

LEADER - THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE RURAL AREA IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The paper presents an analysis of the situation of social services in rural areas, as well as the physical infrastructure - in which they take place. Given the degree of poverty and vulnerability of the population in rural areas, integrated interventions through LEADER come in response to local needs. LAGs participate in developing and strengthening the role of local governance by involving public authorities, the private sector and civil society in community-based decision-making. Some of these decisions are aimed at solving social problems at the local level. Through LEADER, the LAG is a facilitator for the implementation of intervention and social assistance programs, as well as other community services. The situation of the distribution of LEADER interventions by regions is presented, detailing the number and value of projects financed by EAFRD and those financed by ESF.

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

INTRODUCTION

LEADER is a development instrument for local communities, which is based on the principle of "bottom-up" approach acting by identifying the needs of a defined territory and finding solutions that contribute to its socio-economic development. LEADER is implemented by Local Action Groups (LAGs), which play an important role in the multisectoral development of local communities and contribute to increasing the quality of life in rural areas. At European level, the subject of LEADER has been the subject of numerous analyzes and studies, given the impact of this instrument on the community [3, 14, 15, 16, 17].

Between 2011 and 2020, when Romania received support from the European Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development (EAFRD), there was an increase in the use of European non-reimbursable funds, which led to improved living conditions in rural areas through infrastructure, services basic quality, job creation and social services.

The Local Action Group (LAG) is a private-public partnership made up of representatives of the public sector, the private sector and

civil society, from a delimited territory that includes communes and small towns with a population of up to 20,000 inhabitants. The role of LAGs is to develop and implement a Local Development Strategy that includes identifying local needs and finding concrete solutions to address them. European funds for agriculture and rural development provide Member States with funding to implement the strategies, which are managed locally by LAGs. One of the aims of LAGs is to increase the quality of life at local level, including from a social point of view, by addressing vulnerable groups.

In the programming period 2014-2020, through measure 19 - Support for local development LEADER (DLRC - Local development placed under the responsibility of the community) from the National Rural Development Program 2014-2020, Managing Authority for the National Rural Development Program (MA PNDR) selected 239 Local Development Strategies (SDLs) which are implemented by 239 Local Action Groups (LAGs) authorized by the PNDR MA for operation. The Local Action Group elaborates the Local Development Strategy, within which are established the activities, the

necessary resources for the development of the communities and realizes the selection of the projects submitted by the applicants related to all the measures proposed in the SDL. LAGs include 2,735 communes and 142 cities with less than 20,000 inhabitants, covering 92% of the LEADER eligible area and about 86% of the LEADER eligible population, with a positive impact on the development of local communities and rural areas in Romania [2, 6, 8].

The social services infrastructure represents the framework that allows and determines the provision of social services. The quality of social services provided at national or local level is influenced by the level of development of the specific infrastructure. Investments in the development of social infrastructure are one of the instrumental variables that can increase the quality of social services provided to the categories of beneficiaries.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to present the stage of implementation of the LEADER instrument in Romania regarding the social infrastructure through the Local Action Groups, a series of indicators were used: number of contracts through which social infrastructure objectives were financed through LEADER, number of contracts through which operationalized this infrastructure through HCOP and the total value of the contracts.

The analysis covers the period between 2014 and May 31, 2021, using the bibliography and processing of information and data provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Agency for Financing Rural Investments and the Ministry of Investment and European Projects on the analysis and evaluation of vulnerable groups, NRDP and HCOP financing contracts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Starting with the 2014-2020 programming period, the European Commission has proposed a new initiative to support territorial development, Community Local Led

Development (CLLD). Noting the impact of the LEADER program initiated in 1991 and continued to date with significant results at the level of the territories benefiting from this funding from the funds included in the Common Agricultural Policy, to achieve a scaling of the LEADER approach from a niche development to a broader method of integrated local development, the European Commission proposed in 2014 through Regulation 1303 a multi-fund approach. Thus, the CLLD initiative proposes to maintain the bottom-up approach, expanding the intervention territory and providing more types of funding to identify and cover local needs. The funds available to finance Local Development Strategies are the EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development), which remains the only fund with a mandatory minimum contribution of 5% of each Member State's financial envelope allocated to rural development, ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), ESF (European Social Fund) and EMFF (European Maritime and Fisheries Fund) [4, 5, 11, 12, 13].

