

A TERRITORIAL APPROACH FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS. CASE OF BULGARIA

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Abstract

The implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy has contributed to numerous improvements and positive effects on local economies. However, it has not entirely succeeded in overcoming the economic and social disparities across territories. The article reviews the practical aspects of the implementation of the LEADER and Common local led development (CLLD) approaches in Bulgaria. It also provides a comparative analysis of both Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) and CLLD. The objective is to show the impact of CLLD on decreasing the economic divergence between urban and rural municipalities and to identify the main difficulties in CLLD implementation that need further improvement.

Key words: rural and urban municipalities, Common local led development (CLLD),
integrated territorial approach, Integrated territorial Investments (ITIs), EU cohesion policy

INTRODUCTION

The territorial dimension has been considered as a priority of the EU Cohesion Policy since 2009 as a result of the Barca report [2]. Since then various territorial tools have been devised for the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy including Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) and Common local led development (CLLD).

The EU defines ITIs as “a territorial mechanism that enables the implementation of a territorial strategy in an integrated manner while drawing funds from at least two different priority axes in the same or different programs” [4].

CLLD, on the other hand, can be described as a tool “involving partners at local level including the civil society and local economic actors in designing and implementing local integrated strategies that help their areas to make a transition to a more sustainable future” [5].

Both territorial approaches (ITIs and CLLD) refer to integrated actions in urban and rural territorial areas with similar economic and social characteristic and needs. The implementation of the integrated strategies and investment in the defined territories is also included in the future EU Cohesion

Policy. One of the objectives for the upcoming programming period (2021-2027) is “Europe closer to citizens” [1, 10]. This objective would bring new challenges related to the introduction of a new regional balanced approach aimed at investment in integrated measures, which have to be tailored to the specificities of the regions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article briefly presents the characteristics and philosophy of both ITIs and CLLD. A comparison between the two allows to examine their similarities and differences and to discern the main advantages and disadvantages associated with each approach. This comparative analysis assists in better understanding how they can be used to complement each other. The author then measures the impact of the territorial approaches CLLD and LEADER on the economic development of the municipalities by carrying out a descriptive analysis (standard deviation and median). The purpose of the analysis is show the divergence in value of the indicators incurred in the implementation of integrated territorial strategies (LEADER and CLLD). Finally, the article looks at the implementation of the

LEADER and CLLD approaches and the distribution of the financial resources from the European structural funds across the measures included in the local strategies.

The data for the period (2013-2018) was obtained from the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute. The descriptive analysis includes all Bulgarian municipalities and refers to following economic indicators: number of unemployed, number of unemployed up to 29 age, number of long-term unemployed, unemployment rate, the average annual income per person, net revenues from sales (thousand BGN) and output (thousand BGN). The municipalities are divided into rural municipalities with and without local action groups (LAGs), and urban municipalities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Legislative framework

The starting point of territorial cohesion policy consisted in the adoption of two main documents by the European Commission: the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion in 2008 [8] and the EU Territorial Agenda in 2011. [9] The Green Paper contributed to an open discussion on the territorial dimension of the EU cohesion policy and focused the attention on the needs to apply integrated territorial approach. The Territorial Agenda delineated the main goals for overcoming the economic and social discrepancies across regions, which are due to the urbanization, concentration of the production in big cities and depopulation of the small towns and settlements. The priorities of the Territorial Agenda can be defined as polycentric and balanced territorial development, territorial integration, improving territorial cooperation among communities, enterprises and cultural institutions [9].

The legislative documents of the EU cohesion policy (2014-2020) ensure the implementation of the integrated territorial investments. In the current programming period (2014-2020), CLLD was introduced in the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) No 1303/2013 (articles 32-35), which sets out the requirements for developing local strategy and

establishes the responsibilities of the stakeholders participating in the local action group [22]. The EU Regulation on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) No 1305/2013 (article 42-44) provides rules supporting LEADER programmes directed at inter-territorial co-operation between rural municipalities [24]. The Integrated territorial investments are determined by the CPR in article 36 and the integrated actions are set out in articles 37-46 [22]. The EU Regulation No 1301/2013 on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) provides in article 7 that 5% of the resources are to be allocated to the measures included in integrated sustainable urban development strategies [23]. For the current programming period, ITIs are funded by €13.8 billion from the ERDF, € 1.7 billion from ESF and € 0.3 billion are allocated by Cohesion Fund [7].

