

## LOCAL ACTION GROUPS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON LOCAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT. CASE STUDY: LAG “VEDEA GĂVANU BURDEA”, OLT COUNTY, ROMANIA

Mihaela Felicia FLORESCU (STANCIU), Adrian TUREK RAHOVEANU

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, 59 Mărăști Blvd, District 1, 011464, Bucharest, Romania, Phone: +40213182564, Fax: +40213182888, Emails: mihaela1977florescu@gmail.com, turek.adrian@managusamv.ro

**Corresponding author:** turek.adrian@managusamv.ro

### Abstract

*Over time, the LEADER Program has brought a number of positive changes to rural areas and has played an innovative role in addressing many of the problems facing the rural environment. Since its launch in 1991, the LEADER axis has sought to provide rural communities in the European Union with an effective method of involving local partners in guiding and managing the future development of the area covered by LAGs. The main aim of the paper is to demonstrate the usefulness of Local Action Groups at regional level for the sustainable development of rural areas through its actors: local communities, existing economic agents in the LAG, local public administrations or constituent members of the LAG, public and private. A series of methods were used such as: comparative analysis, both in terms of quantity and quality, as well as the method of the questionnaire applied to a number of 340 inhabitants in the LAG area "Vedea - Găvanu - Burdea". The implementation of the questionnaires resulted in a series of conclusions and recommendations aimed at increasing the income of the inhabitants of the LAG territory, as well as improving the quality of life, stabilizing it, as well as ways to make better use of local agricultural products. In the opinion of local actors, the LAG must continue to maintain the current line of evolution and capitalize on the rural, natural and ethno-cultural potential of the area, by developing and increasing added value, by innovative approach to tourism, agriculture, food industry and diversification. rural economies. Public administrations in the region covered by the LAG are of the opinion that the directions in which investments should be directed are public utility infrastructure. Another recommendation is to simplify bureaucracy, for most respondents the main obstacle to accessing European funds is bureaucracy.*

**Key words:** Local Action Group, Rural Development, LEADER Program

### INTRODUCTION

Rural Development Programs (RDP), at the level of each Member State of the European Union, are a very important component of agricultural policy, promoting the sustainable development of rural areas in Europe and addressing socio-economic as well as environmental issues. The RDP is the instrument through which each Member State attracts the financial resources allocated by the EU for agriculture and rural development, which is structured in priority axes, each addressing a specialized area of intervention [6], [13]. The LEADER program is Axis 4 of the NRDP, but differs from it in its specific approach [15].

At the same time, about 90% of the EU's territory is located in rural areas, where more than half of Europe's inhabitants live [16]. In

this sense, LEADER, whose name comes from "Links between rural development actions", has had and still has, for the rural development policy of the European space, an innovative approach [10], [4], [9].

The LEADER approach, through its specific actions, will lead to the improvement of local governance and the promotion of the endogenous potential of the territories [1], [5], [8]. Also, the LEADER approach implies the consolidation of territorial coherence and the implementation of integrated actions, which can lead to the diversification and development of the rural economy, for the benefit of the communities [12], [14].

One of the main advantages of a local action group in a region is to focus, together with the actors that make it up, on the problems of that territory and to be able to make guides of the proposed measures in order to solve the

identified needs. in the territory of the LAG [2]. The community has an important role in determining the needs, but also the strategic directions of local development of micro-regions, as only those who live here can identify these needs because they face them daily [3], [11].

In order to correctly identify the needs of the members of the LAG "Vedea - Găvanu - Burdea" it was necessary to evaluate the community within the LAG, the economic agents in this region, the local public administration, as well as the active members of the LAG. already existing.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In order to achieve the main purpose of the paper, a series of methods were used such as: comparative analysis, both quantitatively and qualitatively, but also the method of the questionnaire applied to actors in the region to identify the needs of LAG "Vedea - Găvanu - Burdea".

In order to correctly identify the needs of LAG members, an assessment was required at the community level within the LAG, of the economic agents in this region, of the local public administration, as well as of the active members of the already existing LAG, and to identify the needs. community, a questionnaire was completed for 340 respondents.

The format of the proposed questionnaire followed the logic imposed by the rigors of a research and started from relatively simple questions, the complexity of which increased over time. Another approach to the questionnaire considered neutral questions containing non-specific or personal questions. The sample, in any survey, is a defining element and represents a very important and laborious technical operation, but it depends on the homogeneity and / or heterogeneity of the population. In the case of applying the questionnaire at LAG level, this element of population homogeneity is met because, by definition, any LAG has a unitary structure, it pursues territories that have common socio-cultural values.

