

LOCAL ACTION GROUPS (LAGS) – AN IMPORTANT INSTRUMENT IN ENSURING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Local action groups (LAGs), the key element of LEADER approach, are intended to identify and put into practice, using the public-private partnership, a local development strategy which harmoniously combines the interests of all players involved into the development of rural areas: inhabitants, organizations, professional unions, local politicians, environmental associations, cultural and community service providers, mass-media etc. The involvement of LAGs into the decision making process in respect of the future of rural region ensures the premises of a sustainable development within the rural area, in consistency with its three dimensions: economic, social and environmental.*

Key words: *LAG, sustainable development, rural areas, local development strategy.*

1. Introduction

LEADER (Liaisons entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale) was established by the European Commission in 1991. LEADER programme was designed with the aim to support "the development of sustainable rural communities following the reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy" [5].

During the first stage, LEADER received funding from the EU structural funds as a separate Community Initiative. Starting with 2007, the programme was co-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)[6].

LEADER is based on an economic development model of rural areas called:

"Community-led rural development theory". This model, presented by Terluin in the paper "Rural regions in the EU: exploring differences in economic development", identifies "a main precondition for generating and sustaining economic development in rural regions: the existence of community capacity to function effectively on a self-help basis. Many rural regions and communities experience genuine difficulties in generating economic development, largely due to insufficient capacity to solve economic problems, an inadequate institutional milieu and lack of political responsibilities. The community-led rural development theory focuses on the strengthening of the self-help capacity of

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local actors, which is considered to be a major precondition for establishing and sustaining local economic development. Partnerships and adjustments of the institutional structures are seen as the main tools in the process of capacity building" [3, page 77].

LEADER is an important instrument in reducing the economic and social imbalance between the rural and urban regions in Romania.

Romania's population has a rural level significantly higher as compared to other countries in the European Union. Many of the rural communities have a very reduced contribution to the economical development. The rural regions still keep a traditional way of living and the same social structure. [7]

As compared to the EU average, the risk of poverty and social exclusion is much higher in the area of Eastern Europe countries.

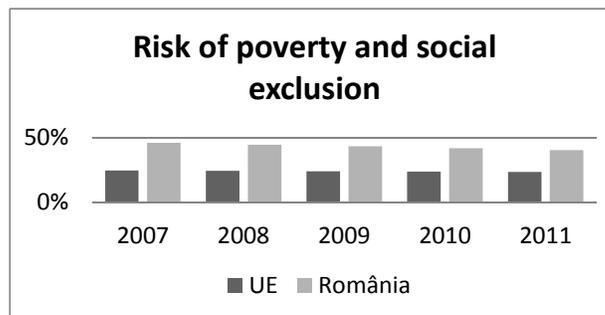


Fig. 1. *The evolution of risk of poverty and social exclusion in Romania as compared to EU average*

Between 2007 and 2011, Romania had a decrease of poverty and social exclusion risk from 45.9% to 40.3% of population. In 2007, the EU average was of 24.4% and it decreased to 23.4% in 2010 [8].

The rural economy presents important differences depending on the country regions, specific demographical features, social and economic characteristics. This differentiation is visible especially in respect of the population's cost of living and the lack of alternative income sources.

The rural economy falls predominantly within the primary sector (within its structure, agriculture weighs 60%, as compared to EU where the share is of 14-15%). The Romanian rural regions are affected by the lack of infrastructure and its deficiencies that affect both the

economic development, and the quality of life. The most important problems relate to: quality of roads, access to medical care and rural population's access to education [8].

We think that part of above mentioned issues may be solved through the LEADER programme. Due to the ever-increasing role the LEADER approach has played in realizing rural development policy, Local Action Groups (LAGs) have become crucial to the institutional system of rural development [2, p. 31].

Local Action Groups (LAGs) are made up of public and private partners from the rural territory, and must include representatives from different socio-economic sectors. They receive financial assistance to implement local development

strategies, by awarding grants to local projects.

