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"LEADER APPROACH" - AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

TUREK RAHOVEANU ADRIAN¹

Summary

The rural development programs that are developed with the active involvement of local citizens have a long tradition in the European Union. From 1991 until 2006, Leader I, Leader II and Leader + have been designed as a laboratory to encourage the emergence and testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development, rural development policy in the Community. In this way, the initiative Leader, after had experience in three programming periods, has reached a level of maturity that allowed the competent authorities to implement the Leader approach more widely in national rural development programs. For this reason, Council Regulation no. 1698/2005 of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) for the period 2007-2013, contains a fourth axis called LEADER axis. The main focus of the paper is given to the implementation of LEADER in Romania in the period 2007-2013. The paper has three parts. The first part presents the general characteristics of the LEADER approach and the measures that are performed within the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. In the second part is presented the list of local action groups and their spatial-demographic characteristics.

Keywords: Rural development, agricultural policy, LEADER approach, Local Action Group, local development strategies

INTRODUCTION

The acronym LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement Rural) means "Links between actions for rural development" represents an innovative approach for the implementation of rural development policy. The specific objectives of the Leader approach are: participation of local communities members in the local development process and encourage innovative activities, encouraging local actors to work together with representatives of other communities within and outside the country, fostering partnerships, preparing and ensuring the implementation of local development strategies. Leader approach through its specific actions will lead to achieving the strategic objectives of Axis 4: improving local governance and promoting endogenous potential of territories.

In the 2007-2013 programming period, the Leader approach has been integrated within the overall EU policy for rural development. This means that Leader is included in the national and regional rural development programs supported by the EU, along with a number of other rural development axes.

The eligible area for implementation Leader axis is the rural area defined by the legislation of Romania (municipalities and cities) plus a total of 206 towns (not exceeding 20,000 inhabitants). Including cities in the eligible territory Leader will ensure territorial coherence, the critical mass in terms of human, financial and economic resources, to support a viable local development strategy. Thus, the area eligible for Leader covers a population of approximately 11.7 million, of which about 2 million are from cities and eligible area for implementation of the Leader Axis is 227,000 km² (207,000 km² rural area defined under the national definition, plus about 20,000 km² area owned by cities with up to 20,000 inhabitants). Thus, 17% of the eligible area Leader can come from small towns and about 9% of the eligible area will be owned by small towns of up to 20,000 inhabitants [1].

Thus, we observe that Leader is a tool for developing a territorial approach at micro-regional level concerning the diversity of rural areas. The real advantage of the Leader approach lies in its ability to embrace the complexity of territorial system, meaning the rural infrastructure, common goods, local and cultural heritage, organizational capacity, knowledge transfer.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

The LEADER approach involves strengthening territorial coherence and implementation of integrated actions that can lead to the diversification and development of the rural economy for the benefit of communities. Another goal is the institutional building for developing and implementing integrated strategies that will enable the rural actors, representatives of different fields to work together and interact for the benefit of rural communities.

The paper presents shortly the theoretical arguments for introducing LEADER and analyzes the implementation of the support measures in agricultural policy. The main objectives of the paper are:

- Presenting the general characteristics of the LEADER approach and the measures that are taken in the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013
- Presentation of local action groups, the main emphasis being given by the space-demographic characteristics.

This paper is based on analysis activities, from literature, legislation and existing strategic documents and other available studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Encouraging local participation in developing and implementing sustainable development strategies, the Leader approach proved to be a valuable resource in the EU rural policy. There were three generations of Leader: Leader I (1991-1993), Leader II (1994-1999) and Leader + (2000-2006). In the 2007-2013 programming period, Leader was integrated ("embedded") in all national / regional programs of rural development. Because of this, it was possible to apply a Leader approach more widely and in a much wider range of rural development activities.

For the programming period 2007-2013, the Council approved Regulation no. 1698/2005 of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) which emphasized more Leader-style approach. During this period, each rural development program must have a Leader component for implementing local development strategies "bottom-up". Member States and regions can select the local action groups (LAGs) based on local development strategies proposed by them. Each program can finance capacity building and encouragement necessary to prepare these local strategies, the operating costs of LAGs structures and implementing local development strategies and cooperation projects between LAGs.