The drafting and application of the questionnaire aimed to determine the success of the survey and the emphasis had to be on validity and to provide as accurate information as possible on the objectives set. In the process of completing the questionnaire we aimed to determine the need for questions to cover the subject under investigation and to correspond to the research objective; determining the type of questionnaire (structured, unstructured, etc.), formulating the content of the questions (depending on the type and quality of the questions) and ordering them, in a logical sequence, from simple to complex); determining the dimensions and format of the questionnaire, writing in a formula as attractive as possible; coding and elaboration of completion instructions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Presentation of the Local Action Group "Vedea Găvanu Burdea"**

The territory covered by the "Vedea Găvanu Burdea" Local Action Group includes 19 localities, of which 18 are part of Olt County (Drăgănești-Olt town and Coteana, Crâmpoia, Dăneasa, Ghimpețeni, Gostăvățu, Izvoarele, Mărunței, Mihăiești, Movileni, Nicolae Titulescu, Radomirești, Schitu, Seaca, Șerbănești, Stoicănești, Vâlcele și Văleni), and a locality - Dobrotești - is part of Teleorman County.

In accordance with the recommendations on financial allocations, the indices of component A (area and population of the LAG), respectively 985.37 Euro/km<sup>2</sup> and 19.84 Euro/inhabitant, resulted in obtaining a financial allocation of 2,317,360 Euro for the LAG „Vedea Găvanu Burdea”. Regarding the value related to the quality level (Component B), the LAG obtained a budget of 679,550.31 euros following the evaluation and selection process. Subsequently, following the approval of the Report on the outcome of the evaluation of the SDLs, as a result of the supplementation of the financial allocation, the LAG's budget was increased by 128,759.03 Euro (Table 1).

Table 1. Financial allocation of the "Vedea Găvanu Burdea" LAG

Specification	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Population	Inhabitants/km <sup>2</sup>	Financial allocation (euro)
Component A	1,084.98	62,916	57.98	2,317,360
Component B	-	-	-	679,550.31
Financial supplementation of the LDS	-	-	-	128,759.03
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>3,125,669.34</b>

Source: [7].

Following the consultations carried out by the "Vedea Găvanu Burdea" Local Action Group with all the important actors in the territory, based on the diagnostic analysis and the SWOT analysis, the objectives, priorities, areas of intervention and measures introduced in the Strategy were identified. local development of the LAG.

From a budget of over EUR 3.1 million, the Vedea Găvanu Burdea LAG has chosen to provide funding for 3 priorities (P1 - Encouraging knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural

areas, P2 - Increasing farm viability and the competitiveness of all types of agriculture in all regions and the promotion of innovative agricultural technologies and sustainable forest management and P6 - Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas), which included 9 measures, the highest financial allocation being directed the measure of development of villages (33.85%), followed by the measure of development of the non-agricultural sector (21.78%) and the measure of development of agricultural holdings (10.62%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Financial plan broken down by priorities of the "Vedea Găvanu Burdea" LAG

Priority	Measure	Financial resources (EUR)	The amount allocated (%)
P6	M7 / 6B Village development	1,058,130.09	33.85
	M6 / 6A Development of the non-agricultural sector	680,836	21.78
	M8 / 6B Social infrastructure for marginalized / at-risk-of-poverty / social exclusion communities	100,000	3.20
	M9 / 6A Support for the creation of new economic activities in the non-agricultural sector	35,000	1.12
<i>TOTAL P6</i>		<i>1,873,966.09</i>	<i>59.95</i>
P2	M4 / 2B Renewal of generations of farmers	240,000	7.68
	M2 / 2A Development of agricultural holdings	331,968.67	10.62
	M3 / 2A Supporting small farms	10,000	0.32
	M5 / 2A Supporting legally constituted associative forms	22,600.35	0.72
<i>TOTAL P2</i>		<i>604,569.02</i>	<i>19.34</i>
P1	M1 / 1C Vocational training of actors involved in the agricultural sector	22,000.37	0.70
<i>TOTAL P1</i>		<i>22,000.37</i>	<i>0.70</i>
<i>TOTAL PRIORITIES</i>		<i>2,500,535.48</i>	<i>80.00</i>
Operating and animation costs for SDL		625,133.86	20.00
<i>TOTAL GENERAL</i>		<i>3,125,669.34</i>	<i>100.00</i>

Source: [7].

