

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEADER APPROACH IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Due to its specificity, the LEADER approach can generate a balanced development of micro-regions. The fact that the local population is involved in the development of the areas in which they operated develops the local governance and contributes to the dynamic development supported by a local development strategy designed, implemented and managed locally by LAG representatives.

Keywords: local initiatives, LEADER, LAG, “bottom up” approach

JEL Classification: Q18, R58

1. INTRODUCTION

Introduced at European Union level through the Bulletin of the European Communities, Supplement 4/88 – The Future of rural society. Commission communication transmitted to the Council and to the European Parliament on 29 July 1988, the LEADER approach ("Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale") involves using 7 principles for local development: designing a local development strategy focused on area, a "bottom up" approach, the establishment of a Public-Private Partnership called Local Action Group (LAG), encouraging innovation, development of integrated and multi-sectoral actions, networking and co-operation.

2. THE BEGINNIG OF THE LEADER APPROACH IN ROMANIA

The Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) stipulated that national rural development programs, must include Axis 4 LEADER to support local development strategies.

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This fact was a major challenge for all Member States and particularly for Romania, as admitted by the Managing Authority of the program.² As a new Member State, Romania has faced a series of problems since:

1. Institutions and agencies involved in the management and implementation of the LEADER approach lacked relevant experience,

2. The degree of awareness of local communities about the potential of the LEADER approach was low, only a few partnerships had the potential of future local action groups.

The implementation of LEADER in Romania was to be introduced "step by step" over several years since drafting local development strategies was a challenging and time consuming task.

The concept of the LEADER approach was promoted in Romania in the documents approving the 2007-2013 National Development Plan³, which represents the strategic planning and multiannual financial programming document, developed by a broad partnership that guides and stimulates the socio-economic development of Romania in accordance with EU Cohesion Policy.

It specified⁴ that the LEADER Community Initiative *"aims to mobilize all actors from the rural areas in designing and implementing local development strategies for the conservation of rural and cultural heritage, the development of the economic environment and the improvement the organizational skills of local communities. In this context it becomes necessary to create public-private partnerships for implementing development strategies, but also to exchange and disseminate information, to encourage the formation of local organizations and to help them stimulate the activities of local communities and the participation of local communities in initiatives aimed at their development. The encouragement of the creation and testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development of rural areas as part of the program will open the way to utilise unused reserves of civic actions, will contribute to a rapid development of these areas. The implementation of the measures planned under this program will help improve spatial development and rural infrastructure, including resources related to the economic, social and cultural areas. This sub-priority will aim at stimulating local initiatives that will boost the capacity of rural communities to develop business initiatives based on partnership and projects for the protection of local cultural and natural heritage. It will also encourage and support involvement of local communities in the process of drafting and promoting the documentations of spatial and urban planning. Thus, this*

²<http://www.madr.ro/axa-leader/leader-2007-2013/legislatie-axa-leader.html> taken on 01.12.2015, at 20.00

³Planului Național de Dezvoltare 2007-2013³ approved in december 2005 (page 325, Section 5.3.4 *Promovarea inițiativelor locale de tip LEADER*)

⁴Planului Național de Dezvoltare 2007-2013 approved in december 2005 (page 325, Section 5.3.4 *Promovarea inițiativelor locale de tip LEADER*)

type of local initiatives will meet exactly the requirements and needs of local actors in a particular rural area. In this way, the "bottom-up" approach will allow each representative of rural areas, together with the community, to benefit from the knowledge necessary to carry out various activities of common interest. These strategic elements will be implemented by the LAGs (Local Action Groups)."

Subsequently, the theme was taken up in the National Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2007-2013 (NSP) and the National Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 (NRDP).

The National Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2007-2013 (NSP) specifies for Axis 4 LEADER⁵:

Objective: Implementation of a pilot LEADER program.

Sub-objectives: LEADER implementation through a bottom-up approach at local level to implement the rural development program.

Measures Objectives:

- Improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry sector by supporting restructuring, development and innovation
- Using natural and cultural resources in a rational and balanced way through the use of agricultural good practices and the increase of the importance and value of community interest areas selected as Natura 2000 sites
- Improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging economic activity
- Increasing the added value of local products by facilitating access to markets for small production units.

According to article 54 of the Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005, each Member State shall establish a national rural network, which groups the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. The operation of the National Network for Rural Development was funded through the Technical Assistance component of the National Rural Development Program, according to art. 66 (3) of Council Regulation (EC) no.1698/2005.