The Leader fundamental concept is that, given the diversity of rural areas, the development strategies are more effective if they are decided and implemented at local level, by local actors. The difference between Leader and other rural policy measures is that it indicates "how" to do and not "what" to do [2].

Leader approach can be summarized in seven key features: elaborating the local development strategies focused on the area, the approach and implementation strategies "bottom up" local public-private partnerships: local action groups, integrated and multi-sector actions, innovation, cooperation, establish contacts in the network. Each feature completes the others and interacts with them in a positive way, with lasting effects on the development of rural areas and their ability to solve their own problems.

Feature 1. Local development strategies focused on area

An area-based approach takes into account an area with low size, homogeneous and socially cohesive, characterized by tradition and common identity, common needs and expectations, must have sufficient coherence and a critical mass in terms of human, financial and economic resources, to support a viable local development strategy.

Feature 2. Approach and implementation strategies "bottom up"

In a "bottom up" approach, the local actors participate in taking decisions on strategy and in the selection of priorities to be pursued in their local area. The rural policies following this approach are designed and implemented in the manner best adapted to the needs of the communities they serve. This can be achieved by involving all local actors. Involvement of local actors includes population as a whole, the economic and social interest groups and representative public and private institutions. Capacity building is an essential component of the 'bottom-up', which involves: awareness, education, participation and mobilization of the local population for identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the area (analysis); participation of various interest groups in the elaboration of the local development strategy; establishing clear criteria for selecting, at local level, appropriate projects to implement strategy.

Feature 3. Public-private partnerships: Local Action Groups (LAGs)

Establish a local partnership "local action group" (LAG) is an original and important feature of the LEADER approach. LAG is responsible for identifying and implementing a local development strategy, make decisions on the allocation of financial resources and manage them. These groups can effectively stimulate sustainable development because they: gathers and combines human and financial resources available in the public sector, private sector, civic and voluntary sector; associate the local actors around common projects and multi-sector actions, in order to generate synergies, joint ownerships and critical mass to improve the area's economic competitiveness; strengthen dialogue and cooperation between different rural actors, who often have little experience of collaboration, by reducing potential conflicts and by facilitating negotiated solutions through consultations and discussions; facilitating through the interaction of various partners, processes of adaptation and change in the agricultural sector (like quality products, food chains), integration of environmental concerns, diversification of the rural economy and quality of life.

The rural actors most active in the initiatives of local action groups are: professional organizations and unions, professional associations, citizens, residents and their local organizations, institutions and local governments, environment associations, cultural and community service providers, associations of women, youth.

Feature 4. Facilitating innovation

Leader can play an important role in stimulating new and innovative approaches to rural development. Innovation can relate to introduce a new product or process, a new organization or new markets.

Feature 5. Integrated and multi-sector actions

A local development strategy must be a multi-sector approach that integrates different sectors. Actions and projects contained in local strategies should be linked and coordinated as a whole.

Feature 6. Establish contacts in network

Establishing contacts in the network is a mean of transferring good practices, disseminating innovations and building based on lessons learned from the local rural development. Establishing contacts in the network include the exchange of ideas, experiences and knowledge between Leader groups or between different rural areas whether or not they are beneficiaries of Leader. Establish networking lead to the strengthening of relations between people, projects and rural areas, thus exceeding the isolation faced by some rural areas.

Feature 7. Cooperation

Cooperation involves a local action group engaged in a joint project with another Leader group or with a group taking a similar approach, in another region, in another Member State or in a third country. Cooperation projects are not simply experience exchanges. They must involve a

concrete joint project, conducted under a common structure. In the Leader approach, there are two possible types of cooperation: inter-territorial cooperation: cooperation between different rural areas within the same Member State. May take place between Leader groups and is also open to other local groups that have a similar participatory approach, trans-national cooperation: cooperation between Leader groups of at least two Member States or with groups of third countries, following a similar approach.