The Local Development Strategy (LDS) of the Local Action Group "Vedea Găvanu Burdea" through the measures introduced in it,

contributes to the mission of the Europe 2020 Strategy, by promoting sustainable rural development within the LAG territory,

obtaining a more balanced agricultural sector from territorially and ecologically, more beneficial for the climate, more competitive and more innovative.

**Identifying the needs of LAG members "Vedea Găvanu Burdea" - case study**

In order to correctly identify the needs of the members of the LAG "Vedea - Găvanu - Burdea" it was necessary an evaluation at community level within the LAG (100 respondents), of the economic agents from this region (100 respondents), of the local

public authorities (19 respondents), as well as active members of the existing LAG (121 respondents). In this sense, questionnaires were completed and applied to a number of 340 respondents and from which a series of needs of these actors emerged.

As a characteristic of the area, the main source of income is income from agricultural activities. We can see that the role of agriculture is very important, 69% of respondents obtaining the main income from this activity (Fig.1).

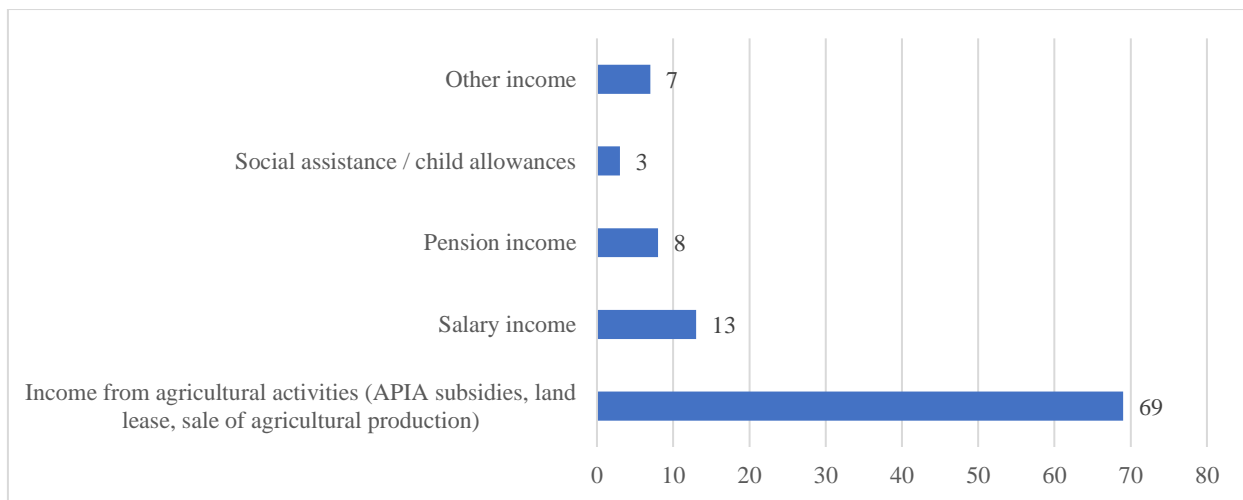


Fig. 1. What is your family's main source of income?  
 Source: Own design based on questionnaire output data.

Most of the population of this region wants to stay in the area in the next period, but there is a percentage of 28% of respondents who said they want to leave the locality where they live

in favor of an urban center (6%) or abroad (13%), or are still undecided (9%) what to do in the next period (Fig. 2).

