

LEADER Experience Exchange: Cooperation

On March 3rd and 4th, 2026, the "LEADER: Cooperation Experience Exchange" event took place at the Real Sitio of San Ildefonso (Segovia). Organized by the Spanish CAP Network of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA), it was held in a hybrid format with live streaming and in-person attendance at La Farm Studio. This allowed 125 people to participate in person and 140 to follow the event via streaming, from 14 different member states of the European Union.

The event was presented as a space to promote LEADER cooperation at the national and European levels, as it is an instrument that helps local actors to boost the potential of their territories through dynamic networking.

CONTEXT

This meeting stems from the need to strengthen the LEADER approach through national and European cooperation to bolster local capacities in the face of shared challenges. In line with this, the aim is to exchange experiences, best practices, and knowledge, as well as to establish synergies between different regions.

Based on the above, the Spanish PAC Network organized this event with the objectives of:

- To publicize the LEADER cooperation opportunities in the 2023-2027 programming period.
- Showcase the work of the MAPA on the LEADER approach, and in particular the inter-territorial LEADER cooperation.
- Disseminate the initiatives of the European CAP Network to strengthen networking

TECHNICAL DATA SHEET OF THE EVENT.

- ♦ "LEADER: Cooperation Experience Exchange".
- ♦ March 3rd and 4th, 2026.
- ♦ Hybrid format:
 - In-person attendance: La Farm Studio, Real Sitio of San Ildefonso, Segovia.
 - Streaming: The recording is available in Spanish and English.
- ♦ Attendees: Management and technical staff of Local Action Groups (LAGs), Regional and National LAG networks, LEADER management authorities and regional managers, various MAPA units with competences on LEADER, LAG representatives from other member states, national and European CAP networks and other entities linked to rural development or with an interest in the topic of the event.
- ♦ Conference organized by the Spanish CAP Network, belonging to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA).

among European LAGs.

- To present good practices of LEADER cooperation at the intraregional, interterritorial and transnational levels.
- To promote the emergence of new LEADER cooperation projects, as well as the addition of new partners to cooperation projects in the initial or ongoing phase.



Photograph 1: Opening of the day by Ms. Ana Rodríguez Castaño, secretary general of Agricultural Resources and Food Security, of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EVENT

INAUGURATION AND PRESENTATION OF THE SPANISH PAC NETWORK

The event was opened by **Ana Rodríguez Castaño**, secretary general for Agricultural Resources and Food Security at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA), who welcomed the nearly 300 participants gathered both in person and via live stream. In her address, she highlighted the strategic location of La Granja de San Ildefonso, a symbol of the adaptability and vitality of rural areas. She emphasized the role of the LEADER program as an essential tool for building trust in local communities, specifically the importance of Local Action Groups (LAGs), which enable bottom-up decision-making to transform local ideas into real projects that sustain the daily lives of municipalities.

She also defined cooperation not as an option, but as a strategic element for addressing the three major shared challenges at the European level: the green transition, digitalization, and the fight against depopulation. She acknowledged that, although the Spanish administrative framework is complex due to its multiple layers, the ministerial objective is to simplify, connect, and refine ideas so that they become solid proposals with realistic timelines.

Next, **Sara Josefa Herrero Rodríguez**, head of the CAP Network Management Unit, explained the evolution from the former National Rural Network to the CAP Network (2023-2027), which integrates agricultural and rural development policies under a single approach focused on economic, environmental and social objectives.



Photograph 2: Intervention by Sara J. Herrero, head of the CAP Network Management Unit.

In addition, she defined the Spanish PAC Network as a connection point for the sector, and detailed the activities linked to LEADER carried out by the Network: exchanges of experiences, LAG viewer, reports of good practices, direct contact with the LAGs and communication tools.

Regarding the communication tools made available to the LAGs, he highlighted the web repository of [good practices](#), [the monthly newsletter](#) and the [Savia Rural magazine](#), which has a specific section called "LEADER Territory".

LEADER COOPERATION IN SPAIN AND EUROPE

Subsequently, the current state of cooperation in Spain was analyzed, as well as the tools available for the promotion of projects, at the national and European levels.

At the national level, **Marina Celada Carmona**, head of service at the General Directorate for Rural Development (MAPA), presented the work carried

out by her unit, focused on reversing the low number of cooperation projects identified in the previous period. Among the key actions was the creation of comparative fact sheets on cooperation in the different autonomous communities, which stemmed from an agreement reached within the LEADER group, comprised of managing authorities from all the autonomous communities.