In addition, the main strategic document defining the commitments of the EU Member States to manage CLLD on the national level for the current programming period is the Partnership Agreement. It outlines the interaction of the managing bodies of the operational programs involved in the implementation of the CLLD [21].

Bulgaria adopted the European Structural and Investment Fund Funds Management Act in 2015 [14], which defines the national institutional framework for the management of European Structural and Investment Funds. In accordance with the provisions of article 28, paragraph 1, item 2 the Council of Ministers lays down rules for coordination between the managing authorities of the operational programmes and the local action groups engaged in developing and implementing the integrated multi-funded CLLD strategy.

Comparison between ITIs and CLLD

To better understand the differences and similarities between ITIs and CLLD, the author compares the two approaches in the Table 1 below.

This comparison shows that the main differences refer to the framework of

governance, the size of the projects and sources of finance.

Table 1. Key differences between ITIs and CLLD

	Differences	
	CLLD	ITIs
Territorial scope	Sub-regional level: it covers neighboring municipalities	Urban areas with potential for economic development
Management	Bottom-up decentralized approach LAGs play a key role in developing and executing the multi-funded local strategy	Top-down centralized approach ITI is led by governmental entity jointly with intermediate bodies at regional level. ITI approved by the central government
Financing	Small-scale projects limited to € 200 000 LAGs allocate the financial resources to projects beneficiaries	Large-scale projects Public funds are allocated by governmental and public institutions

Source: summarized by author.

The ITIs are funded by European structural funds and private resources, while the CLLD is funded by EAFRD and European Structural Funds and is therefore a multi-funded strategy. This multi-funded strategy creates conditions for economic diversification of rural municipalities through developing manufacturing, rural and eco-tourism, crafts, restoration cultural and traditional arts and others. The comparison also indicates that there are numerous similarities between the two approaches. The ITIs and CLLD are both oriented to territorial priorities and enhance the economic interaction at the territorial level. The similarities between the two approaches could be briefly summarized as follows: both the ITIs and CLLD (1) cover urban and rural territories; 2) make use of multi-funded integrated strategy tailored to ESFs priorities; 3) aim at ensuring long-term social and economic benefits for territorial

settlements; 4) contribute to the establishment of partnerships between stakeholders, businesses and local and regional authorities; 5) promote territorial integration; 6) create conditions for enhanced labour mobility. These similarities could be used for the two tools to be jointly applied at the defined territories.

Bottom-up approach of CLLD implementation: an opportunity for developing economic potential in rural areas

Disparities between large and small cities and rural areas is a major concern for Bulgaria's regional development. Territorial inequalities are widening due to population loss, worsen demographic structure, low production and investment potential.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) supports rural areas to decrease the territorial economic and social differences and depopulation by encouraging economic diversification and entrepreneurship. The CAP policy applies specific territorial approach designed to promote local economy and entrepreneurship known as LEADER initiative, first adopted in the 1990s, and which played a critical role in reorienting rural development beyond agricultural policies. LEADER is a territorial approach for rural development whose purpose is to "mobilize economic actors in defined territorial areas to collaborate in designing and implementing a local development policy" [11]. LEADER is addressed mainly to rural municipalities.

In the current programming period, the CLLD has been extended to urban territories. The local strategy therefore covers territories with population from 10,000 to 150,000 [5] which means that it includes small and less-development settlements around big cities in urban areas.

The applied CLLD strategies are a combination of interventions mainly funded by ERDF, ESF and EAFRD while the funding from the Cohesion fund is less prominent as it is dedicated only to ecological and climate projects.

The main difference between CLLD and LEADER initiatives concerns the diversified

financial source: as shown above, the CLLD uses more than one ESIF, while LEADER is mono-funded by EAERD. The applied multi-funded integrated strategy aims at achieving the synergy of economic, social and environmental development through cooperation between neighboring municipalities regardless of their population and economic development. The European LEADER Association for Rural Development pointed out that in Europe the total number of LAGs is 3,073, the number of LAGs under multi-funded strategy (EAERD) is around 2761 in Europe [6]. Additionally, the local territorial strategies in Europe funded by EAERD contributed benefits for 56 percent of the total rural population (163 million inhabitants [25].

