

Young LEADER Forum

Seminar

The Young LEADER Forum, organised in close cooperation with the European Commission and [Finnish National Network](#), was the first opportunity for the EU CAP Network to bring together motivated young people from rural areas and people connected with [LEADER](#) at local level, together with organisations and administrations from regional, national and EU levels.

Introduction



The event offered an opportunity to highlight the added value of youth engagement and empowerment in the implementation of the LEADER approach. It also enabled the voices of young people to be amplified through sharing their ideas to ensure that their contributions are valued and will be incorporated into the changes needed in their rural areas.

The key characteristic of the Young LEADER Forum was its participatory nature - Forum activities were co-led by the young participants who were actively involved in the facilitation of group discussions, reporting, team navigation in an exciting orienteering session, and communicating event outcomes.

Opening session



The intensive two-day programme was informally opened on the evening of the participants' arrival. The Finnish hosts prepared a networking dinner with the possibility to meet Finnish Local Action Groups (LAGs) from the area and organised a task-card game. In parallel, a transnational cooperation (TNC) corner welcomed participants interested in finding a TNC partner, provided information on EU CAP Network support to TNC, and offered a space for participants for informal discussions on TNC.

The formal opening of the Forum on Wednesday morning 12 June included welcome messages, followed by inspiring insights in the involvement of young people in LEADER. After an introduction to the day and a short energiser about who is in the room, participants watched a pre-recorded [video message](#) by [Sari Essayah](#), the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry. Sari stressed the need for active young people who participate in the development of their regions and rural areas. She also pointed out that LEADER / Community Led Local Development approach offers diverse opportunities for young people to participate in different activities, while their ideas and visions are

Event Information

Date: 12-13 June 2024

Location: Vierumäki, Finland (and field visits in surrounding areas)

Organisers: The event was co-organised by the European Commission, EU CAP Network and the Finnish National Network.

Participants: 193 participants from 33 countries (26 EU Member States, 7 non-EU countries- Albania, Montenegro, Moldova, Turkey, Georgia, North Macedonia and Serbia). Participants were mainly young people between 18 to 35 years old, with the majority younger than 30 years, but also expert representatives from Managing Authorities, National Networks, LAG Networks, Local Action Groups, European organisations and the European Commission.

Outcomes: Plenary and group discussions on youth involvement in the implementation of the LEADER approach, dynamic activities on how to foster an International Young LEADER Community which resulted in an announcement of such a community by ELARD and field trips to LEADER projects in the rural area focused on youth, with diverse networking possibilities.

Web page: https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/events/young-leader-forum_en

a superpower for transforming challenges into opportunities. She also made a point that more senior participants should believe in young people, listen to them and extend their possibilities to engage in local development.



Welcoming words given by [Maria Gafo-Gomez-Zamalloa](#), Deputy Head of the Social Sustainability Unit of DG AGRI/European Commission, stressed the importance of youth involvement in rural development, especially considering negative demographic trends and the increasing number of young people leaving rural areas. She also highlighted that on average, only 9% of young people participate in LAG decision making bodies, with considerable variation among EU Member States. She flagged that young people, so called 'millennials' and 'generation Z', are more aware of the importance of environment protection and are the first digital generations. Maria invited young people to become ambassadors of their rural areas and encouraged their participation in their rural communities.



Riina Nokelainen, a youth activator from the Finnish LAG Etelä-Karjalan Kärki-LEADER, introduced the Finnish 'Youth LEADER' approach. There are over 31 LAGs in Finland that offer youth LEADER action, either in the form of dedicated funding or through youth activities. The Young LEADER Fund has been functioning since 2010 and its aim is to support young people's own project ideas. Concrete examples of these youth-led activities include an escape room, cultural events, sport equipment, advertising and theatre. In addition to the fund, 'youth action groups' are active around Finland and offer diverse possibilities to young people, mainly aged 13-29, to become involved in rural development. In parallel, a coordination group was established to bring together youth leader workers and strengthen the Youth LEADER in Finland.



