ACCELERATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEADER APPROACH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkan region, comprising countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, continues to face significant rural development challenges, including depopulation, low infrastructure investment, limited services, and socio-economic disparities. These persistent issues call for a sustainable and community-driven approach that empowers rural populations to shape their own development paths.

The EU's LEADER approach—short for Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale—offers a framework rooted in bottom-up planning, public-private partnerships, and multi-sectoral strategies tailored to local contexts. First developed as part of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, the LEADER method aims to revitalize rural areas through the establishment of Local Action Groups (LAGs), collaborative strategy development, and grassroots project implementation.

Despite its promise, the uptake and operationalization of the LEADER approach in the Western Balkans remains fragmented and slow. The need to align national frameworks with EU standards, limited awareness, weak institutional capacities, and the absence of IPARD III LEADER accreditation are among the factors constraining its success. Addressing these challenges is crucial for unlocking the socio-economic potential of rural areas in the region and aligning them with EU integration goals.

MAIN FINDINGS

The follow-up analysis conducted through the LEADER Road Maps and national reports reveals the following key findings across three thematic areas:

1. **Legal and Institutional Frameworks**
   - Countries are gradually aligning with EU rural development policies, yet dedicated LEADER legislation remains underdeveloped or unenforced.
   - Limited awareness and prioritization among policymakers hinder legal enactment and IPARD LEADER accreditation processes, which remain incomplete across all countries.
   - Institutional capacity gaps, particularly in managing intergovernmental coordination and technical assistance, obstruct implementation.
   - The lack of clarity on roles and procedures post-accreditation, especially concerning fund management and LAG oversight, further delays progress.

2. Rural Development Networking

- Rural Development Networks (RDNs) are key to supporting LAGs, but often lack formal roles in national policy processes.
- Networking organizations face limited funding, fragmented stakeholder engagement, and underdeveloped communication mechanisms.
- Capacity-building programs are irregular and rarely tailored to LEADER-specific needs like strategy development, community facilitation, or partnership brokering.

3. Local Action Groups (LAGs)

- LAGs vary greatly in maturity and operational capacity; many are formed via external projects and struggle with sustainability once funding ends.
- Common challenges include weak internal governance, limited project management skills, poor community engagement, and lack of funding for implementation and staffing.
- Participation is often top-down due to migration and human capital shortages, compromising the bottom-up principle of LEADER.
- Coordination among emerging LAGs is often overlapping or competitive due to a lack of national guidance on territorial delineation and recognition.

These challenges highlight the importance of a coordinated, well-resourced, and inclusive policy environment to support the LEADER rollout effectively.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The LEADER approach remains a transformative opportunity for rural revitalization in the Western Balkans, but requires urgent and synchronized action at the legal, institutional, and grassroots levels. Key recommendations include:

1. **Legal and Policy Alignment**
   - Prioritize IPARD III LEADER measure accreditation in all WB countries through technical support, fast-tracked procedures, and institutional coordination.
   - Establish national LEADER funding lines (via rural development programs) until full EU accreditation is achieved.
   - Define clear, expert-reviewed protocols for LAG territorial approval, fund allocation, and evaluation.

2. Capacity Building and Technical Support

- Launch targeted training for LAGs and public officials in areas such as strategy writing, financial management, and community animation.

- Develop mentoring schemes and peer-learning platforms between established EU and WB LAGs.

3. Networking and Sustainability

- Enhance the formal role of RDNs in national planning and funding structures.
- Facilitate transnational cooperation projects to promote innovation, knowledge transfer, and visibility.
- Ensure consistent funding for LAG operation, stakeholder events, and communications infrastructure.

The Western Balkan governments, supported by EU institutions, donor agencies, and civil society, must jointly commit to accelerating LEADER implementation as a pillar of rural development and EU alignment. The time for action is now—to ensure rural communities are not left behind in the European integration process.

SOURCES

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Prepared by:
Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN)
Contact: info@brdnetwork.org | www.brdnetwork.org
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