Taking into account the main strategic guidelines set by Romania with regard to rural development for the period 2007 - 2013 and strengthening these guidelines through facilitating their learning and understanding by the rural actors, the National Network for Rural Development has the overall objective to enlist the energy of all actors in the rural development process and promote an effective flow

⁵Planul Național Strategic pentru Dezvoltare Rurală 2007-2013 (PNS), page 51

of information, exchange of ideas and best practices and cooperation, bringing together all the organizations and institutions that are involved in rural development in order to:

- Creating an economy based on agricultural and forestry holdings that must undertake modernization;
- Development of an agriculture that promotes biodiversity and environment conservation;
- Improving the quality of life and economic development in rural areas;
- Improving local governance in order to create and implement local development strategies.⁶

The National Network for Rural Development was recommended to be first created through the Leader program because it is the best starting point due to the existence of a network of NGOs active in local development and to be extended afterwards to other rural development issues. Thus, the first beneficiaries of the network would be the local action groups.⁷

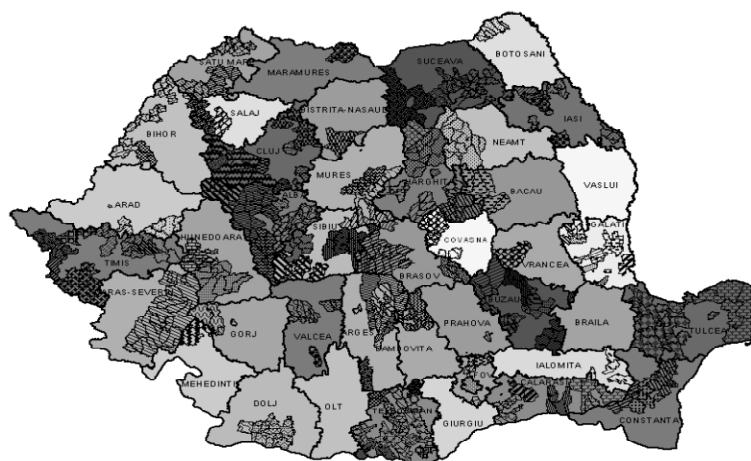
Although in the 2000-2006 programming period, Romania did not implement Leader actions, a number of development initiatives were identified at country level, such as Local Initiative Groups (LIG), Micro-regions and other LEADER-like partnerships. These were partnerships between non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local public administration, church, school, medical and dental offices, micro-regions, etc. Some LIGs have reached an organizational maturity and were transformed into Community Associations with legal personality, while others have dissolved after achieving their objective. In 2006, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development selected a total of 120 representatives of sub-regional territories (areas), with a population between 10,000 and 100,000, territories which covered 37 counties out of 42, in pursuit of LEADER structures and activities. These representatives have been appointed by informal partnerships between public, private and civil society, in order to be trained on the following topics: building partnerships, diagnostic analysis, local development strategy, the action plan of the territory, animation activities, monitoring and evaluation of the Action Plan, all these actions being necessary to prepare the Leader axis implementation in Romania.⁸

⁶Programul Național de Dezvoltare Rurală 2007-2013, VIIIth version, march 2012, page 486

⁷Planul Național Strategic pentru Dezvoltare Rurală 2007-2013 (PNS), page 69

⁸Programul Național de Dezvoltare Rurală 2007-2013, VIIIth version, march 2012, page 56

Map of the territories selected for the training of representatives of public-private partnerships (LEADER)



Source: 2007-2013 National Rural Development Programme, VIIIth version, march 2012, page 532

The evaluation study "*Methods for and Success of Mainstreaming Leader Innovations and Approach into Rural Development Programmes*"⁹ (April 2004), conducted by ÖIR-Managementdienste GmbH, contracted by DG Agri defines the concepts of "strategic vertical / top down mainstreaming" and "mainstreaming on demand". The study noted the need for a critical mass of key players among senior administration and political actors interested in introducing the LEADER approach and able to formulate and implement a comprehensive approach. The study called it "strategic vertical mainstreaming" because it starts from the top of the hierarchy and is translated down and spread to other authorities. Integration can also be induced from the bottom up through political lobbying of local and regional stakeholders, who convey a demand of the people and local institutions: "mainstreaming on demand" appears after previous successful experiences with LEADER approaches, which should be intensified based on local people.