Matthias Wagner, from the German LAG Leipziger Muldenland, presented the youth mentoring project 'Ju and Me'. He explained that the project, implemented in 2019/2020, aimed at reverse mentoring where young people from LAG areas were mentors for adults. This was only a first step for youth involvement in the LAG's work. The group of young people were later involved in creating the local development strategy. The LAG also supported small youth projects and facilitated an exchange of youth workers from Germany, Latvia and Finland. Recently, the LAG has been empowering young people who are running youth houses, while working with partners in Poland and Finland. Matthias pointed out that youth involvement is an ongoing process which never stops.



The final speaker in the opening session, **Alberto Madrassi** from Italy, presented the EUROPARC Youth Manifesto created by the EUROPARC Federation in 2018 as an output of their LEADER transnational cooperation project. The Manifesto is a source of ideas and inspiration for decision makers in Protected Areas and rural communities. It was developed using a bottom-up process and covers four main thematic areas on how to involve youth in the work of protected areas: youth empowerment, living, learning and working. As requested by the Manifesto, the EUROPARC Youth Council was subsequently established to promote youth engagement in decision making.

World café session



The World café session was devoted to youth-led discussions on the role of young people in implementing LEADER. Young participants were involved in facilitation and reporting back on the outcomes. Four main topics guided the group conversations ([a more comprehensive overview](#) of the topics discussed and main take-aways is available online :

1. Youth leadership in civic activity and democratic engagement through LEADER

Discussions within this theme were focused on young people working with different levels of elected government and youth civic engagement. Participants found it important to make the ideas of young people visible, building personal relations with decision makers, and improving the confidence and communication skills of young rural people. Key challenges in doing so consisted of paperwork, bureaucracy, difficulties in accessing funds but also youth not always having an interest in speaking up if their voices are being used in a performative way without paying attention to them, so called 'youth washing'. A wide range of examples that enable youth leadership included rural youth hubs, councils, rural youth camps and the European Rural Parliament.

2. Youth involvement in LEADER decision making

This theme was centred around the involvement of young people in LAG governance, LAG management, Youth LAGs or Youth LAG Networks. The key challenge was seen as older LAG members 'clinging' to their seats on decision-making boards, but also bureaucracy, the formality of the meetings that makes it difficult for youth to get involved, and in 'youth washing'. The possible improvements suggested in the discussions include for example the establishment of LAG youth boards, the introduction of mandatory quotas on youth representation, targeted and continuous involvement of youth into LAG events, and persistent work on engaging young people through the LEADER method to motivate them to get involved.

3. Connecting & promoting people and place

The focus of this theme was linked to celebrating rural cultural identity, promoting LEADER as well as being LEADER ambassadors. The key opportunity in doing so was seen in early age education and building rural pride. Illustrative examples included children in school drawing pictures of inspiring rural women in their area and making a calendar based on these. The need for rural storytelling that put young peoples' voices first was also highlighted, along with fostering youth ownership e.g. through the creation of projects with young people - not 'for' young people.

4. Involvement in LEADER Projects

Discussions on youth involvement in LEADER projects covered four sub-thematic aspects:

4a. Innovative youth entrepreneurship

The best learning opportunity for young people was seen in small scale projects and related grant schemes. Acquired experience can then be used to 'grow' and promote more complex projects. Good practices of how to support youth are start-up hubs, school programmes and easy access for entrepreneurs to LEADER funding and LAGs.



4b. Shaping the green transition in rural areas

The key challenge outlined for the rural green transition is the lack of coordinated solutions to complex issues. Motivating farmers and young people and the role of education can be the key in fostering future improvements.

4c. Improving social inclusion in rural areas

Listening to young peoples' needs is a first step in achieving projects with a social impact. Young people need a tool to transform an idea into a project. This could be provided by youth coach advice, Erasmus+ or small micro grant schemes, 'YLLD' - young local led development programme managed by LAG, etc.

4d. Promoting the digital transition in rural areas

Innovative use of digital technologies and providing youth with spaces to collaborate e.g. digital hubs, form important opportunities for youth engagement in digital projects. Young people can also help those in their community who are digitally excluded, e.g. older generations.

Actions orienteering - towards an international young LEADER community!



The afternoon session was devoted to a dynamic participatory activity on fostering an international young LEADER community. The session was launched by **two inputs** on EU level networking, provided by **Anja Fortuna** from Rural Youth Europe (RYE), followed by **Annie Linsemak** and **Aude Bourgeois** from the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD).