These fact sheets allow for the comparison of regulations and deadlines between the autonomous communities, highlighting the diversity in deadlines for the call for proposals and in the acceptance of preparatory aid.

In the European context, **Peter Toth**, from the [European CAP Network](#), presented the main support tools available for transnational cooperation. Among these, he highlighted the European directory of LAGs, which already compiles information on nearly 2,356 groups from 25 Member States, 45 of which are currently seeking partners to develop joint projects.

During her presentation, she particularly emphasized the usefulness of the technical guide associated with this tool and delivered a clear message from a methodological perspective: cooperation should not arise haphazardly, but rather from a well-defined local development strategy. In other words, it is first necessary to clearly identify the need or problem to be addressed and, from there, to identify partners who can truly contribute value, whether in the form of experience, knowledge, or resources, to develop solutions jointly.

Finally, he pointed out some of the main obstacles that continue to hinder these types of initiatives, such as the lack of harmonization of regulations between countries and the long timeframes that administrative approval processes usually require.



Photograph 3: Intervention by Peter Toth, from the European CAP Network.

First, **Stefan Spasov**, Bulgaria's managing authority, explained how Bulgaria has adopted a multi-fund approach, allowing Local Action Groups (LAGs) to manage funds from up to five different programs. This structure ensures the multi-sectoral development of the territory.

Spasov highlighted that the LEADER budget for the 2023-2027 period has increased to €350 million, covering 97 Local Action Groups. To boost cooperation, Bulgaria has eliminated closed calls for proposals, allowing groups to submit projects on an ongoing basis, thus avoiding delays due to administrative schedules and facilitating work with international partners.

Regarding the situation in the Czech Republic, **Ondřej Večeř**, from the Czech CAP Network, presented the robust architecture of the [Czech Republic's National Network of Local Action Groups \(LAGs\)](#), which includes 178 of the country's 180 LAGs. He also highlighted the success of the multi-fund approach and emphasized the role of LAGs as agents of territorial resilience in the face of global crises, detailing their capacity for emergency responses to issues such as the conflict in Ukraine and the energy crisis. **Irena Krizova**, also from the Czech CAP Network, detailed the institutional tools available in the Czech Republic to promote LEADER cooperation, which is based on significant prior

activation, including activities such as organizing webinars and speed dating sessions, where managers rotate through thematic tables to present ideas and find partners directly, eliminating the impersonal nature of bureaucracy.

LEADER GOOD COOPERATION PRACTICES

This part of the day was dedicated to presenting transnational and interterritorial cooperation projects that are completed or in very advanced stages. The objective in this case was to analyze successes, results, obstacles encountered, and the associated lessons learned.

- **“+Empleo +Empresa +Rural”** (Castilla y León) - Speaker: José Miguel Mozo, from LAG “Campos y Torozos”.

This inter-regional project involves up to 11 Local Action Groups in the region, aiming to promote sustainable development through technological innovation and the strengthening of the rural business network. Its main outcome has been the creation of Spain's first job portal exclusively for rural areas, which currently boasts over 7,000 registered users and 3,400 job postings. For its social impact, the project received an award in the 2023 [Agricultural and Rural Inspiration Awards](#) in the socio-economic category.

- ***“Food without borders”*** (Italia) - Speaker: Rosa Messuti from [Cittadella del Sapere LAG](#).

This initiative, conceived as a “cultural bridge” through gastronomy, already involves collaborations with countries like Portugal and Slovenia. The project utilizes modern digital marketing tools and storytelling to promote rural agri-food excellence with a focus on tourism. Key actions include the creation of a shared digital consultation platform and the organization of educational tours for journalists, chefs, and even international bloggers,

all aimed at fostering awareness and promotion of local products.

- ***“Community-Based Soft Tourism as a Tool for Sustainable Rural Development”*** (Czech Republic) - Speaker: Veronika Liotard from [MAS Sedčansko LAG](#).

A low-impact tourism model focused on preserving the natural landscape and local culture, as opposed to mass tourism. The philosophy behind this project is based on the idea that, instead of building large infrastructures, it is better to connect existing resources through hiking trails, information panels, and other means. The aim is to introduce innovative actions along tourist routes, always in cooperation with local authorities (municipalities and Local Action Groups), and avoiding mass tourism. Furthermore, the economic sustainability of the project once funding ceases was identified as a major challenge.