Main challenges facing the rural municipalities in Bulgaria

Bulgaria is divided into six planning regions (NUTS 2 level), 28 districts (district is a central government territorial administration, with governors appointed by the Council of Ministers, (NUTS 3 level) and 265 municipalities (LAU 1). The rural regions include all municipalities where the number of the population is up to 30,000 people. Following this definition, the Bulgarian rural regions encompass the territories of 232 municipalities, which comprise of 34 percent or 2.3 million of the total country's population. However, 66 percent of the population live in municipalities with more than 30,000 inhabitants.

The current Bulgarian operational programme "Regions for growth" [20] funded by the EFRD is targeted at sustainable urban development, mainly in big urban cities, which are administrative and economic centers of municipalities above 30,000 inhabitants. Investment intervention covers 39 municipalities which do not belong to the category of rural municipalities. Bulgarian municipalities provided integrated urban development plans in which measures were funded by ERDF and European Social Fund or attracting private sector resources through public-private partnership. The urban integrated plans include measures for: improvement of urban environment,

development of industrial and social zones including cultural, social, educational infrastructure, energy efficiency for residence and public buildings [3]. Urban integrated plan could be considered as a territorial approach because of the concentration of public funds on pre-defined zones of the big cities. However, Bulgaria has not used ITIs as a tool for territorial development covering many local municipalities, not only large urban cities.

Despite the EU cohesion policy funding the differences at an intra-regional and inter-regional levels continue to increase in Bulgaria. Most Bulgarian regions are defined as lagging behind because of negative demographic trends and increase of aging population.

Throughout the period 2010-2018 the number of the population in the rural municipalities has declined faster than the average level for the entire country. During the same period the population in rural areas declined by 14 percent as a consequence of the negative natural birth rate, the migration and mobility of the work force to towns, high speed process of urbanization. The population below 15 years of age is low, around 6 percent, it is significantly lower than the population in urban areas - where it is 15 percent or 20% for the entire country. By contrast, the share of the 65 aged population lives in rural settlements is 22 percent. During the period 2010-2018, the number of working age population dropped down by 12 percent, while the population above 65 age increased by 5 percent. Most of the people in working age (around 76 percent) live in towns and only 24 percent live in villages. The annual unemployment rate was 4.7 percent in 2018, but in the rural municipalities the unemployment rate is higher, i.e. it is between 10 to 25 percent [18].

The trend of high annual unemployment rate has not changed for the poorest regions in the country (i.e., Northwest and North-East regions) due to the lack of industrial enterprises and the low level of education and qualification of the workforces.

Small municipalities (from 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants) in rural areas, suffer from

structural problems because their main sector of activity is agriculture, which offers seasonal work and temporary income. Moreover, additional concerns include lack of attractive employment opportunities, insufficient investment, lack of profitable manufactured enterprises and a significant outflow of young people.

In Bulgarian rural areas, LAGs have been established upon the initiative of local governments, entrepreneurs and civil associations within a certain territory or community in order to implement objectives related to the EAFRD.

The number of the created LEADER LAGs in the former programming period (2007-2013) was 35, which included 57 rural municipalities (28 percent of the defined rural territory) and local strategies impact on 800,000 people. The LAGs contributed to the completion of 1,221 projects [14], which have been carried out successfully and their activities encompassed 1,090 settlements [15]. The strategies of many LAGs across the country were similar; in particular, LAGs in Bulgaria developed a strategy and a package of measures under the Rural Development program, mainly in the agriculture sector (technological modernization and enhancement of the competitiveness of agricultural holdings), economic diversification, and support for local entrepreneurship, small businesses, local heritage, rural tourism and reconstruction of public facilities.

The economic impact of the completed projects was the creation of the new jobs (around 2,000) in rural tourism, retail, renewable energy production, crafts and manufacturing small and micro enterprises. The total amount supporting the LAGs was around €70 million (EAFRD and national co-funding), which was approximately 1.7 percent of the Regional Development program budget [15].

