs. It is however important to highlight that the largest part of LEADER specific costs is used to directly support participation and networking for local actors and beneficiaries. In this sense, such costs represent an investment of resources for the purpose of generating added value in terms of improved social capital, creation of networks and civic engagement.

Overall, the implementation of LEADER/CLLD has allowed the establishment of an effective multi-level governance system between Managing Authorities, Paying Agencies and LAGs, facilitating the smooth implementation of LEADER. Results suggest that higher costs of LEADER are justified as they ensure broad participation of the local population in governance systems, although more could be done to ensure participation of young people and women. Better coordination between different levels of governance and quality of interactions between relevant institutions is ensured by the presence of specific skills in LAG staff (e.g. animation and communication), the size of LAG staff (in relation to available budget) and time dedicated by the board

of directors for decision-making. Findings confirm LAGs' ability to support rural populations beyond what is achieved through nationally administered schemes.

LAGs can improve social capital within LAGs, their local LEADER areas and among LEADER areas within Member States and beyond. **Thanks to the activities undertaken by LAGs and their networks, the level of trust towards LAGs increases.** LAGs can activate social capital and establish networks beyond project support, inside and outside LAG areas. In particular, the time LAGs dedicate to networking contributes to improved mutual learning, a quintessential pre-condition for local development to occur and improve over time.

The findings also show that the more effectively a LAG promotes collaboration among local actors to reinforce their production and assets, the better the project performs and delivers results compared to similar non-LEADER projects. Such benefits appear to justify higher costs in animation, in the time dedicated by LAGs for decision-making, and costs associated with employing specific professional skills in the LAG - dedicated to animation, communication, cooperation coordination, and monitoring and evaluation.

Animation, networking, and technical assistance provided by LAGs are also effective in supporting new beneficiaries in obtaining LEADER financing and improving the quality of funded projects and the performance of local enterprises. Moreover, thanks to these LAG activities and despite the small scale and limited financial resources, LEADER projects are more effective than similar projects at the RDP level in terms of public expenditure needed to create new jobs.

The Evaluation Helpdesk concluded that the main challenges for LAGs are to improve their monitoring systems further, ensure the collection of needed data, and enhance their evaluation capacity to utilise the achieved results and the added value created by their local strategies.





SPOTLIGHT

How to assess LEADER added value and demonstrate the benefits of its approach: guidelines to support Member States

New non-binding guidelines will show options for evaluating LEADER with a list of factors of success and indicators.

LEADER has been an innovative and essential part of EU rural development policy for over three decades. With each programming period, LEADER has expanded its scope and tools to empower local communities and drive sustainable development. However, effectively assessing its added value has remained an ongoing challenge, but new non-binding guidelines have been developed to help Member States face this challenge. Ahead of their publication, Valdis Kudins, from the European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP, presented the guidelines 'Assessing the added value of LEADER' during the fifth Good Practice Workshop in Luxembourg in November 2023. He also gathered feedback from stakeholders in March 2024 during the LEADER sub-group meeting in Brussels and the third meeting of National CAP Networks in Denmark.

The added value of LEADER refers to the benefits derived from effectively implementing the LEADER method compared to the potential benefits that would have been achieved without it. These benefits manifest as improved social capital, enhanced governance, and improved results and impacts of programme/strategy implementation.

Recognising the importance of demonstrating LEADER added value, Member States are expected to assess it during the

implementation of their CAP Strategic Plans for 2023-2027. However, this is a significant challenge particularly when dealing with intangible benefits, like assessing the skills of individuals, networking and collective learning.

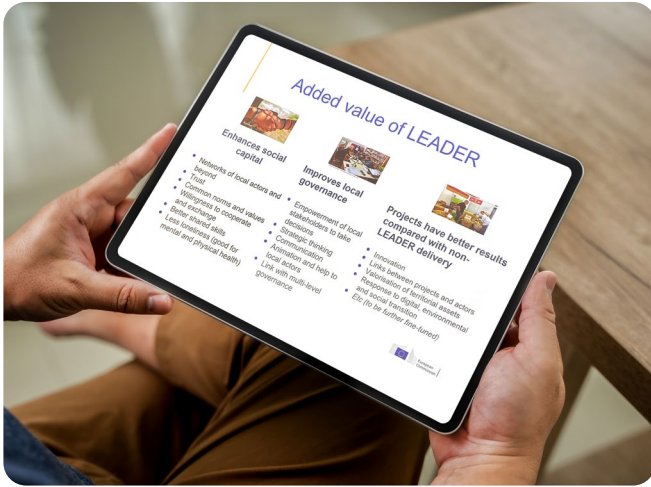
The guidelines are the outcomes of the Thematic Working Group (TWG) established in April 2023 aiming to address these challenges by:

- > operationalising the concept of the LEADER added value;
- > designing evaluation framework examples of LEADER added value for the programming period 2023-2027.