Measures under LEADER - Axis IV of National Program for Rural Development 2007-2013 are [4, 5]:

- Implementation of local development strategies (Measure 41). By Measure 41, the Local Action Groups can implement integrated local development projects, that may cover several axes. Implementation of these projects is done as described in the Local Development Plan. Strategies should materialize in concrete projects aimed at increasing the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry, improve the environment and countryside, improving quality of life and diversification of economic activities in rural areas, developed by local actors, individuals or legal person operating within the Local Action Group territory. Beneficiaries can be also outside the Local Action Group territory, with the condition that provided projects meet the strategic objectives and be implemented on its territory.
- Implementing cooperation projects (Measure 421). By Measure 421, the cooperation projects should have the effect of improving local strategies by encouraging local actors to undertake experiences expansion projects, stimulating and supporting innovation, acquiring skills and their improving both inter-territorial and trans-national.
- By Measure 431 aims fostering partnerships, preparing and ensuring the implementation of local development strategies through: local institution building, providing human, financial and technical support to Local Action Groups activities, training of Local Action Groups to develop and implementation of local development strategies; animating the territory. This measure is divided into two sub-measures, the first available before the LAGs selection and the second after the selection of LAGs.
- Building public-private partnerships (sub-measure 431.1). Sub-measure 431.1 supports the construction of public-private partnerships, local development strategies and local development plan preparation to participate in the selection of Local Action Groups (LAGs). This sub-measure is implemented in three successive phases, as follows:
 - Phase 1 – In this phase is carried out the awareness of local actors on LEADER approach through information sessions and training on the National Rural Development Programme;
 - Phase 2 - This phase is the training of potential LAGs representatives on local development strategies (making diagnosis and SWOT analysis, strategy development, program activities, partnership formation, etc.);
 - Phase 3 - This phase provides financial support for the preparation of local development plans for the selection of LAGs based on a draft prepared by the partnerships involved. This will include objectives, duration of achievement, action, the budget for preparation of strategy and local development plans for the selection of LAGs. The final product of this project will be the development local plan for the selection of LAGs.
- Local Action Groups operation, acquiring skills and animating the territory (sub-measure 431.2). Sub-measure 431.2 provides support for Local Action Groups for: operating expenses, animation and skills. 431.2 Sub-measure has two components, namely: a component - Operation of the Local Action Group, b component - Training and territory animation after selecting LAG.

For the programming period 2014-2020 Draft Regulation on the future CLLD (Community Led Local Development) is based on the LEADER approach and refers to all funds covered by the Common Strategic Framework (CSF): European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) European Social Fund (ESF), European Agricultural Fund for rural Development (EAFRD), the European Fund for fisheries and Maritime Affairs (EMFF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF).

CLLD is a specific tool, usable at sub-regional level, which is complementary to other forms of support for local development. CLLD can mobilize and involve the local communities and organizations to contribute to achieving the Europe 2020 strategy objectives of smart, sustainable and favourable to inclusion growth, stimulating the territorial cohesion and policy objectives achieving.

In the programming period 2014-2020, the more explicit support in the form of a common legal framework and harmonized rules for the five funds CCS will increase consistency and encourage local strategies funded multiple, placed under the responsibility of the community. Several common characteristics of CSF funds provisions are intended to simplify and implementation of local development under the responsibility of the community in favour of beneficiaries:

- The unique methodology for CLLD will be applicable within all funds and regions, enabling all territories to benefit from EU support for capacity building, local public-private partnerships and their strategies, networking and exchange of experiences.
- CCS funding contribution will be consistent and coordinated. This approach will facilitate among the beneficiaries creation of multiple strategies multiple funded, better adapted to the needs and areas, for example, in an area that contains both rural and urban elements. This shall in particular ensure the coordination of capacity building, selection, approval and financing of local development strategies and local action groups.
- In the case of strategies financed by multiple funds, there would be funding the operating costs and the organization of local development strategy from a single fund (ie fund principal).
- In terms of cohesion policy, for those operational programs that objectives of a whole priority axis are made by CLLD, the maximum rate of co-financing from ERDF and / or ESF at a priority axis level will increase by 10 percentage points. In the case of EAFRD, depending on the circumstances, the maximum rate of co-financing for CLLD can vary between 80% and 90%, and for EMFF, the maximum rate of co-financing is 75%.