Photograph 4: LEADER cooperation good practices table (from left to right): José Miguel Mozo from the “Campos y Torozos” LAG, Anna Colominas from the Associació pel Desenvolupament Rural de la Catalunya Central, Veronika Liotard from the MAS Sedčansko LAG and Rosa Messuti from the La Cittadella del Sapere LAG.

- **CAL RURAL** (Cataluña) - Speaker: Anna Colominas from Associació pel

Desenvolupament Rural de la Catalunya Central.

This project, supported by 11 Local Action Groups (LAGs), aims to facilitate the settlement of people in rural areas by offering affordable and sustainable housing. To this end, they have a mobile housing and rehabilitation office, catalogs of bioconstruction companies, and guides for mobilizing vacant homes. This initiative is complemented by the "[Viure a Rural](#)" (Living in Rural Areas) project, which seeks to ensure the establishment of new residents with genuine and guaranteed integration into the social and community life of the area.

PRESENTATION OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION PROJECTS ACTIVELY SEEKING PARTNERS

Following the presentation of success stories, the session opened for the presentation of initiatives or projects in the design phase or seeking partners for 2023-2027. The selected projects address different themes such as Climate Change, generational change, smart villages, promotion of local products or ecotourism.

- **"Cultural Identity" (Italy and Portugal) - Speaker: Marco Parroni from Valle Umbra e Sibillini LAG.**

This project aims to transform hidden cultural heritage (small churches, historic buildings, etc.) into a sustainable tourism experience. The key lies in the use of technologies that allow visitors to explore these sites independently, while simultaneously offering immersive narrative content in several languages, greatly enriching the experience.

The initiative is also conceived as a model easily replicable in other regions, with the goal of highlighting this lesser-known heritage that, in many cases, represents the most authentic essence of rural life. The pilot phase has already demonstrated

that it is not only viable but also sustainable from both a social and economic perspective.

- **"EU STORK ROUTE" (Bulgaria) - Speaker: Maria Gieva from [Rakovski LAG](#).**

This project is structured around the creation of a European network in which the white stork acts as a unifying element, given its symbolism of biodiversity and sustainable agriculture. Its objective is to connect territories along the migratory routes of these birds to promote their conservation while developing ecotourism products such as educational festivals, summer camps, and student exchanges, all within the framework of environmental awareness.

- **[Living in Biosphere Reserves](#) (Greece) - Speaker: Christina Kalatha from ATTICA LAG.**

This initiative is aimed at territories that manage or aspire to be certified as [UNESCO Biosphere Reserves \(BRs\)](#). The project's objective is to integrate the "Biosphere Reserve" brand into the daily activities of local communities, with a particular focus on those related to sustainable agriculture, gastronomy, and tourism. Some of the activities include educational visits, the development of an action plan, the creation of a shared online platform for showcasing BR activities, and local training and information sessions.

- **[Smart Rural Living](#) (Extremadura, Spain) - Speaker: Pilar Javato Lucas from REDEX.**

A smart territorial planning project that brings together the 24 Local Action Groups (LAGs) of Extremadura, Spain. Following the development of key projects, the initiative is seeking European partners to share results and improve rural resilience through digital skills.

The main objective of the project is smart rural development: strong, connected, resilient and

prosperous rural communities in rural areas, through “Smart Villages” and innovative solutions to address local challenges and improve the lives of citizens, focusing on the opportunities offered by ICT.

- [Malvasia Myth](#) (Greece) - Speaker: **Storios Bolis** from **Parnonas S.A LAG**.

A project to promote Malvasia wine as an agri-food product and as a cultural icon of the Mediterranean, steeped in history and present in the works of great creators such as Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, etc. The project's objective is to promote tourism in the growing regions of this variety, creating a network of tour operators, developing promotional materials and a common marketing strategy, and organizing cultural activities.

Currently, they are seeking to expand the network of tour operators in Malvasia-producing regions of Spain, Slovenia, France, Portugal, Croatia, and Italy.

encourage direct contact between attendees, thus facilitating the creation of initial connections between them.



Photograph 6: View of the LEADER cooperation agora space.