The work of the TWG on '[Assessing the added value of LEADER](#)' was organised in a participatory manner with documents drafted by evaluation experts actively discussed among stakeholders in series of meetings. More than 90 stakeholders representing LAGs, LAG networks, National Networks, Managing Authorities, evaluators, researchers and the Commission participated in several events and provided their feedback.

Discussions were also particularly useful in creating a common understanding of operationalising the concept of LEADER added value and capturing it in an evaluation framework. It was also very useful to balance various needs and expectations of stakeholders on what the evaluations can do. The 2017 guidelines '[Evaluation of LEADER/CLLD](#)' served as a foundational resource to provide a

comprehensive understanding of the concept of LEADER added value. The concept was further detailed with input from the [support study of the costs and benefits of LEADER implementation](#), as well as from practical experiences of LEADER evaluations in several Member States.



The guidelines on the evaluation of LEADER added value is a non-binding document. It offers options for evaluating LEADER added value by means of a list of factors of success and indicators, which Member States can choose and/or adapt according to their context and evaluation needs.




To meet the need of operationalising LEADER added value, the guidelines propose several key elements to assess its three



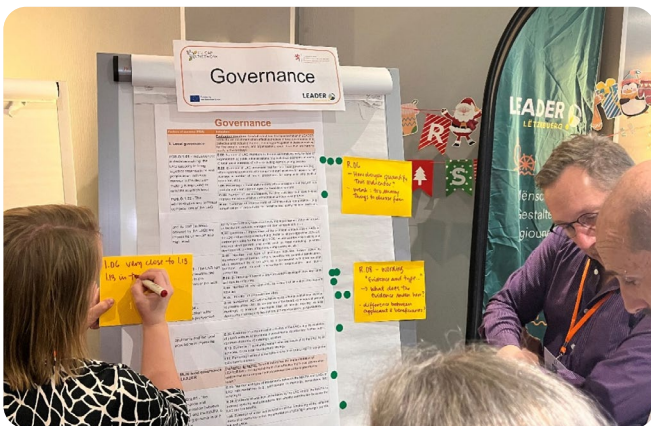
components, as well as possible factors of success. The key elements focus on important aspects when analysing LEADER added value. For example, networks play a significant role in improving social capital. The factors of success linked to networks further specify the expected change/success, such as whether the size and diversity of networks and quality of interactions are improving.



The table below presents possible factors of success for each key element to assess.

COMPONENT	KEY ELEMENTS TO ASSESS	FACTORS OF SUCCESS
<p>Improved social capital</p> 	<p>Networks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ The size and diversity of the network and the quality of interactions within the LAG are improving or remaining high. ➢ The social interactions in the LAG area (but outside the LAG itself) have improved or remained at a high level thanks to LEADER. ➢ The LAG has developed or maintained networking with relevant partners outside the LAG area.
	<p>Mutual support and trust</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ The level of mutual support and trust within the LAG and the local community in the LAG area has increased or remains high.
	<p>Shared mental models, values and beliefs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Shared vision for the LAG area, territorial identities, common objectives, values and beliefs are promoted by LEADER within and in the LAG area.
<p>Improved governance</p> 	<p>Local governance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Inclusiveness in decision making: the LAG's capacity to bring organisations and people together in decision-making is improving or remaining at a high level. ➢ The administrative and technical skills of the LAG and its staff (in areas covered by the Local Development Strategy (LDS)) are improving or remain high. ➢ The LAG has improved animation activities and support to actual and potential beneficiaries. ➢ Communication within LAGs with prospective applicants and the local community is improving.
	<p>Multi-level governance of LEADER</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ The coordination and communication between the LAG and other levels of governance is improving or remains at a high level.
<p>Enhanced results and impacts</p> 	<p>Increased leverage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ The LDS stimulated further investment or activities in the LAG area to achieve its strategic objectives that LEADER did not directly fund. ➢ LEADER interventions made it possible to identify and motivate new project promoters.
	<p>Projects well-tailored to the needs of the territory</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ LEADER meets specific local needs and territorial objectives by enabling projects by a variety of promoter types that valorise specific territorial assets and identities.
	<p>Projects with innovative elements at a local level</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ LEADER fosters introduction/diffusion of innovations in the local context.
	<p>Sustainable projects</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ LEADER projects produce sustainable results.
<p>Projects that promote links between actors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Collaborative projects are established or sustained. 	