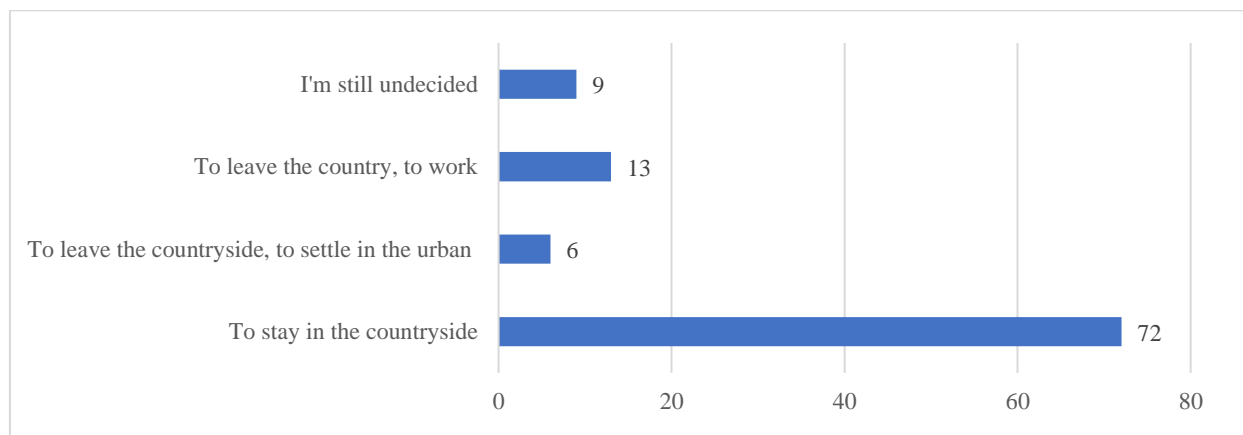


Fig. 2. What do you propose in the next period (maximum 1 year)?  
 Source: Own design based on questionnaire output data.

The main disadvantage of the area where they live and which causes dissatisfaction among the rural population is the aging population

(21.3% of respondents), lack of jobs (20.2%), which forces the labor force to migrate to areas who offer jobs even if they have to

commute or settle in another country. On the other hand, the lack of economic development perspective of the area (18.2%), the low standard of living (17.2%), the lack or insufficiency of the number of public utility

units (15%) is an important problem for the population in the region. targeted. It is important to note that none of the respondents stated that there are disadvantages in the area where they live (Fig. 3).

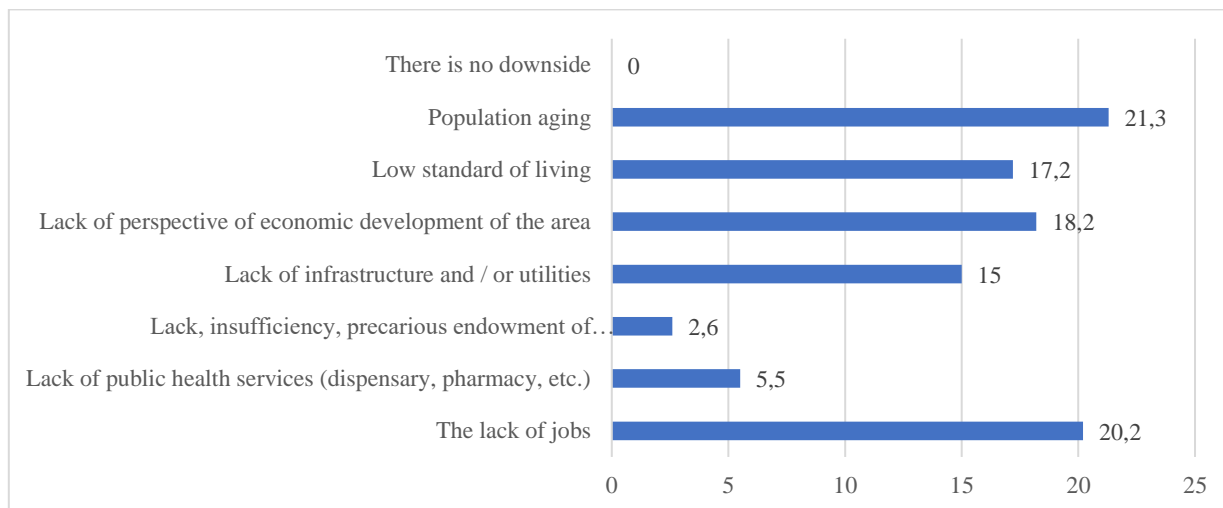


Fig. 3. What do you think is the main disadvantage of the area where you live?  
 Source: Own design based on questionnaire output data.

Regarding future investments to help the development of the area, 45.5% of respondents believe that the direction in which investments should be directed would be the one aimed at creating new jobs, followed by the introduction of utilities in the area.

(29.3%) which would lead to an increase in the standard of living and quality of life of the inhabitants and implicitly to their stabilization in the area and the reduction of migration to urban areas (Fig. 4).

