



## Finland

### LEADER projects support migrant integration in Punkalaidun

*Jean-Luc Janot, AEIDL (01/03/2016)*

Since 2011, Punkalaidun, a rural municipality in South-West Finland, has been investing in the integration and welfare of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers with the help of two LEADER<sup>1</sup> projects.



The motivations behind this were through solidarity towards people who are in need of leaving their homes and risking their lives in order to start anew. “This was not too difficult, says Petri Rinne, manager of the [Joutsenten Reitti](#) (‘Swan’s Route’) LEADER Local Action Group (LAG), because Punkalaidun has had a refugee centre for 20 years now and thousands of asylum seekers have gone through it, so local people are used to living side by side with newcomers.”

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a territorial and community-led approach, [LEADER](#) (*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Economie Rurale*) was a major EU rural development programme between 1990 and 2006. Its name and principles have been integrated into Axis 4 of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

The local community, the public and private sectors as well as local associations and elected local authorities were therefore ready to work together and help the newcomers. Local agricultural businesses and SMEs needed seasonal labour, and the municipality's population was decreasing and ageing. Punkalaidun also had suitable buildings and public services (schools, health services, etc.) available to serve the newcomers.

The municipality has implemented an integration project with the support of the Joutsenten Reitti LAG. An 'immigration coordinator' was hired in 2011. Her main role has basically been problem-solving and bridge-building between the newcomers (from Myanmar and Syria) and Punkalaidun residents, notably through social activities including football and tango dancing, but also education and employment.

"The toughest aspect has been building up mutual trust and respect," says Maarit Tiittanen, the immigration coordinator. Maarit has run two LEADER projects in Punkalaidun. These have enabled her to become a real 'integration coordinator' between the immigrants and local citizens, public services (like childcare, schools and health care) and employers, including farmers.

Maarit has been able to find a job or school place for 80 refugees selected from foreign refugee camps. Asylum seekers at the local refugee centre have also been helped out.

The refugees have had a very positive impact on the local economy; the Finnish state pays for most of their service needs, their living and daily subsistence, and even though this daily subsistence allowance is not high, refugees have brought a new financial input into Punkalaidun's economy, increasing the sales of local shops, cafes and restaurants.



After four years of implementation, the integration scheme has received a number of awards and appeared on national TV and other media several times. The best feedback however comes from happy refugee families living in Punkalaidun: "We lived in a tent in a refugee camp in Thailand. Now we have work, our own house and a sense of community," says a family from Myanmar.



"Punkalaidun is the most vulnerable municipality in our LEADER area, due to continuing out-migration and an ageing population," says Petri Rinne. "Refugees have brought new energy to the area, in both social and economic terms. Our LEADER integration projects are now widely benchmarked across Finland, where more than 100 new refugee centres have been established recently. The need for positive examples and transferrable models is huge at both national and European levels."

Now that Europe is experiencing one of the strongest immigrant and refugee influxes in recent history, the Punkalaidun experience shows that local development programmes such as LEADER can help integrate migrants into rural communities throughout the EU. The Joutsenten Reitti LAG is now thinking of launching its next project phase which could involve inter-territorial or transnational cooperation to share good practices. "We are open to potential partners," says Petri Rinne.

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*Photographs: Maarit Tiittanen*

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