For its development, this block was structured in three consecutive phases:



Photograph 5: Transnational cooperation projects actively seeking partners (from left to right): Maria Gieva from Rakovski LAG, Pilar Javato Lucas from REDEX, Christina Kalatha from ATTICA LAG, Marco Parroni from Valle Umbra e Sibillini LAG and Storios Bolis from Parnonas S.A LAG.

AGORA LEADER COOPERATION

During the afternoon session, several participatory activities were organized to break the ice and

1. The agora opened with a round of quick elevator pitch presentations; in which the previous projects participated as a reminder, as well as other initiatives also looking for partners.

- **“Parte de mí”** (Italy, Spain, France and Belgium) - Speaker: **Concepción Escribano** from [Entreparkes LAG](#).

Project based on the study of the relationships between the rural and urban environment with the aim of cooperating to achieve collective and balanced governance between both contexts.

- **“Minería y Territorio”** (Spain) - Speaker: **Antonio Manzanares Gijón** from [Asociación para el Desarrollo Sostenible del Valle de Alcudia](#).

This initiative aims to genuinely connect mining companies with the rural areas where they operate, based on a very clear idea: that mining activity should not simply pass through the territory, but rather develop alongside it. The objective is to

move towards authentic and sustainable territorial cohesion in those areas where industrial activity exists.

- **Projects focused on local gastronomy (Malta) - Speaker: Pierre Louis Attard, from [Gozo LAG](#).**

During her presentation, she expressed her interest in promoting cooperation projects focused on local gastronomy. Her proposal is based on directly involving local stakeholders to highlight their lifestyle and culture, using them as a tool for local development.

Moreover, the attendees practiced active listening, establishing priorities for subsequent direct negotiation.

2. The next phase, entitled “Matchmaking Session,” was conducted in a speed-dating format, with project promoters meeting with representatives from Local Action Groups (LAGs) interested in collaborating. These meetings allowed for the identification of synergies, the definition of specific roles, and the establishment of the next steps to materialize the cooperation.

Simultaneously, a technical assistance point or “Help Desk” of the European CAP Network was set up, where Peter Toth and Elena di Federico advised LAG managers on updating their digital profiles and uploading transnational cooperation proposals to the European platform.

3. The final phase, called Synergy Walk, was established with the aim of continuing to build networks freely, as well as to learn about other projects presented in the space. A visual vote was also conducted using stickers to prioritize the Network’s future activities.



Photograph 7: Compilation of proposals for activities to be carried out beyond cooperation.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE DYNAMICS AND CLOSING OF THE FIRST SESSION

To conclude the technical session, **María José Murciano** from the [Spanish Rural Development Network](#) (REDR) and **Elena di Federico** from the European CAP Network summarized the results and closed the first day of the conference.

Elena di Federico spoke, emphasizing that LEADER cooperation puts European values and the seven LEADER principles into practice, highlighting that “when we cooperate, we multiply.”

She also stressed that the main challenges of cooperation are largely related to administrative issues: the lack of harmonization between regions, differences in regulations, and inequality in available resources significantly hinder joint work. Even so, she noted that when these barriers are overcome, the satisfaction is very high, both professionally and personally.

Furthermore, she emphasized that cooperation requires patience; results are not immediate, and it is essential to accept that processes take time, as well as to draw on previous experiences to improve along the way.

Finally, he raised a point about the use of available resources. He mentioned, for example, the LAG

directory of the European CAP Network, which, despite being fairly well-known, remains underutilized. In his opinion, this highlights the need to strengthen its dissemination and further facilitate access to it so that its full potential can be realized.

For her part, **María José Murciano** added that, in the current European context, strengthening LEADER cooperation is a strategic priority. At a time of profound economic, social, and geopolitical transformations, rural areas need robust networks, participatory governance, and the capacity to cooperate across territories to respond effectively to shared challenges. The cooperation dimension of LEADER is one of its most valuable assets, as it allows rural communities to exchange knowledge, develop joint solutions, and build strategic alliances that strengthen innovation, resilience, and territorial cohesion throughout Europe. However, cooperation cannot be hampered by excessive administrative barriers or a system that places disproportionate weight on financial and procedural risks. Rural territories have too much at stake to allow cooperation initiatives to be discouraged by complex rules or uncertainty in project justification. If Europe wants dynamic and resilient rural areas, it must ensure that LEADER cooperation is facilitated, supported and simplified, enabling local actors to fully deploy their capacity to collaborate, innovate and respond collectively to the challenges of our time.