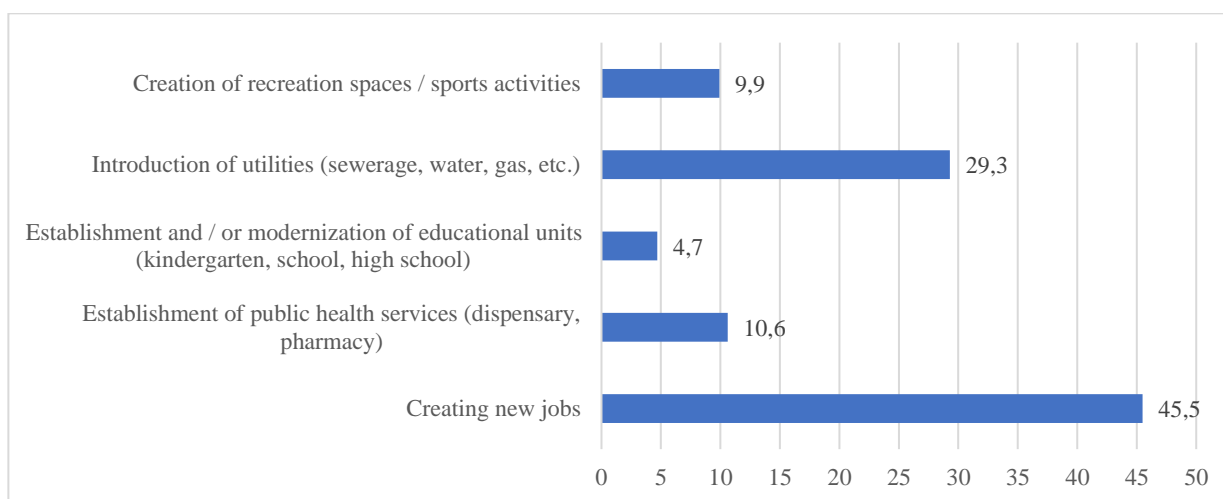


Fig. 4. In which direction should future investments be directed?  
 Source: Own design based on questionnaire output data.

**From the point of view of the inhabitants of the LAG area,** the sub-measure considered to be best suited to the needs of the respondents, with a weight of 20% is mentioned sub-measure 6.3, followed by sub-measure 6.1. The too strict conditions necessary to access

European funds, the lack of information, the excessive bureaucracy have the most significant share among the respondents, having a value of 38%, regarding the main impediment related to accessing European funds (Fig. 5).

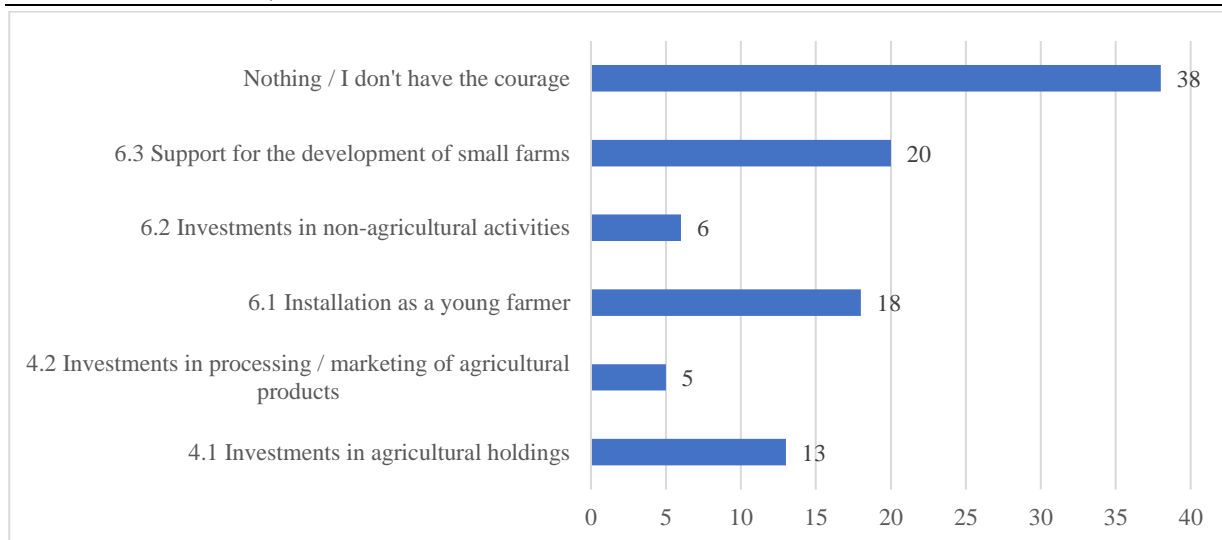


Fig. 5. What activities would you like to develop in the future through European funds?  
 Source: Own design based on questionnaire output data.

