

LOCAL INITIATIVES FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The article describes the LEADER instrument - concept and implementation in Romania's rural area, through Local Action Groups (LAGs), their role in the socio-economic development of local communities, the development path, from the beginning to the present, and how to implement a bottom-up approach - in response to the needs identified at the local level in order to increase the quality of life in rural areas by supporting local initiatives, thus specifically addressing the problems identified at the local community level, for periods programming period 2007-2013, and 2014-2020, when Romania received support from the European Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development (EAFRD).

Key words: LEADER, Local Action Group, local initiatives, rural area, Romania

INTRODUCTION

What is LEADER? The LEADER program (the title comes from the French “Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Economie Rurale”, - “Links between actions for the development of the rural economy”) is an instrument of the European Union to support rural development projects initiated at local level, in order to support rural areas. At the level of the Member States of the European Union, the LEADER instrument has been implemented since 1991 and until 2006, three programs were developed: LEADER I, LEADER II and LEADER +. These programs are designed to encourage the implementation of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development in the community.

Since 2007, the LEADER initiative has reached a level of maturity that allows the competent authorities and local action groups in the Member States to allow the implementation of the LEADER approach on an extended basis in the national rural development program [1, 2, 3, 12, 17].

In Romania, according to the provisions of the Council Regulation no. 1698/2005 on the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) for the period 2007-2013 [4, 6], in the National Rural Development Program of Romania, a fourth

axis was introduced called the LEADER Axis, through which the implementation of this concept was initiated.

In the 2014-2020 programming period, based on the provisions of Regulation (EU) no. 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development provided by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) [5], Romania introduced in the National Rural Development Program of Romania, Measure 19 - LEADER Local Development. Many studies analyzed and assessed the impact of the implementation of LEADER instrument in Romania through the Local Action Groups [10, 11, 14, 15, 16].

In this context, the purpose of this study was to present the LEADER concept and the state of implementation in the rural area of Romania through Local Action Groups. Also, it aimed to emphasize the role of the local communities in identifying their needs to grow the life quality and living standard sustaining the local initiatives in the periods 2007-2013, and 2014-2020.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to present the stage of implementation of the LEADER instrument in

Romania, through the Local Action Groups, the following indicators were used:

- number of Local Action Groups,
- covered area,
- number of inhabitants who benefited from the interventions of the Local Action Groups,
- number of the implemented projects,
- value of the implemented projects.

The analysis covers the programming periods: 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, using the information provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The LEADER axis in Romania, in the period 2007-2013 was based on the combination of characteristics regarding:

- territorial approach
- partnership approach
- bottom-up approach
- integrated and multisectorial approach
- innovation and experimentation
- implementation of cooperation projects
- interconnection of local partnerships.

The specifics of the LEADER implementation were given by the need for rural development of a certain territory (area) - by taking into account several types of partners (local public authorities, representatives of the private and social sector, individuals). Taking control of the development of rural areas in their own hands aimed to change the mentality of waiting for decisions at the central level, with decision-making at the local level, in which all representatives are consulted and also received the satisfaction of involvement in rural development of the respective territories. Innovative approaches based on seeking new answers to existing problems were supported, by promoting creative and innovative ways of exploiting human, natural and cultural, financial, logistical resources in compliance with environmental conditions and the principle of sustainability. The development of the communication capacity between the partners (public, social, private) has led to the improvement of the territorial coherence necessary for the development of the economy and the rural communities.

In the period 2011-2012, the territory was

covered by 163 LAGs selected in two stages, based on eligibility and selection criteria, which ensured the authorization of homogeneous LAGs from a territorial, economic and social point of view and to implement a Local Development Plan that meets the needs identified at the local level. The 163 LAGs covered an area of approx. 142,000 km², representing approximately 63% of the eligible territory, consisting of communes and small towns with a maximum of 20,000 inhabitants and about 58% of the LEADER eligible population. The total financial allocation on Axis 4 was EUR 524,094,639, of which support was provided for the construction of public-private partnerships (Sub-measure 431.1), for the running costs of the LAG (sub-measure 431.2), for implementation of selected projects within the strategies (measure 4.1) and for the development of cooperation projects (measure 421) (Table 1).

Table 1. Financial allocation and number of projects contracted under the LEADER Axis

Sub-measure	Financial allocation EURO	Number of projects contracted
4.1	451,874,742	7,038
421	3,749,704	92
431.1	6,639,557	97
431.2	61,830,636	163

Source: Own data processing www.madr.ro [6].

In the territories covered by the Local Action Groups were implemented projects aimed at increasing the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors, with a financial allocation of 183,081,072 euros (of which 95,202,158 euros public expenditure and 87,878,914 euros private expenditure), projects which participated in the improvement of the environment and rural area, with a financial allocation of EUR 31,381 (of which Euro 29,498 in public expenditure and Euro 1,883 in private expenditure), as well as projects that supported the increase the quality of life and diversification of the rural economy, with a financial allocation of 268,762,289 euros (of which 220,385,078 euros public expenditure

and 48,377,211 euros from private expenditure).