At European level, in the 2014-2021 programming period, there were several types of approaches, starting from the full use of a single fund out of the 4 (most local action groups), to the possibility of choosing 2, 3 or even all funds. In Romania, the Partnership Agreement stipulated the implementation of CLLD only at urban level, by combining ERDF and ESF; instead, for the Local Action Groups in rural areas (funded by the EAFRD) and the fisheries (funded by the EMFF), the single-fund approach was maintained. In order for the Local Development Strategies of the rural LAGs to obtain other types of funding, a complementary approach was taken, in the sense that priority axis 5 was reserved from the HCOP (Human Capital Operational Program). Only the beneficiaries of social infrastructure projects selected by LAGs and financed by the LEADER measure could participate in the calls for project proposals. 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 services -"soft component", 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 NRDP - LEADER measure [1, 7].

The LAGs initiated animation actions that included workshops, seminars, etc. in order to collect data that reflect the reality in the territory, so that the measures introduced in the SDL meet the real needs, specific to the territory concerned. Within the Local Development Strategies (LDS), the Local Action Groups (LAGs) have planned, following the diagnostic analysis of the territory, social infrastructure measures, mentioning the eligibility and selection conditions for the projects related to the target group for which the investments in social infrastructure (insufficiently developed or non-existent). Social infrastructure projects must ensure their operation by operationalizing the infrastructure by an entity accredited as a provider of social services and in this regard was agreed collaboration/cooperation with HCOP which ensures the operationalization of structures made by LAG with adequate staff and trained by HCOP.

Among the 239 LDS selected by MA NRDP through Measure 19 - LEADER Local Development:

- 130 LDSs were scored in the selection process for the inclusion of social infrastructure measures, with a total non-reimbursable allocation of 28,728,374 Euro;
- 106 LDSs include combined measures (social infrastructure + actions dedicated to minorities) with a total non-reimbursable allocation of 20,114,347 Euro.

Analyzing the available data, it results that at the level of AFIR were signed 289 contracts totaling 21,705,797.34 euros, which are in various stages of implementation, or part of them completed, financed through Local Development Strategies covering the territory of 181 LAGs.

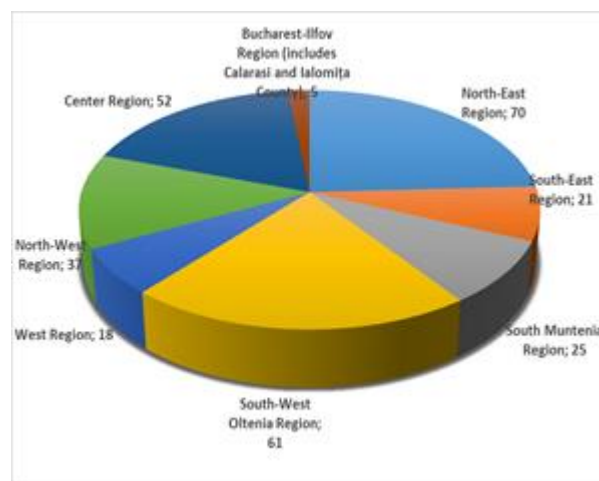


Fig. 1. Regional distribution of LEADER-funded social infrastructure projects (number of projects)

Source: Processing of authors according to the data available on <http://opendata.afir.info/>, Accessed on 20.07.2021.

According to the research "Analysis and evaluation of vulnerable groups in order to establish the need for social services" developed in 2018 by the Directorate of Social Services Policy within the Ministry of Labor and Social Justice, covering the period 1.09.2016 - 20.03.2018, "for 4 of the 8 regions development group the group with the highest share is represented by people in poverty.

These regions are Bucharest Ilfov, North East, Center and North West with over 40%; In 4 development regions, the share of elderly people identified as the most vulnerable group is high, reaching 45% in the case of the West region", which makes the need for social services as necessary as possible. Through LEADER, the need for social services as well as the contracts that have been financed as presented in Table 1.

Comparing the number of contracts through which social infrastructures were financed by the LEADER measure at regional level with the level identified by MMPS for the need for social services, it is noted that the LAGs in the North-East and North-West regions

performed a diagnostic analysis based on the real needs of the territory, financing through both LEADER and HCOP, social infrastructure structures in a proportion similar to the necessary needs; in the South-West and Central regions, the LAGs financed

a higher percentage of projects related to the needs of social services, and in the South-East, South-Muntenia, West and Bucharest-Ilfov regions there is a lack of interest in covering the need for social services.