LEADER Axis in the National Program for Rural Development 2007-2013

National Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 stated that because in Romania there is a lack of experience in connection with the Leader Axis, 120 local experts were selected to be trained. In selecting LAGs by the MA, the responsibility

⁹<http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/leader/full.pdf> taken on 02.12.2015, at 10.00

of project selection will be given to them and the eligibility checking, approval, implementation of payments the responsibility of the Payment Agency for Rural Development and Fisheries (APDRP).

Thus, in Romania, the LEADER axis during the 2007-2013 period included the following measures:

4.1 Implementation of local development strategies:

411 Increasing the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry

412 Improving the environment and the countryside

413 Quality of life and diversification of the rural economy

4.21 Implementing cooperation projects

4.31 Operation of Local Action Groups, skills acquisition and animation

431.1. Establishing public-private partnerships

431.2. Operation of Local Action Groups, skills acquisition and animation

Romania's priority in the 2007-2009 period was the implementation of Measure 431.1 on establishing public-private partnerships (potential LAGs) with a set of clearly oriented objectives:

1. Effective introduction of the LEADER "bottom up" planning approach and development through a gradual process of training (learning by doing) and interconnection.

2. Preparation for the expansion of LEADER in the next programming period.

The 431.1 sub-measure was implemented in 3 successive phases as follows:

- Phase 1 - This phase raising awareness of local actors about the LEADER approach was done through information and training sessions regarding the National Rural Development Programme, local development, Axis 4 LEADER, examples of concrete actions in rural areas;
- Phase 2 - In this phase the training of representatives of potential LAGs was done regarding local development strategies (diagnose analysis and SWOT analysis, strategy development, program actions, partnership formation, etc.);
- Phase 3 - In this stage financial support was provided for the preparation of local development plans for LAG selection, based on projects designed by the partnerships concerned. These had to include the objectives, the duration of planned actions, the strategy and budget for the preparation of the strategy and local development plans for the selection of LAGs. The final product of this project had to be the local development plan for the selection of LAGs.

Public-Private Partnerships established as LAGs had to cover a territory of the eligible area for the implementation of the Leader axis, mainly the rural area, defined by the Romanian legislation, plus a number of 206 small towns (not

exceeding 20,000 inhabitants). At the same time, the urban population could not exceed 25% of the total number of inhabitants in a LAG.

The number of people that should have been covered by LAGs amounted to about 11.7 million., of which about 2 million from the small town and the area eligible for LEADER axis implementation was 227,000 km² (207,000 km² of rural areas defined according to the national definition, plus approximately 20,000 km² urban area owned by towns with up to 20,000 inhabitants).

The maximum amount that could be requested by a potential Local Action Group was 2,850,000 Euro.

The selection criteria for the local development strategies were¹⁰:

Criteria regarding the territory – Priority selection was given to:

- ✓ Territories with a population between 30,000 and 70,000;
- ✓ Territories with a population density below 75 inh. /Km²;
- ✓ Territories include areas poor / disadvantaged Natura 2000 areas with high natural value (HNV) areas affected by industrial restructuring;
- ✓ Territories include portions of different counties.

Criteria regarding the partnership - Priority in selection has been granted to the following groups:

- ✓ Ethnic minority groups;
- ✓ Groups with a balanced representation of young people;
- ✓ Groups with a balanced representation of women;
- ✓ Groups that include representatives of agricultural organizations / groups of producers
- ✓ Forestry sector representatives, representatives from the economic / environmental organizations, etc.;
- ✓ Groups in which private partners and civil society represent more than 65% of all partners.

Criteria regarding the strategy - The quality of the following items was considered in the selection process:

- ✓ initial situation assessment and analysis of needs and potential of the area (diagnostic analysis and SWOT analysis);
- ✓ objectives for implementing the local development plan; (set in correlation with the diagnosis and SWOT analysis/ clear and measurable);
- ✓ actions / methods proposed to achieve the objectives;
- ✓ complementarity with other development programs;
- ✓ LAG criteria used for selection of projects;
- ✓ administrative procedures, rules and detailed audit trail;

¹⁰Ghidul solicitantului pentru participarea la selecția grupurilor de acțiune locală, martie 2012

- ✓ assessment procedures - Monitoring development strategies;
- ✓ effective local partners consultation in developing the strategy
- ✓ effective informing of potential beneficiaries about the LAG activities.