Photograph 8: “Family” photo of the speakers of the event.

The closing remarks were delivered by **Sara Josefa Herrero Rodríguez**, head of the Spanish CAP Network Management Unit, who expressed the Network’s commitment to thorough follow-up, compiling all contacts from the synergy reports to directly connect the groups that have formed alliances. Furthermore, the LAGs were urged to proactively register their projects on the European platform to improve current figures.



Photograph 9: Closing remarks by Sara Herrero, head of aArea of the Spanish CAP Network Management Unit.

PROJECT VISITS - MARCH 4

The second day of this technical meeting, held on March 4, focused on learning about the practical application of the LEADER approach in the Segovian municipality of Otones de Benjumea.

The tour included an immersion in rural heritage through the [Ethnographic](#) and [Pedagogical Museums](#) of Otones de Benjumea. The Ethnographic Museum, founded in 1996, houses a collection of over 3,000 objects that document daily life and traditional trades in rural areas since the mid-19th century. The visit to the Pedagogical Museum allowed participants to reflect on the evolution of rural education. These cultural institutions not only preserve collective memory but also serve as hubs for tourism and social cohesion in the region. They feature permanent exhibitions arranged chronologically and temporary exhibitions always related to the specific characteristics of the Spanish education system.

Both museums are part of the LEADER cooperation project “[Living Museums](#)”. **Eugenio Rojo**, the project coordinator, presented the project to the attendees. This project exemplifies technological innovation applied to rural development through an intelligent system that allows museums and interpretation centers to be opened and visited independently 365 days a year. This initiative was highlighted during the event as a replicable model of smart tourism that optimizes the management of cultural resources and puts the hidden heritage of sparsely populated rural areas at the forefront.



Photograph 10: Visit to the Pedagogical Museum in Otones de Benjumea.

Finally, the day provided an opportunity to learn firsthand about women's entrepreneurship projects funded by the EAFRD, specifically the LEADER program, such as [AMAPOLABIO COSMETICS](#) by **Teresa de Andrés**, a natural and organic cosmetics business in San Cristóbal, Segovia; and [Los Juaquines](#) by **Bustar López**, a business in Pinillos de Polendos, Segovia, dedicated to artisanal sausages and hams. These presentations highlighted how the support of Local Action Groups is crucial for rural women to lead green innovation projects and generate a positive and lasting socio-economic impact in their communities.



Photograph 11: Visit to women's entrepreneurship projects funded by LEADER: AMAPOLABIO COSMETICS and Los Juaquines.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Some **general conclusions** can be drawn from the event:

<p>Benefits and added value of cooperation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - LEADER cooperation should be understood as more than just an institutional process, as it acts as a catalyst for strengthening relationships between territories, thereby multiplying the desired results: “to cooperate is to multiply.” - The current challenges facing rural areas in terms of climate change, biodiversity, and digitalization are global in nature and pose challenges in all territories. In this sense, the most effective solutions emerge from the local level, responding to bottom-up dynamics, and can be shared across different locations. - Rural areas should not be considered declining, as they actually constitute the perfect setting for innovation and entrepreneurship. In this sense, LEADER cooperation should be understood as a tool or lever that helps transform small local ideas into real, global projects.
<p>Bureaucratic obstacles and challenges</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The implementation of LEADER cooperation projects is hampered by bureaucracy and a lack of administrative flexibility. As a result, not as many projects as desired are carried out, despite the clear willingness of Spanish and European Local Action Groups (LAGs) to promote them. - A significant disparity has been identified in the regulations concerning rules and deadlines for cooperation, both at the national and transnational levels. It could even be argued that sometimes “it is easier to cooperate with other countries than with neighboring regions.” - Cooperation requires patience due to the lengthy waiting periods for approval processes.
<p>Strengths for successful cooperation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The event highlighted how the most successful projects require patience, “the art of waiting,” and sometimes draw on lessons learned from previous experiences. This is why a constant exchange of case studies among the different LAGs is essential in the search for replicable proposals and opportunities for cooperation. - Cooperation must always be framed within a local development strategy to achieve specific objectives. - The interest and success of the multi-fund management model, which contributes to the resilience and autonomy of LAGs, was emphasized. - LAGs must make the most of European tools to open and facilitate cooperation channels at all levels. Therefore, meetings that demonstrate how to use these tools and what possibilities they offer are so important.