For each factor of success proposed in the evaluation framework, the reader will find a set of indicators that can provide quantitative evidence justifying the expected success. For example, to assess the improvements or changes in terms of size and diversity of the network and quality of interactions within the LAG, the guidelines propose the following indicators: (Output) Number of LAG members by type of organisation i.e. public administrations, private local economic interests, social local interests, and other; (Result) Network diversity index of the LAG membership (as a proxy of structural social capital of the LAG); (Impact) LAG members that consider a valuable culture of cooperation developed between them. All these indicators will provide evidence of networking as one of the elements of social capital.



An indicator fiche is provided for each indicator that is included in the example of the evaluation framework. Each fiche contains a definition and aim of the respective indicator. It also identifies the unit of measurement and data sources. For example, for many indicators it is proposed to use the variables of the data for monitoring and evaluation (DME) defined in Annex VII of [Regulation \(EU\) 2022/1475](#), which all Member States/LAGs will report on. Some indicators require the collection of primary data via surveys, focus groups and interviews. To establish points of comparison and a

baseline, the indicator fiches suggest the time and frequency of data collection. For each indicator, the methodology, approach, or formula for data calculation, along with other comments and possible caveats, is also provided.

Given the varied approaches to LEADER implementation across Member States, it is inevitable that evaluation frameworks for assessing LEADER added value will also vary. Consequently, these guidelines aim to offer a wide-ranging list of elements and indicators. This approach empowers evaluation stakeholders to select and adapt elements according to their specific capacities and contexts. To support familiarisation of these guidelines and to facilitate their application in practice, the EU CAP Network, supported by the Evaluation Helpdesk, offers capacity building events in Member States.

The full document of the guidelines 'Assessing the added value of LEADER' will be available on the [EU CAP Network's publications database](#).

Evaluation reading corner

- > [The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward](#) - European Commission
- > [CAP Evaluation Expert Insights - LEADER](#) - EU CAP Network
- > [Towards EU climate neutrality: progress, policy gaps and opportunities](#) - European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change
- > [Economic enabling conditions for scaling of Nature Based Solutions](#) - European Environment Agency
- > [Applying a Human Rights and Gender Equality Lens to the OECD Evaluation Criteria](#) - OECD





SHOWCASE

Research shows how to measure social capital at the LAG level

Elena Pisani is an associate professor at the land, environment, agriculture and forestry department at Padova University with extensive experience in international, national and regional research projects. We asked her a few questions about her studies on the role of social capital and local governance in LEADER-CLLD.



A possible indicator for structural social capital: Network Diversity Index of the LAG membership

Component	Improved social capital
Key element to assess	L Networks
Evaluation question	To what extent does LEADER contribute to quality interactions and networking among all actors?
Factor of success	FOCUS: The size of the network and quality of interactions within the LAG is improving or remains at a high level.
/ brief description	O/O: Number of LAG members broken down by type of organisation, public administrations, private local economic interests, social local interests, etc.
Outputs (indicators)	
/ Data sources	(Data source: Data for Monitoring and Evaluation (DME). Variables L006 to L004. Driver V0 to the regulation (EU No 1303/2013))
Results (indicators)	ROI: Network diversity index of the LAG membership (as a proxy of structural social capital of the LAG)
/ Data sources	(Data source: focus groups and administrative records of the LAG)
Impacts (indicators)	ROI: Stakeholders that consider a quality cooperative culture has developed between LAG members in frequent exchanges of information, frequent meetings, good relationship develops.
/ Data sources	(Data source: Interviews, surveys)

How can social capital be defined at the LAG level?

By developing a Local Development Strategy, LAGs promote horizontal and vertical relations or, in other words, networks of structural social capital and thanks to the bottom-up approach. Moreover, the development of the Local Development Strategy is based on common meanings and understandings that are related to social norms, values and attitudes shared by members and beneficiaries. Additionally, the day-to-day activity of the LAG is based on participatory approaches and consultation processes

that require sharing values and common visions, enabling the participation of local actors in the implementation of the Local Development Strategy. Investment in social capital promotes innovation and cooperation, which are building blocks of the LEADER approach.