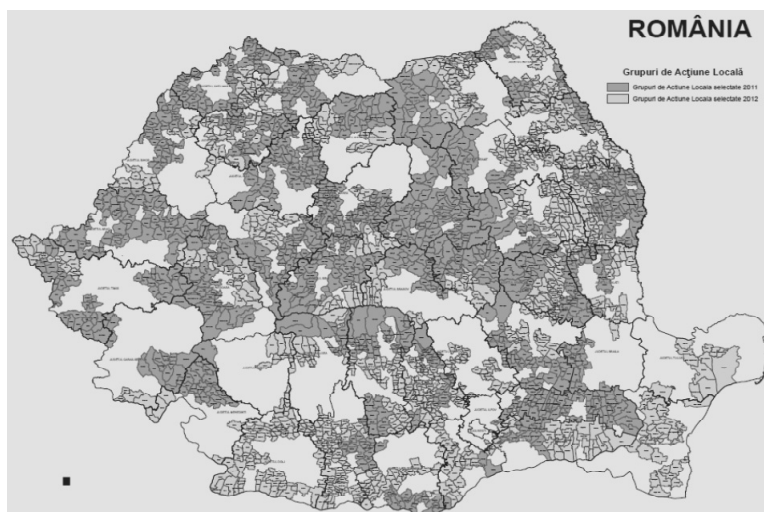
Criteria related to the strategy components - Priority in selection has been granted to the following strategies:

- ✓ strategies including innovative actions;
- ✓ strategies including cooperative actions;
- ✓ strategies combining several axes of the NRDP objectives;
- ✓ strategies addressing semi-subsistence farmers (diversification or development);
- ✓ strategies targeting young people;
- ✓ strategies integrating environmental issues;
- ✓ strategies aimed at facilitating the implementation of those measures that will address the NRDP beneficiaries: producer groups, associations, partnerships, other associative forms recognized by national law.

The first selection session of LAGs in Romania took place in the period 01.09-29.10.2010. There were selected and financed a number of 82 local action groups. The second session of the LAG selection took place during 01.03-02.05.2012. There were selected and financed a number of 81 local action groups. By the end of 2012, only 87 LAGs had signed the grant contracts under the sub-measure 431.2 *Operation of Local Action Groups, skills acquisition and animation*, totaling € 44,465,611, thus being able to start conducting the activities for the implementation of their strategies. The 163 LAGs brought up to their micro-regions until November 2015 a total funding of € 385,762,868, according to available official data.¹¹ After completing the selection of local development strategies, the territory covered by the LAGs was approx. 14,398 km² (comprising 1,805 villages and 79 town under 20,000 inhabitants), attended by 58% of the LEADER eligible population and representing about 63% of the LEADER eligible territory)¹².

¹¹ According to the information letter sent by the Managing Authority on my request for information

¹² Programul National de Dezvoltare Rurala 2014-2020, page 62



Source: http://www.madr.ro/docs/dezvoltare-rurala/Axa_LEADER/harta-gal-romania-update-2013.pdf taken on 24.10.2015, 17.00

Local development strategies implemented few atypical measures (non-specific to the National Programme for Rural Development), the financing contracted by LAGs' beneficiaries being mostly on measures specific to Axis 1 and 3 of the National Rural Development Programme. This was mainly due to the fact that LAGs have had short periods available to implement their strategies, but also due to repeated changes of procedures manual for implementing the strategies, made by MA NRDP and the Rural Investment Funding Agency. Another problem that local action groups faced in the selection and evaluation of projects, was the introduction and evolution of the concept of "creating artificial conditions" for financing. Identifying these artificial conditions led to the rejection of some of their beneficiaries' projects.

The Council Regulation (EC, EURATOM) No 2988/95 of 18 December 1995 on the protection of the European Communities financial interests stipulates in article 4, (3): „Acts which are established to have as their purpose the obtaining of an advantage contrary to the objectives of the Community law applicable in the case by artificially creating the conditions required for obtaining that advantage shall result, as the case shall be, either in failure to obtain the advantage or in its withdrawal.” This condition was acquired in subsequent regulations.

Thus, firstly the following filter for the identification of artificial conditions was introduced¹³:

1. *The same title of the project identified in two or more proposals?*
2. *The same head office is found in two or more proposals?*

¹³Formular E 3.1 - Fișa de verificare a criteriilor de eligibilitate, specifica masurii 312 din PNDR 2007-2013

3. *The same site of the project (village) is found in two or more proposals?*
4. *The same legal representative of the project is found in two or more proposals?*
5. *The same project consultant is found in two or more proposals?*

Accumulation of three positive responses, would have resulted in the project's dismissal. Rejection of projects under artificial conditions caused a large number of complaints from the potential beneficiaries. Subsequently, the Rural Investment Funding Agency (RIFA) published in November 2015 the "Guidelines for the prevention of irregularities creating artificial conditions in accessing funds granted by the NRDP 2014-2020".