**At the level of economic agents in the LAG,** the sub-measure of investments in agricultural holdings is considered the most attractive for them (19%), followed by the sub-measure of investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural activities (15%) and the sub-measure for investments in

processing/marketing of agricultural products (14%). It should be noted that 29% of respondents do not consider that PNDR measures can produce beneficial changes in their economic activity and implicitly do not want to access any measures (Fig. 6).

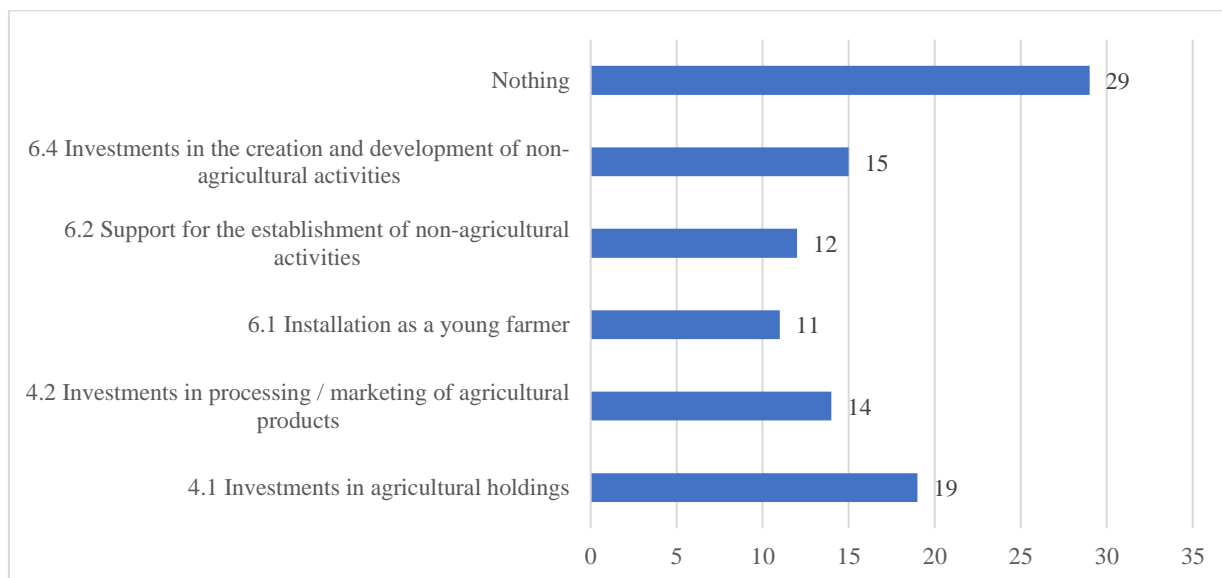


Fig. 6. What measures in the NRDP are you considering to access European funds?  
 Source: Own design based on questionnaire output data.

The main obstacles considered by the economic agents interviewed in accessing European funds are: bureaucracy - too many required documents (43%), lack of possibilities to co-finance the investment

(31%), strict conditions for accessing European funds (20%). It should be noted that none of the interviewees stated that they had not heard of European funds (Fig. 7).