A subsequent action orienteering exercise divided participants into 15 teams. The purpose was to enable participants to reflect on guidance questions within their teams and develop their proposal for an international young LEADERS' community. The questions included prompts such as:

- Why it is important to have international young LEADER community,
- What is its proposed objective,
- What are the key actions needed for its creation,
- What will be its activities, and
- How can it be brought to life after this event.

Having reflected on the guiding questions, each team was asked to prepare a short pitch of their proposal. As an outcome, these pitches were presented to judging panels with a high level of enthusiasm,

creativity, team spirit and huge efforts given to the preparation despite the limited time. Some participants, both young and also those representing the expert audience, took an active role as the coach for their team, and joined the judging panels, enabling ownership of the process.

The five best proposals shortlisted by judging panels were pitched to all participants in the plenary. These included ideas such as:

- Creating a joint community platform / a network connected online to share best practices, experiences and to support each other, but also serving as a vehicle for collaboration, for advocacy and policy making.
- Deciding on the action plan of the community which could include e.g. a video campaign or other appealing activities.
- Appointing a few fixed coordinators to steer the strategy and implement the action plan.
- Having a pool of community members / network of young ambassadors in every LAG, region and country.
- Establishing a link to national EU Parliament members.



The winning team - calling itself the 'Sunrise coalition' - was selected in a plenary vote. Their pitch underlined they are a group of bright young people wanting to make a difference to their local communities and they aim to make the coalition last. The key actions proposed included organising a LEADER festival in 2025 to excite a greater mass of people and get traction. As a continuation, a national recurring event would be organised. The focus would be on young people, but also taking a bigger perspective and providing collective inspiration - it should also involve families of LAG members and wider communities to get them on board. The winning team plans to use well-targeted communication within and outside the community including an online platform (e.g. Discord) and a newsletter.

Wrap-up: Taking forward actions and building on ideas from the day's discussions



In a reflection on the afternoon interactive session, ELARD representatives - inspired by the proposals presented and the exceptional enthusiasm of participants - announced that they would take a first concrete step and **launch the Young LEADER Community** following the event.

The representative of RYE encouraged participants to use the rest of the time in Vierumäki to network and engage, and pointed out that RYE is eager to help build community structures from local to European levels while participants can do their part mainly at local and national level.



The EU CAP Network will look to incorporate the Forum outcomes into future work as well as involving participants into foreseen EU CAP Network activities, including thematic groups, networking clusters whilst also highlighting the role of young people in the [Agricultural and Rural Inspiration Awards](#) (ARIA).

Field trip visits

The second day of the conference was devoted to the five parallel field visits organised in cooperation with the 'Youth LEADER' Finnish LAGs that showcased inspiring youth projects supported through LEADER.

The first visit explored the active rural associations around the Lahti area with specific interest in youth entrepreneurship. Participants visited [Vierumäki village association](#) organizing forest camps for children, [Ampu 4H](#) providing entrepreneurship education for rural youth, and [Mallusjoki youth association](#) running a local cultural centre with theatre, music and poetry.

The second visit provided a comprehensive experience of local entrepreneurship and youth work in unique environments from litti to the historical corners of Porvoo. Through [Vuolenkoski village's job placement service](#), local youth find summer employment. The charming [litti summer café](#) serves as a place for youth employment and events. In Porvoo, mobile youth work takes place, and the [Limo car](#) meets young people in Porvoo's rural villages.

Participant of the third field visit could enjoy diverse experiences from [world-class disc golf](#) to [farmyard tales](#) and [inspirational youth meeting place](#) in Pukkila village – all run by or for local rural young people.

The fourth visit promoted national cultural heritage and the creativity of youth through [dance moments by Hollola youth association](#). Participants enjoyed theatre at [the Miinan Monttu summer theatre](#) and explored Finnish nature with the [Tuusula 4H](#) organizing forest camps for local children.

The fifth visit offered a culinary journey from Porvoo's popular candy factory [Brunberg](#) to the heart of the Baltic archipelago in [Varlaxudden recreational area](#). Participants explored the innovative work of the [NopeeGarage](#), a cultural workshop and youth centre for children and young people in Sipoo area.