LAGs selected in the first session had some difficulties in identifying the amounts of money required for starting the implementation of their activities, staffing and to cover operating costs. This problem has found its solution in granting an advance for the LAG activities, starting with 2013, the amount being secured by a promissory note issued personally by the legal representative of each LAG.

In Romania, although almost all local development strategies of LAGs included co-operation actions, inexperience and reluctance of the Rural Investment Funding Agency (in the absence of very precise criteria of defining this type of projects) and the MANRDP towards financing cooperation projects, but also the lack of experience of local action groups, led to an extremely low implementation degree of cooperation activities in the 2007-2013 programming period. Also a factor that led in the same direction was the economic crisis, which severely limited financial capacity of the national and European partners to carry out such projects.

Innovation is also one of the main features of LEADER. However, in Romania, the lack of experience of LAGs, RIFA and MA NRDP made innovation to be found in a very low measure in the projects selected in local development strategies.

LEADER in the 2014-2020 National Rural Development Programme

In accordance with the Council Regulation 1303/2013¹⁴, Article 33 - Community-led local development strategies:

"1. A community-led local development strategy shall contain at least the following elements:

(a) the definition of the area and population covered by the strategy;

¹⁴REGULATION (EU) No 1303/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006

(b) an analysis of the development needs and potential of the area, including an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats;

(c) a description of the strategy and its objectives, a description of the integrated and innovative features of the strategy and a hierarchy of objectives, including measurable targets for outputs or results. In relation to results, targets may be expressed in quantitative or qualitative terms. The strategy shall be consistent with the relevant programmes of all the ESI Funds concerned that are involved;

(d) a description of the community involvement process in the development of the strategy;

(e) an action plan demonstrating how objectives are translated into actions;

(f) a description of the management and monitoring arrangements of the strategy, demonstrating the capacity of the local action group to implement the strategy and a description of specific arrangements for evaluation;

(g) the financial plan for the strategy, including the planned allocation from each of the ESI Funds concerned.

2. Member States shall define criteria for the selection of community-led local development strategies.

3. Community-led local development strategies shall be selected by a committee set up for that purpose by the managing authority or authorities responsible and approved by the managing authority or authorities responsible.”

In accordance with the same Council Regulation 1303/2013¹⁵, Article 34 - Local action groups:

„1. Local action groups shall design and implement the community-led local development strategies. [...]

3. The tasks of local action groups shall include the following:

(a) building the capacity of local actors to develop and implement operations including fostering their project management capabilities;

(b) drawing up a non-discriminatory and transparent selection procedure and objective criteria for the selection of operations, which avoid conflicts of interest, ensure that at least 50 % of the votes in selection decisions are cast by partners which are not public authorities, and allow selection by written procedure;

(c) ensuring coherence with the community-led local development strategy when selecting operations, by prioritising those operations according to their contribution to meeting that strategy's objectives and targets;

¹⁵REGULATION (EU) No 1303/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006

- (d) preparing and publishing calls for proposals or an ongoing project submission procedure, including defining selection criteria;*
- (e) receiving and assessing applications for support;*
- (f) selecting operations and fixing the amount of support and, where relevant, presenting the proposals to the body responsible for final verification of eligibility before approval;*
- (g) monitoring the implementation of the community-led local development strategy and the operations supported and carrying out specific evaluation activities linked to that strategy.”*

For the 2014-2020 programming period, the Leader approach has been introduced in the National Rural Development Programme by Measure 19 "LEADER local development", which includes the following sub-measures¹⁶:

- *19.1 – Preparatory support for the local development strategies.*
The purpose of investments in this sub-measure is to support local public-private partnerships in designing their local development strategy.
- *19.2 - Support for the implementation of actions within the local development strategy.* The strategies developed will present types of actions that are found in specific categories of eligible actions in the NRDP and / or innovative actions. The Local Action Group through the Project Selection Committee will select the projects it will fund.
- *19.3. Preparation and implementation of cooperation activities of the Local Action Group.* This sub-measure will fund the transnational cooperation projects (between Romania and other EU Member States and inter-territorial cooperation (within the territory of Romania) among Local Action Groups.
- *19.4. Support for operating expenses and animation.* The sub-measure aims to reimburse the operating expenses based on the performance of the LAG in the implementation of the strategy.