"LEADER means listening to the voice of local citizens and increasing their participation" [4, p.19].

2. Leader Programme in Romania in the Past and Future Expectations

In 2011, with the financial support of NRDP (National Rural Development Programme), it was established the National Rural Development Network. This authority intends to encourage the exchange of ideas (promotion of good practices), cooperation between the players from rural areas and cooptation of all organizations and institutions involved into the rural development.

In Romania, the implementation of LEADER approach and the formation of Local Action Groups (LAGs) started during the period 2007-2013 throughout the NRDP. During 2011 and 2012, in Romania were registered 163 LAGs, covering an area of approx. 142,000 km², with a participation of 30% of the total population, i.e. 6.7 million inhabitants, and with a territorial distribution of LAGs more concentrated in West and Center [8].

During the implementation of local development strategies (LDS) and operation of LAGs, it was proved that LEADER approach may contribute to a balanced and sustainable development of rural territories and it may accelerate their structural evolution. Local players involvement into the development of their places of origin will contribute to local development and lead to a dynamic development, on the bases of a strategy of local development prepared, implemented and managed by the LAGs representatives [9].

LAGs, through the local partnership, shall identify and implement a strategy of local development, shall make decisions

related to the distribution and management of financial resources, with the purpose of ensuring sustainable development [7].

In order to maintain the innovative feature of LEADER approach it is important to finance the actions of putting value the local resources and promoting the local specificity (such process was started during the period of implementation of NRDP, 2007-2013). [9].

LEADER may be considered a measure for sustainable rural development, a real help for most rural communities which, through such an approach, are able to implement viable projects adapted to the local needs, social conditions, geographical characteristics, etc.

Considering the LEADER features: local development strategies centered on the area, "top-down" approach, public-private partnerships: creation of local action groups ("GAL"), encouraging innovation, integrate multi-sector actions, establishment of network contracts and cooperation, we consider that such kind of approach may ensure the premises for a sustainable development within the rural area, in consistency with its three dimensions: economic, social and environmental.

The LEADER Programme represents an approach offering new rural development opportunities that lay on the foundations of identifying local needs, strengthening the development capacity and implementing local development strategies in order to conserve the rural and cultural patrimony, to develop the economic environment and to improve organizational skills of the local communities [1, page 114].

The new philosophy of rural area development is based on the concept of sustainable rural development [10, p.64] which implies the harmonious combination between the agricultural (and forestry) part and the agro alimentary and non-agricultural rural economic one.

In Romania, the process of sustainable rural development is still in its incipient stages, being slowed down and sometimes blocked by the challenges faced locally and centrally, on economic and social levels.

The issues faced by the rural area include: subsistence and semi-subsistence farms, which are not viable, the poor productivity and quality of agricultural production, the insufficient and ineffective use of the available resources, the aging of population in villages, low level of education, activities of specific consultancy poorly developed, income per capita in the rural regions by 27% lower as compared to urban areas, important discrepancy between the imports of agricultural products and their export, the absence of a network of agro alimentary markets with a regulated structure, the poor development of rural infrastructure, migration of youth from rural to urban areas, the poor development of activities generating complementary/associated incomes, the defective use of local natural resources, the poor promotion of certain areas of real interest and high potential for tourism, increase of areas affected by process of land degradation, forest fund degradation with impact over lands,

biodiversity and water, groups of local initiative which disappeared after reaching their goals [11].

A priority for NRDP 2014-2020 is the sustainable development of rural areas. LEADER has not yet reached the impact aimed in Romania during 2007-2013 and there is a real potential for even a higher success in the future in respect of achieving this goal.

The identified primary needs include: to simplify the administrative procedure, to increase the LAGs managers' capacity, to raise awareness among rural population in respect of opportunities to get more involved into the development of their local communities, etc. [12].

3. Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Rural Sustainable Development

Entering into a local partnership is an important feature of Leader approach. LAGs shall identify and implement a strategy of local development, shall make decisions related to the distribution and management of financial resources.

LAGs may contribute to rural (economic, environmental and social) sustainable development (Table 1).

LAGs contribution to rural sustainable development

Table 1

ECONOMIC DIMENSION	SOCIAL DIMENSION	ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – in order to improve the economic competitiveness of the area, LAGs gather local players (from the rural area) around common projects; the competitiveness is determined by the way in which a territory uses its resources and local advantages [19]; – gather and combine human, natural and financial resources available in the public and private sectors; – contribute to rural economy diversification. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – consolidate the dialogue and cooperation between different players from the rural areas; – contribute to the settlement of potential disputes occurred in the rural region; – facilitate through the interaction of different partners the processes of adaptation and change in the agricultural sector; – contribute to the improvement of quality of life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – integrate the concerns related to environment within the local development strategies; – encourage NGOs (which militate for environment protection) to take part to the elaboration of Local Development Strategies (LDS).

Local Action Groups decide the content of local strategy for rural development and make decisions in respect of different projects to be financed.

The process of elaboration of local development strategy (LDS) includes: objective setting, definition of strategic priorities and arrangement of actions to be taken [13]. LAGs request financial support, within open calls for proposals, organized by the member states of the LEADER Programme, using as basic

element in the submitted request the Local Development Strategy (LDS). The member states select the best local action groups and assign them budgets in order to implement their local strategies.

Figure 2 presents the players involved into the establishment of LAGs, who actively contribute to the elaboration of a local development strategy (LDS).

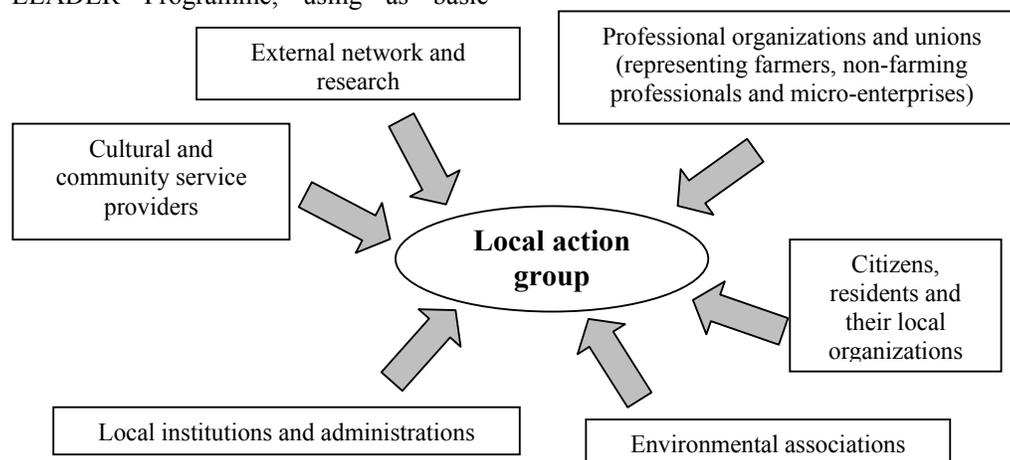


Fig. 2. *Actors involved into the establishment of LAGs*

Source: THE LEADER APPROACH. A basic guide [13]

4. Examples of Lags from Center Region and their Preoccupation for Sustainable Development

4.1. Bârsa County Local Action Group

Bârsa County local action group is a non-governmental organization established with the support of public administrations, private companies and non-governmental organizations from local communities of Hărman, Bod, Sânpetru, Hălchiu, Crizbav, Feldioara, Dumbrăvița, Hăghig and Vâlcele.