Formulation, implementation and management of rural development projects require participating processes that induce a collective action. These processes require new social structures involving the organized civil society, the so-called local action groups (LAGs) in the context of the Leader initiative.

Local Action Groups are entities that are public - private partnerships, consisting of representatives of public, private and civil sectors appointed from a homogeneous rural territory that will have to meet a number of requirements on the composition, territory covered and will implement an integrated strategy for development planning.

After the first selection of local action groups (LAGs) currently exists and operates a total of 81 LAGs, approved in 2011 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (table 1, fig. 1).

Table 1: Local Action Groups - number and spatial-demographic characteristics

County	Existing GAL (No.)	The total area (Km2)	Population (No. inhabitants)
Alba	3	13025.01	117249
Arad	4	5376.5	202958
Arges	3	3494.5	136547
Bacau	2	2,371	117539
Bihor	2	1976.84	105578
Bistrita Nasaud	2	2085.76	96497
Botosani	2	1415.45	110213
Brasov	2	1685.76	72681
Braila	1	848	35169
Buzau	3	2954.93	131184
Caras Severin	1	2,011	39980
Cluj	4	4123.04	153319
Calarasi	1	937.13	37699
Covasna	2	2196.92	78912
Dambovita	6	1287.67	99632
Galati	1	991.04	68712
Giurgiu	1	279.86	11833
Harghita	4	5,606	184320
Hunedoara	2	3832.24	79393
Ialomita	3	3428.04	156795
Iasi	1	736.96	45861
Maramures	2	1985.97	105332
Mehedinti	1	1572.23	49142
Mures	4	2516.67	153203
Neamt	2	2544.01	112182
Olt	1	902.44	48323
Satu-Mare	3	2488.55	143242
Salaj	2	1363.59	58967
Sibiu	3	3477.72	131147
Suceava	2	3767.08	71393
Teleorman	1	1,032	42469
Timis	3	3971.95	134179
Vaslui	3	3200.82	164755
Valcea	1	1545.36	32623
Vrancea	3	3032.79	152984
TOTAL LAG	81	94064.83	3482012
Total Romania *	-	238391	21413815

Source: www.rndr.ro, *www.insse.ro

Analyzing the number and spatial-demographic characteristics of the existing local action groups observe the following:

- The local action groups existing in Romania are very heterogeneous in terms of size and administrative-territorial structure.
- The 81 LAGs are spread almost all over the country, except the counties of Constanta, Dolj, Gorj, Ilfov and Tulcea.
- In county Dambovita work the most LAGs, in number of 6, followed by Arad, Cluj, Harghita, Mures with 4 each.
- The area occupied by the 81 LAGs represents 39.45% of the total area of Romania and comprise 16.26% of the total population.