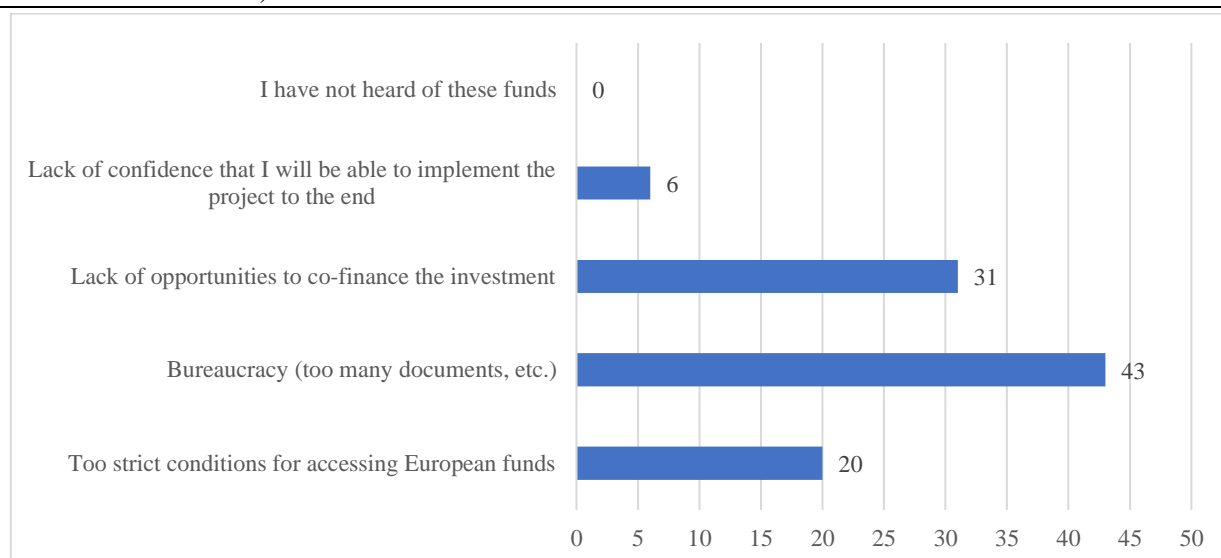


Fig. 7. What do you think is the main obstacle to accessing European funds?  
 Source: Own design based on questionnaire output data.

**At the level of local public administrations** in the region covered by the LAG (applied on a sample of 19 representatives - town halls), they are of the opinion that the directions to which the locality they belong to and represent should go, are the investments in infrastructure. public utility units with a share of 94.7% of the total respondents. They consider that the main problem identified at the community level is the lack of infrastructure and / or utilities: sewerage, drinking water, natural gas (68.4%), as well as the lack of perspective of economic development of the area (26.3%) and the endowment precarious educational units: kindergarten, school (5.3%).

Most consider that the main obstacle in accessing European funds is the bureaucracy, this being recognized by 52.6% of respondents, followed by those who consider the access conditions as too strict (47.4%).

**Regarding the active members** (applied on a sample of 121 representatives from the "Vedea Găvanu Burdea" LAG) 44.6% of them stated that the activity carried out by the LAG is very good, reaching most of the objectives of the Local Development Strategy, 33.9% consider the activity as good and 21.5% of them consider the activity as satisfactory. The main strength of the LAG they consider is that the LAG was able to identify the specific needs facing the micro-region (43.8% of respondents), and then easier

access to European funds through the LAG. compared to national competition (24.8%) and proximity to the community (16.5%).

The main impediments to accessing European funds in the 2014-2020 programming period according to the active members of the LAG were: insufficient budget to cover all project applications (35.5%), excessive bureaucracy (33.1%), too strict conditions necessary to access European funds (17.4%), lack of opportunities to co-finance investments (14%).

In order to make the activity more efficient, the active members consider that a more accentuated promotion of the LAG in the territory is necessary (37.2%), a more active involvement of the representatives of the business environment (30.6%) and last but not least of the public partners (15.7%).

The community within which the "Vedea - Găvanu - Burdea" LAG is located has an extremely important role in determining the needs, as well as for establishing the strategic directions for local development of the micro-region, because only those who live here can identify the needs of the place. especially because they face them daily.

## CONCLUSIONS

Given that the resources of the subsoil, the industrial tradition and the degree of urbanization are limited, the main development potential of the area is related to the rural environment. In these conditions, the development strategy of the Local Action Group "Vedea - Găvanu - Burdea" must continue to maintain the current line of evolution and capitalize on the rural, natural and ethno-cultural potential of the area, by developing and increasing added value, through the innovative approach of tourism, agriculture, food industry and diversification of rural economies.

Increasing added value in these traditional sectors - labor-intensive but less capital-intensive and technology-intensive - depends on creating a brand image of the area with a number of clear, easily recognizable consumer characteristics that create positive associations. with traditional, area-specific life and to lead consumers to prefer area-specific products compared to other alternative products and to make them pay an appropriate price. In this sense, a special importance must be given to the definition of brand images, both for tourist products and for agricultural products, food of origin or traditional that can be used as tourist attractions.

In this context, the revitalization and exploitation of traditional crafts, of local traditional products is necessary to follow the same logic, of integration, in relation to the development of tourism as for agricultural and food products. Moreover, traditional crafts can be, insofar as they are integrated in commercial circuits, vectors for the diversification of rural economies dependent on agriculture, thus contributing to increasing the incomes of the rural population and stabilizing it, as well as high value-added ways to capitalize on local agricultural products.