Bârsa County LAG objectives are: to revitalize the community life and the civic commitment within Bârsa County territory;

to develop certain common objectives for the nine communities as well as certain innovative instruments of community development; to elaborate and assume a coherent local development strategy, whose objectives cover both the interests of local public administration, of business environment, and the interests of civil society representatives; to involve the relevant local players into the process of implementation of the local development plan; to increase the economic and territorial cohesion; to attract resources in order to ensure a process of sustainable development; to provide a compact, economically developed rural space, with a high quality of life, which may generate

development in other rural localities from the counties of Braşov and Covasna as well [14].

4.2. Brasov North Transylvanian Association - Local Action Group

Starting from the hypothesis of a sustainable development of the communities from the North of Braşov county, in 2009 was established (following a partnership) the Brasov North Transylvanian Association (Asociația Transilvană Braşov Nord).

Within the process of elaboration of the strategy of development (The Local Development Plan – Northern Area of Braşov County) were involved players from all 13 localities from the target territory. [15]

In 2011, the association was authorized as Local Action Group (LAG) by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Following such authorization, through LEADER axis of National Rural Development Programme (NRDP), the territory covered by LAG received non-reimbursable funds of around 2.8 million Euros for LAG operation and strategy implementation.

In order to raise the awareness among the local players in respect of the opportunities of LAG team, ATBN carried out a continuous activity of animation and promotion of the possibilities to obtain non-reimbursable financing. For 2014-2020, the association intends to prepare another Development Plan and to obtain a new authorization as Local Action Group. [18]

4.3. Valea Sâmbetei Micro-Region Local Action Group Association

Valea Sâmbetei Micro-Region Local Action Group Association was established in 2006 and includes public and private

partners, non-governmental associations and professional groups with no judicial personality from all sectors of activity.

The association aims to achieve sustainable rural development of localities of Beclean, Cincu, Drăguş, Lisa, Sâmbăta de Sus, Şoarş, Ucea, Viştea and Voila.

Valea Sâmbetei Micro-Region faces numerous problems (characteristic for the rural space of Romania). In order to solve such problems, Local Action Group Association elaborated a local development strategy with the involvement in the decision making process of all players interested in the well being of the area.

The purpose of this plan of local development is „to achieve sustainable rural development by ensuring long-term economic, social and cultural development and stability of the rural space Valea Sâmbetei Micro-Region – part of Țara Făgăraşului, interconditioned with the environment and landscape protection and preservation, maintaining the land fertility, ensuring habitats and biodiversity, keeping the traditions and cultural patrimony”[16].

5. Conclusions

In specialists’ opinion, LEADER represents one of the most important instruments of local development in Romania [9].

At European level, LEADER success is undisputable (eg West Cork LAG of Ireland – creation and promotion of Fuchsia Brand, “Almenland” regional initiative in Styria region, Austria, the strategy for quality products from the Montiferru region - Sardinia, etc.) [19][13]. There are many examples which confirm that LEADER approach led to rural development, to the implementation of brilliant ideas coming from members of local communities, to the self confidence stimulation for those who live in rural

areas, to the animation of population and its involvement in the decision-making processes regarding the future of the region, etc.

In Romania there is still a lack of expertise in drawing up and implementing Local Development Strategies (LDS), and in certain cases the priorities set by strategies were influenced by various factors, failing to reflect real problems of rural area. The capacity of local development does not respond to the local needs in a complete manner, especially concerning the collaboration between the public and private partners, and a strategic approach shall be encouraged and developed. [10].

According to NRDP [17], within the process of selection of LAGs priority will have those strategies of local development which: include innovative and cooperative actions, combine the objectives of several axes of NRDP, address to semi-subsistence farmers, address to youth, integrate environmental problems, aim to facilitate the implementation of those measures from NRDP that will have as beneficiaries groups of producers, associations, partnerships etc.

The characteristics mentioned, considered essential in the LAGs selection process, present numerous points derived from the concept of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental dimensions).

This is the reason why we believe that, in the future, LAGs will show a major concern for the implementation of those strategies (SDL), able to be genuine instruments in promoting sustainable development, offering a welfare chance for the Romanian rural communities.

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