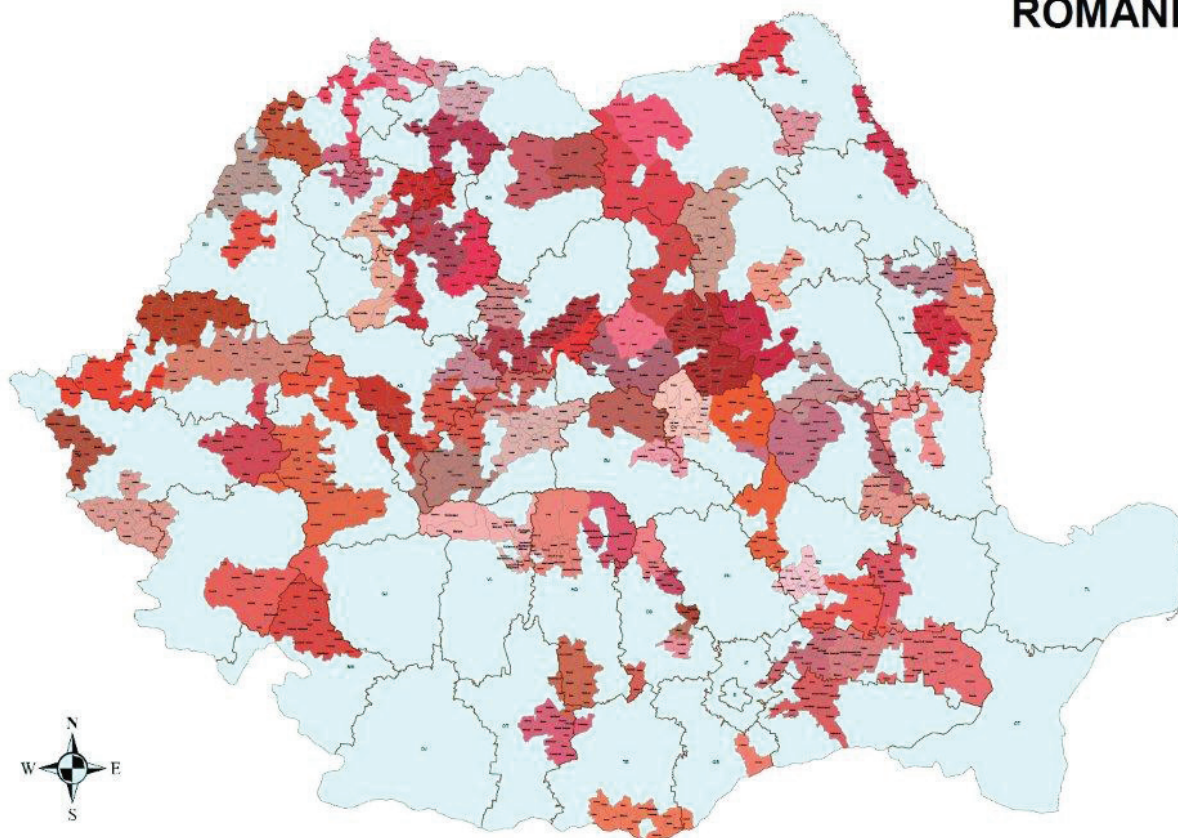


Fig.1 LAGs Map

Source: www.leader-romania.ro

CONCLUSIONS

Rural development policy is an important component of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). It promotes the sustainable development of rural areas in Europe, approaching economic, social and environmental problems. More than half of the EU population lives in rural areas, which cover 90% of EU territory.

Leader is an innovative approach within EU rural development policy, is a method of mobilizing and promoting of the rural development in local rural communities. Experience has shown that Leader can bring significant changes in the daily life of people in rural areas.

Leader encourages rural territories to explore new ways to become or remain competitive, to maximum value the assets and to overcome the difficulties they may face, such as an aging population trend, low levels of services or lack of employment opportunities. Thus, Leader improve the quality of life in rural areas, both for farm families and for wider rural population.

The Leader approach is based on links between citizens, activities and territories. Local partnership is established as local action groups and their establishment allows practical application of the concept of local partnership. Being a member of this partnership is to take part - you join, be a part – assume responsibilities, take action and participate in the interchange [3].

LAGs in accordance with European standards must be a balanced and representative ensemble of members from different socio-economic areas of the territory. At the decision level, the economic and social partners and representatives of civil society, such as farmers, women, rural youth and their associations must represent at least 50% of the local partnership.

LAGs approach the rural problems from a global perspective based on development strategies. Besides local partnership, the strategy is an essential element. This should take into account sustainable development issues and is based on endogenous potential development of the selected area. The main aim of the strategy is to create long-term development policies and each strategy is based on a detailed analysis of the state of the area in which the potential and development opportunities should be clearly identified. Each strategy should include:

- The characteristics of the area (geographic, economic, demographic, sociological, and description of previous actions).
- SWOT analysis (development potential of the area).
- Vision of area development (theme chosen and the objectives, priorities, target groups, expected results).
- The operating strategy (bottom-up approach, timeline, innovative actions, transferability of actions and activities).
- The harmonization with other LAGs development programs.

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