The LAGs experienced some difficulties in relation to the organization of application procedures and lack of sufficient finances to cover administrative and operational management costs [15, 17]. The delays at various phases of the projects including the

initial stage of negotiation, the verification of the project costs and paying to beneficiaries within the set time limit was a key obstacle for finalizing the projects according to the schedule. This also led to delay in the implementation of the planned activities and restructuring the financial plan of LAGs strategy. One of the drawbacks of LEADER programme was a weak cooperation in transferring experience among created local groups. The majority of LAGs under LEADER include one municipality (19 LAGs), number of LAGs covering two neighboring municipalities is 12, three LAGs composed by three neighboring municipalities and one LAG included four neighboring municipalities.

Presently, at the local level, LEADER/CLLD is implemented through LAGs' activities and the CLLD strategy.

Table 2. CLLD funds disbursed across operational programmes (2018)

Programmes	Budget for CLLD (million €)	ESIFs %	Share to total CLLD budget %
Rural development programme	131.0	5% (EARDF)	43%
Operational programme “Innovation and competitiveness”	64.0	6% (ERDF)	21%
Operational Programme “Human Resource Development”	50.0	5% (ESF)	17%
Operational Programme Environment	19.5	2% (CF)	6%

Source: Information System for management and monitoring EU Funds (ISUN) and author's own calculations [13].

The number of LAGs is 71, including 117 municipalities, 1,646,588 inhabitants (23 percent of population) and 5 percent of the total territory [16]. The contribution to the budget of multi-funded CLLD is as follows: Rural Development programme is €131 million, operational programme “Innovation and Competitiveness” is €64 million,

operational programme “Human Resource Development” €50 million, operational programme “Environment” - €19,5 million, operational programme “Science, Education for Smart Growth” - € 40 million [13].

The highest share of financing for carrying out the multi-funded local strategies comes from the Rural Development programme. Practices have shown that integrated local development has a positive impact on local economies, job creation, and development of new and traditional economic activities outside of the primary production in the agriculture sector. The advantage is the possibility to combine various community needs (social, cultural, environmental and economic) and to gain access to different funds.

Harizanova. H., and Stoyanova, Z highlighted that LAGs and the creation of initiatives for starting and maintaining small business is important factor for the development and growth of rural areas [12]. The LAGs act as a kind of managing local bodies and as such they issue calls for proposals, evaluate projects and support beneficiaries in project implementation.

Some of results achieved by the applied integrated strategy (LEADER and CLLD) can be summarized as:

- Introduction of an integrated mono or multi-funded strategy to rural areas;
- Involvement of a variety of actors from businesses, non-profit associations;
- Creation of a new community institutional structure based on partnership and cooperation;
- Concentration of financial resources on the specific needs of the territory;
- Diversification of the economy in rural areas beyond the agriculture sector.

The difficulties of CLLD in implementing multi-funded strategy can be grouped in the following manner:

Administrative capacity – CLLD is a new approach and the LAGs do not have sufficient experience and knowledge in the project management and practical experience in implementation of integrated territorial strategies and planning the targeted investments. The administrative burdens stem

from complicated administrative procedures and the existence of numerous operating and implementation rules within structural funds imposed by managing authorities. The fact that LAGs often involve partners who are unfamiliar with local economic development issues and funding per projects is limited, may lead to increase of the risk of political interference in the choice of eligible territories/strategies and project selection within the local strategy.

Governance – the coordination of projects under CLLD is well organized but as the process of approval strategies, projects verification and payments take time, which leads to increase of the opportunity and transaction costs. There are differences in the regulatory framework and guidance of ERDF, ESF, EAFRD (for instance, in terms of eligibility rules, eligible costs, project application requirements, criteria for project selection and assessment, financial control and audit, etc.) that limit the integration of funds. These differences create an obstacle for achieving the projects’ objectives by the project beneficiaries and executing the projects on time.

Public-private cooperation – The municipalities play a leading role in establishing the LAGs. Some of the difficulties that have been encountered include low public awareness and understanding of the needs and the benefits of integrated territorial strategy and the importance of mobilizing potential beneficiaries as well as low levels of communications with stakeholders. Despite such difficulties the urban and rural municipalities have gained some experience in implementing both territorial integrated approaches.

The territorial approaches CLLD and LEADER concentrate investments to achieve greatest added value by decreasing economic and social disparities across rural and urban areas.