Table 1. Regional distribution of the need for social services and contracts financed by LEADER

Region	Regional distribution of social service needs	Regional distribution of contracts for social infrastructure through LEADER	Regional distribution of contracts for the operationalization of social infrastructures through HCOP
North- East Region	19%	24%	23%
South-East Region	13%	7%	9%
South-Muntenia Region	17%	9%	4%
South West Oltenia Region	12%	21%	24%
West Region	11%	6%	3%
North-West Region	13%	13%	16%
Center Region	12%	18%	20%
Bucharest Ilfov Region (includes Calarasi and Ialomita County)	3%	2%	0%

Source: Processing of the authors of the research “Analysis and evaluation of vulnerable groups in order to establish the need for social services”, 2018 _ _ Analysis_and_evaluation_of_vulnerable_groups.pdf (mmuncii.ro) and according to the data available on <http://opendata.afir.info/>, Accessed on 10.06 .2021 and by processing the document “List of POCU projects contracted by implementation regions as of May 31, 2021” published on June 7, 2021 on the MIPE website.

The distribution of contracts for the development (through LEADER) and the operationalization (through HCOP) of social infrastructures, is presented in Table 2 [9, 10].

Table 2. Distribution by region of social infrastructure contracts

Region	No projects of LEADER	Total public value (mil. euro)	No projects of HCOP	Total value public (mil. euro)	% of projects by both funds	Total amount of social intervention (mil.euro)
North- East	70	5.3	22	21.13	31.43%	26.49
South-East	21	2	9	8.24	42.86%	10.24
South-Muntenia	25	2.16	4	3.81	16.00%	5.97
South West Oltenia	61	4.45	23	22.49	37.70%	26.93
West	18	1.07	3	2.74	16.67%	3.81
North-West	37	2.9	15	14.43	40.54%	17.33
Center Region	52	3.29	19	18.14	36.54%	21.43
Bucharest Ilfov Region (includes Calarasi and Ialomita County)	5	0.46	0	0	0.00%	0.46
TOTAL	289	21.63	95	90.97	32.87%	112.67

Source: Processing of authors according to the data available on <http://opendata.afir.info/>, Accessed on 10.06.2021 and by processing the document "List of POCU projects contracted by implementation regions as of May 31, 2021" published on June 7, 2021 on the page internet at MIPE.

CONCLUSIONS

Local Action Groups are active partnerships that develop and implement their own strategies, playing an important role at the level of local communities through actions aimed at identifying social problems and solutions to them in rural areas.

Through local development strategies, LAGs identify the real needs of people in marginalized communities at risk of poverty or social exclusion, for which they propose solutions and provide funding to achieve the objectives proposed through strategies based on the needs identified in the territory. It is well known that in rural areas the lack of social services is exacerbated, although the worst problems are encountered here, the intervention of LAGs thus complements public policies on the provision of social services (which address general issues) by meeting specific needs at the level of some communities.

There are differences depending on the region in terms of social infrastructure developed and operationalized through the LEADER and POCU instrument, by reference to the level identified by the MLPS for social services needs, as follows:

- In the North-East, South-West Oltenia and Center regions, several requests for financing for infrastructure and social services were registered compared to the identified needs;
- In the South-East, South Muntenia and Center regions, the requests for non-reimbursable support are in a smaller proportion than the identified needs for social services;
- In the North-West and Bucharest-Ilfov regions, including Ialomița and Călărași counties, it is found that funding applications for social services cover the percentage identified for those needs.

The differences between the level of infrastructure contracts and those for the support of social services can be explained by the fact that the infrastructure part or the operational part is supported by local funding sources (public or private).

The LAGs, through the measures included in the development strategies, facilitate the

provision and development of social, socio-medical, educational services to the people who are part of the vulnerable groups in the rural communities.

These activities are complemented by activities in the field of legal assistance for the regulation of identity documents, property, civil status (where applicable), obtaining social assistance rights (assistance benefits / social services), the field of combating discrimination or of segregation (by promoting multiculturalism, addressed equally to Roma and non-Roma ethnic groups), housing (including housing rehabilitation and / or legalization of utility insurance).

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