Putting into practice of the Measure 19 "LEADER Local Development" started through the call for proposals for funding under sub-measure 19.1 in the period 25 March - 5 June 2015. According to the evaluation report¹⁷ of this first call for proposals there were submitted 175 eligible projects, 1 ineligible project, and 4 projects were withdrawn. The total public value of eligible projects was 2,376,835.85 EUR, and the total public value of projects submitted: 2,380,302.89 EUR. Grant support intensity for this sub-measure is 100% and the budget available was 2,400,000 Euro. Eligible projects are in the contracting process. Support for technical assistance will be provided in accordance with the Regulation no.1303 / 2013, up to a

¹⁶http://www.madr.ro/docs/dezvoltare-rurala/programare-2014-2020/dezbatere/fise-masuri/Fisa_masurii_Leader_draft_v3.pdf, taken on 05.12.2015, at 12.00

¹⁷www.apdrp.ro taken on 12.12.2015, at 16.00

maximum of 20,000 Euro for LDS (local development strategy) submitted by a Partnership as follows:¹⁸

- Expenditure on animation will be a maximum of 10,000 EUR given in proportion to the number of inhabitants covered by the Local Development Strategy (maximum 100,000 inhabitants). Therefore, the financial allocation will be 0,1euro / capita;
- Expenses related to the development of the strategy will be in the maximum amount of 10,000 EUR, regardless of the size of territory and population covered by LDS.

In order to be eligible, the local development strategy must be developed based on a bottom-up approach. LEADER activities can and should meet the different types of eligible activities of the rural development program, including those pertaining to social inclusion and poverty reduction. The types of investments that are not financed by traditional measures of the NRDP 2014-2020, will bridge the gaps between rural and urban areas while preserving local identity and stimulating the clotting of local interests. Local Action Groups will elaborate their strategy according to the needs identified in the diagnostic analysis of their own areas, but also based on the key priorities identified in the 2014 – 2020 NRDP.

CONCLUSIONS

Due to its specificity, the LEADER approach can generate a balanced development of micro-regions. The fact that the local population is involved in the development of the areas in which they operate develops the local governance and contributes to the dynamic development supported by a local development strategy designed, implemented and managed locally by LAG representatives.

LEADER is an important approach for Romania in the struggle for economic and social imbalances and disparities between urban and rural areas. The experience gained so far reflects a capacity for development that does not entirely respond to local needs, particularly in terms of collaboration between public and private partners, therefore the strategic approach should be encouraged and developed.

In the short period of implementation of local development strategies and operation of LAGs selected in the 2007-2014 programming period, it was shown that on the basis of its specificity, the LEADER approach can contribute to balanced regional development and can accelerate their structural progress. The involvement of local actors in the development of the areas in which they operate, will contribute to local development and will lead to a dynamic development, based on a local

¹⁸Ghidul Solicitantului pentru Accesarea Submăsurii 19.1 ”Sprijin Pregătitor pentru Elaborarea Strategiilor de Dezvoltare Locală”, page 5

development strategy designed, implemented and managed by representatives of the LAGs.¹⁹

LEADER is an important tool for rural development for Romania, given that the current basic services do not meet the needs of the local population, nor the social conditions, which can be seen in the poor economic development of the areas.

Given the specific needs of local communities and their endogenous potential, it is relevant to continue to use this tool for bottom up rural development for the promotion of initiatives and development activities by local communities, in an integrated and innovative, but also balanced manner, in order to accelerate the structural development of these communities.

Also, the management capacity of local governance needs to be strengthened in order to inform stakeholders and stimulate rural areas to get involved to a greater extent in the process of developing their own micro-region.

Innovation remains key to LEADER, and in the 2014-2020 period, the support for a wide range of innovative actions, identified on the principle of the bottom up approach, based on community needs, will be revived and strengthened. Therefore, Measure 19 “LEADER local development” will encourage the promotion of innovative projects in the local development strategies, with particular emphasis on identifying innovative solutions tailored to local needs.

The Cooperation component will generate added value in the micro-regions, particularly through the involvement of local people and representatives of various economic sectors. For the Romanian LAGs, cooperation will represent an important opportunity to have direct contact with examples of best practices in other EU Member States and to connect and integrate into the European LEADER community. Therefore, LEADER is not simply a funding source, but rather constitutes the best form of stimulating local and regional development of the LEADER areas.

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¹⁹Programul National de Dezvoltare Rurala 2014-2020

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[10] Rural Investment Funding Agency website: www.apdrp.ro ;

[11] Managing Authority for the National Rural Development Programme website: www.madr.ro