The descriptive analysis shows that the deviation of the main economic factors of the municipalities as a result of the implementation of the CLLD and LEADER approach (the results of descriptive analysis

are shown in Table 3). It also shows that municipalities which established LAGs and carried out the local territorial strategy indicators' value (the unemployment rate and the number of unemployed, the number of unemployed to 29 age and long term unemployed) is low than the municipalities which have not applied CLLD or Leader approach. The change in average income is positive in municipalities with LAGs, the average income is higher by 7.7 percent when compared to municipalities without LAGs. The standard deviation show that the rural municipalities have been brought closer to the level of urban municipalities (standard deviation is 3.5 percent) and the divergence between rural municipalities without LAGs and urban municipalities is larger (standard deviation is 10.5 percent).

The value of the economic indicators (net revenue of sales and output) of municipalities with LAGs is higher than for rural municipalities without created LAGs. The

average difference of indicators net revenues of sales between municipalities with LAGs and municipalities without LAGs is 66.6 percent and the divergence in output's value is 68.7 percent. The positive effect of the local territorial strategies on small and less developed rural municipalities is obvious. The increase of the value of indicators (measuring the unemployment level) is modest in comparison to urban municipalities. Based on the results of the descriptive analysis one can infer that the economic and social development of the rural municipalities does not bring them closer to urban municipalities. It is important to point out that the LAGs strategy contributed to the improvement of the economic potential of rural municipalities, but the social effect is still less visible. This is due to the fact that LAGs promote small size projects focusing on development of micro enterprises in order to diversify the local economy.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis – results

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Rural municipalities (with LAGs)	Average Value	756	110	355	14	8,870	290,554	226,708
	Median	569	93	263	13	8,473	136,981	116,398
	Standard Deviation	652	103	403	8	2,299	369,777	299,833
	Standard Deviation (%)					26%	127%	132%
Rural municipalities (without LAGs)	Average Value	701	100	340	19	8,235	174,358	134,395
	Median	603	79	250	16	7,701	62,499	47,531
	Standard Deviation	522	82	320	13	2,340	314,312	250,191
	Standard Deviation (%)					28%	180%	186%
Urban municipalities	Average Value	2,969	432	599	6	9,198	6,070,192	3,478,376
	Median	2,166	306	398	6	8,877	1,623,772	1,143,413
	Standard Deviation	1,461	219	373	12	2,468	8,193,506	4,214,643
	Standard Deviation (%)					27%	135%	121%

Sources: NSI [18, 19] and author's calculation

Legend: 1—total number of unemployed; 2 –number of unemployed; 3—number of unemployed to 29 age,4-number of long-term unemployed; 5—unemployment rate; 6—the average annual income per person,7—net revenues from sales (thousand BGN); 8—output (thousand BGN).

CONCLUSIONS

In Bulgaria, most of the regions are lagging behind in their socio-economic development. The main reasons for that are the negative demographics trends, aging population and low economic activities. The CLLD is focused on specific sub-regional areas and the projects usually take place in the active rural areas. The measuring of the effects of local territorial strategies is based on descriptive analysis. They show the positive impact on economic environment of the rural municipalities which have introduced the local integrated strategies under LEADER/CLLD program. The territorial cohesion policy is useful and has a positive economic effect for small municipalities, which face various risks such as poverty and labor market isolation. The CLLD therefore is an effective mechanism for increasing diversification of sources of employment and income and providing support for micro and small enterprises and for promoting entrepreneurship. Despite the benefits of concertation of investments on the territories with specific needs, the economic and social divergences still persist and rural municipalities are lagging behind when compared to urban municipalities. In addition, there are still some rural and urban areas in Bulgaria which do not receive sufficient national and EU funding due to the fact that they are not considered attractive for investments.

The combination of the both integrated territorial approaches (bottom-up and top down) has advantages which decrease the depopulation in rural areas and ensure financial support for “white spots”, i.e. settlements located in the peripheries of the cities, which have not received the grant up to now from the operational programme funded by ESIF. Combing CLLD and ITIs for the next programming period (2021-2027) would be beneficial for these areas as it would create the necessary conditions for stimulating economic activities and ultimately making these areas attractive for business development.

It is important to take into consideration the fact that Bulgaria has insufficient experience in implementing integrated territorial strategies at regional level, and there are still some difficulties when it comes to the coordination between the central government, managing authorities, regional bodies and project beneficiaries. The establishment of a common strategy for implementation of the territorial integrated approach and insisting on training of the administrative staff and improving the coordination between the various bodies and participants is therefore crucial for their successful execution.

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