The implementation of the questionnaires resulted in a series of recommendations aimed at both increasing the income of the inhabitants of the LAG territory and improving the quality of life. Thus, the public administrations in the region covered by the

LAG are of the opinion that the directions towards which the localities should be directed should be the investments in the infrastructure of the public utility units. Another recommendation is to simplify bureaucracy. Most believe that the main obstacle to accessing European funds is bureaucracy. At the same time, the access conditions should be more relaxed as they are too strict in the opinion of the respondents.

## REFERENCES

- [1]Albu, M., Horbowski, T., 2017, Principiul subsidiarității și abordarea leader – instrument pentru dezvoltarea rurală a Uniunii Europene, Conferința "Contribuția tinerilor cercetători la dezvoltarea administrației publice", Chișinău, Moldova (The principle of subsidiarity and the leader approach - a tool for rural development of the European Union, Conference "The contribution of young researchers to the development of public administration", Chisinau, Moldova).
- [2]Albu, R.G., Chitu, I.B., 2014, Local Action Groups (LAGS)-An Important Instrument in Ensuring the Sustainable Development of Rural Areas in Romania. Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brașov, Economic Sciences. Series V, Vol. 7(2): 97-104.
- [3]De Los Ríos-Carmenado, I., Turek-Rahoveanu, A., Salvo, M., Rodriguez, P., 2012, Territorial competitiveness for rural development in Romania: Analysis of critical influential factors from WWP model. Agrarian Economy and Rural Development - Realities and Perspectives for Romania, pp. 89-94.
- [4]Esparcia, J., Escribano, J., Javier, S., 2015, From development to power relations and territorial governance: Increasing the leadership role of LEADER Local Action Groups in Spain, Journal of Rural Studies, Vol. 42, pp. 29-42
- [5]Esparcia, J., Escribano, J., Buciega, A., 2016, A perspective of LEADER Method in Spain based on the Analysis of Local Action Groups. Evaluating the European Approach to Rural Development: Grassroots Experiences of the LEADER Programme. Ashgate, Perspectives on Rural Policy and Planning, pp. 33-51.
- [6]Florescu, M. F., Turek-Rahoveanu, A., 2019, Local Development Strategy: A Key Element of Rural Development: Proceedings of the The 33rd International Business Information Management (IBIMA) Conference, Granada Spain.
- [7]GAL Vedea-Gavanu-Burdea, 2021, A short presentation of Leader Programme and of GAL Vedea-Gavanu-Burdea, www.galvgb.ro, Accessed on July 15, 2021.
- [8]Konečný, O., 2019, The Leader Approach Across the European Union: One Method of Rural



Development, Many Forms of Implementation, European Countries. Vol. 11(1):1-16.

[9]Kováč, I., 2000, LEADER, a new social order, and the Central-and East-European countries. *Sociologia Ruralis* Vol. 40(2):181-189.

[10]Marquardt, D., Möllers, J., Buchenrieder, G., 2012, Social Networks and Rural Development: LEADER in Romania, *Sociologia Ruralis*, Vol. 52(4):398-431.

[11]Maurel, M.-C., 2008, Local Development Stakeholders and the European Model: Learning the LEADER Approach in the New Member States, *Journal: Czech Sociological Review*, Issue No: 03, pp. 511-529.

[12]Pocol, C. B., Moldovan, T.C., Cavicchioli, D., Cordea, M. I., 2017, Has the LEADER Programme been effective in promoting local rural development? An evaluation on two Romanian regions, *AgroLife Scientific Journal*, Vol. 6(1):201-211.

[13]Podaru, A. M., Florescu, M. F., Turek-Rahoveanu A., 2018, The Local Action Groups - Key Actors of the Rural Development. *Proceedings of the The 32nd International Business Information Management (IBIMA) Conference Seville Spain*.

[14]Stratan, A., 2013, Planificarea strategică în suportul dezvoltării comunităților locale. (Strategic planning in support of local community development) In: *AKADEMOS*. 2013, No. 1(28), pp. 62-64.

[15]Turek-Rahoveanu, A., 2012, "LEADER approach" - an opportunity for rural development. *Proceedings of the Agrarian Economy and Rural Development - Realities and Perspectives for Romania Conference (AERD'12)*. Vol. 3, Issue 2012.

[16]Van der Ploeg, J. D., Renting, H., Brunori, G., Knickel, K., Mannion, J., Marsden, T., 2000, Rural Development: From Practices and Policies towards Theory. *Sociologia Ruralis Journal*, 40(4): 391-408.