Improved social capital in LEADER includes networks, mutual trust, shared mental models and beliefs that facilitate the quality of collaboration and cooperation within and among LEADER areas.

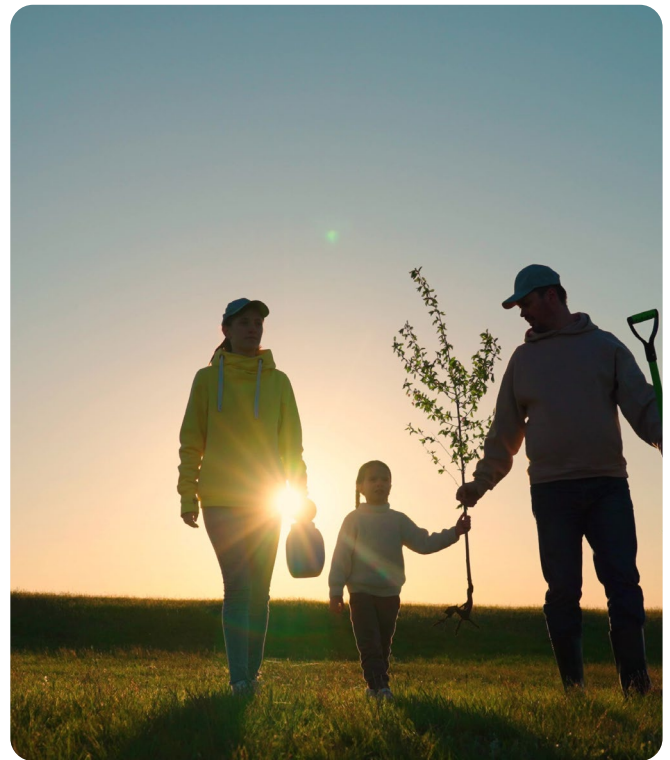


What is your advice for assessing LEADER's social value?

It is possible to measure social capital. Historically, social capital has been analysed via qualitative information. We now know that social capital can be measured also with quantitative indicators, and not only on a qualitative base. The experience realised by a research team of the department of land, environment, agriculture and forestry at Padova University, with the strict collaboration of the LAG Prealpi and Dolomiti, has been really useful to help understand [how to measure social capital in a real case](#). We have now at our disposal different instruments and tools that can be used for this purpose at the LAG level (mainly) but also at the Corporate Social Responsibility level. Nevertheless, the qualitative data can help in interpreting better the quantitative results or in those LAGs where the monitoring and evaluation system is well-structured.

What is the 'Network Diversity Index' (NDI)?

It is a proxy in order to measure a specific type of social capital which is called structural social capital. Structural social capital represents the tangible side of social capital. Specifically in a LAG, it associates with relations across the network of private-public actors, supported by rules and procedures, which facilitate collective action of the organisation. The NDI captures the level of diversity inside a network or the heterogeneity of the categories the actors belong to. According to the social capital theory, a wider variety within the group and among the groups could provide access to useful resources which are not otherwise available to the group. This aspect of LAGs also refers to the partnership principles, the equilibrium in the representation, the opening to diversity of categories and the democratic functioning of the group. The index varies in the range of 0 to 1 assuming the value 0 (no diversity) when there is only one category in the group and the value 1 (maximum diversity) when all the categories are represented in the same measure in the group.



**GET INVOLVED**

Know any interesting evaluation projects, events, publications or other initiatives?


CAP Evaluation News welcomes any contribution from its readers – get in touch by emailing evaluation@eucapnetwork.eu

Events calendar

Below is a list of recent and upcoming events related to evaluation methods and processes for assessing the CAP.


-  14-17 May 2024 – FAO – [34th session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe \(ERC34\)](#)
-  3-7 June 2024 – [Global Evaluation Initiative \(GEI\)](#) – [gLOCAL Evaluation Week 2024](#)
-  11-13 June 2024 – EU CAP Network – [Young LEADER Forum](#)
-  20-21 June 2024 – AIEAA – [The social sustainability of European agriculture facing old and new challenges. Issues, methods and policies](#)
-  21-23 June 2024 – Science, Technology and Engineering Conferences – [4th Agriculture Global Conference](#)
-  8-12 July 2024 – Eval4action.org – [Youth in Evaluation Week 2024](#)
-  23-27 September 2024 – 15th European Evaluation Biennale Conference – [Better Together: Collaborative thought and action for better evaluation](#)

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