Between 2014 and 2020, the aim was to cover the entire territory eligible for LEADER for a balanced territorial development, which would ensure the critical mass for the correct and efficient implementation of local development strategies and the efficiency of operating costs. Community Led Local Development (CLLD) is a way of implementation that allows local partners to develop the Local Development Strategy (LSD), based on the analysis of needs and priorities specific to the territory. In the LDS were coherently selected measures adapted to the specific priorities of the territory and capitalizing on the authentic local potential of the territory. LEADER contributes to the development of rural areas, including small towns with a maximum 20,000 inhabitants, and facilitates the implementation of projects with an innovative multisectorial and cross-cutting approach, to support the needs of the population in the LEADER eligible territory and meet the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy. The support provided under this measure will contribute to reducing the degree of poverty and the risk of social exclusion when developing infrastructure and services in rural areas, increasing and diversifying the number of jobs in rural areas, preserving local heritage, improving collaboration between rural actors and accessing modern ITC infrastructure.

In the current programming period 2014-2020, through measure 19 - Support for local development LEADER (CLLD - Local development placed under the responsibility of the community) in the National Rural Development Program 2014-2020, Managing Authority for the National Rural Development Program (MA NRDP) selected 239 Local Development Strategies (LDSs) that are implemented by 239 Local Action Groups (LAGs) authorized. LAGs include 2,735 communes and 142 cities with less than 20,000 inhabitants, covering 92% of the eligible area LEADER [7, 8, 9].

The LAG is an active private-public partnership, organized on the basis of Government Ordinance 26/2000 on

associations and foundations, consisting of representatives of the public sector, the private sector and civil society [13], appointed from a continuous and homogeneous rural territory, who developed the Local Development Strategies (LDSs) based on the needs and priorities specific to the LAG territory. The LDS includes measures that meet local needs, contribute to EAFRD objectives and generate added value and / or economic, social, cultural and natural impact in the territory. The strategies elaborated by the LAGs are materialized in projects implemented in the territorial coverage area.

The potential beneficiaries of the financing of LEADER investment projects are private, public entities, from the territory of the LAG, established by the technical fiche of the measure described in the LDS in compliance with the provisions of the specific legislation. LAGs are also eligible beneficiaries for certain public interest operations for the community and territory identified in the SDL.

As an element of novelty, in the 2014-2020 programming period, the complementarity of the LEADER approach from NRDP 2014-2020 with the Human Capital Operational Program (HCOP) 2014-2020 regarding the social infrastructure was ensured.

Thus, LEADER finances the infrastructure component for social services "hard component", and through HCOP - Priority Axis 5 "Local development under the responsibility of the community" - Specific objective 5.2 "Reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion from marginalized communities in rural areas and cities with a population of up to 20,000 inhabitants", the "soft component" services are financed, aiming at the operationalization of the social infrastructure projects financed by LEADER. The potential beneficiaries of the projects supported by HCOP, are the local authorities with responsibilities in the field, in partnership with the relevant social actors or LAGs, providers of social services under the law.

Within these integrated projects, social service providers will operate in the

infrastructure financed for this purpose by PNDR - LEADER measure.

Measure 19 has a total allocation of 637,631,674 euros, distributed to Sub-measure 19.1 "Preparatory support for the development of local development strategies", Sub-measure 19.2 "Support for the implementation of actions within the local development strategy", Sub-measure 19.3 "Preparation and implementation of activities Cooperation Group "- Component A" Preparatory Technical Assistance for LAG Cooperation Projects "and Component B" Implementation of Cooperation Activities of Selected LAGs "and Sub-Measure 19.4" Support for running costs". There is currently a contracting rate of about 80% of the total allocation (Table 2).

Table 2. Financial allocation/sub-measures, number and value of projects contracted under measure 19

sub-measure	Financial allocation NRDP 2014-2020 EURO	Projects contracted	Value Euro
Sub-measure 19.1	1,990,183	162	2,209,131
Sub-measure 19.2	495,641,759	7.181	400,199,704
Sub-measure 19.3	16,986,768	62 – Component A 65 – Component B	222,783 – Component A 3,835,586 – Component B
Sub-measure 19.4	123,013,163	478	100,298,715

Source: Own data processing www.madr.ro [7].

The number of Local Action Groups has increased compared to the previous programming period, and the area targeted by local development strategies is about 92% of the total eligible area (total communes and cities up to 20,000 inhabitants) and about 86% of the LEADER eligible population, with a positive impact on the development of local communities and rural areas in Romania. Also, in the current programming period,

LAGs benefit from an increased allocation [6, 8]. (Table 3)

Table 3. The comparative situation of the allocation and number of LAGs between the programming periods

	NRDP 2007-2013	NRDP 2014-2020
	EURO	EURO
Financial allocation	524,094,639	637,631,873
No. LAG	163	239

Source: Own comparison based on the data from [6, 8].

CONCLUSIONS

LEADER is an important instrument for Romania in increasing the economic and social development of rural areas, reducing urban-rural disparities and promoting social inclusion.

The current situation reflects a capacity for development at local level that does not fully meet local needs, especially in terms of collaboration between public and private partners.

The strategic approach must be encouraged and developed by placing it under the responsibility of the community.

Compared to the previous programming period, the number of Local Action Groups has grown, and about 92% of the eligible area is destined for the implementation of the local development strategies.

Also, a positive impact on the local communities and rural areas is going to have 86% of the LEADER eligible population.

All these aspects prove the effectiveness of the implementation of LEADER for assuring the development of the rural areas.

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