

Are LEADER principles achieved in Local Action Groups? A systematic assessment of local representatives' perception

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Abstract

Rural development is often hindered by the lack of human and social capital. The LEADER program is one of the European Union's financial instruments destined to improve the rural areas governance by introducing a set of institutional changes including new local policies, practices and actors. These changes translate into the seven principles at the heart of the LEADER philosophy: partnership, integrated and multi-sectoral strategy, area-based approach, bottom-up approach, cooperation, networking and innovation. This article focuses on assessing the commitment of the Local Action Groups (LAGs) to the LEADER principles in a post-socialist country based on the perception of local actors. In this respect, we combined a quantitative (survey) with a qualitative approach (interview) for evaluating the degree of LEADER principles implementation. The study brings evidence on the specific principles which seem more difficult to integrate and provides a basis for future policy design.

Keywords: LEADER programme, rural communities, local governance, stakeholders' perception, LEADER principles

Introduction

Rural development programs generally aim to reduce disparities between rural and urban areas either directly, by providing funds for building infrastructure and for developing new economic activities or indirectly, by enhancing local governance capacity, therefore ensuring wider participation of local actors to rural development. The LEADER program – one of the most important rural development programs in the EU – is expected to lead to good local governance and to the sustainable development of rural areas. This is due to the bottom-up approach, the support of networking between the actors, the stimulation of partnership and the cooperation between them (Hoffmann and Hoffmann, 2018), all these being basic principles of the LEADER program. Kopoteva and Nikula (2014) state that LEADER is a real opportunity to support sustainable development through this bottom-up approach

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that helps to empower local communities and increase their autonomy. LEADER is also seen as a real support offered to rural areas in finding the path to sustainable development (Lopolito et al., 2011). In terms of local governance, LEADER is perceived as an exceptional example in terms of its ability to introduce a new, more efficient way of governing (Galindo-Pérez-de-Azpillaga & Foronda-Robles, 2018), based on the collaboration between local actors, the program making the transition towards a good local governance (Esparcia et al., 2015). This is also due to its promotion of local development strategies that are tailored to specific local conditions, which may yield greater returns (Lakshmanan & Button, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013).

Despite the generally positive outcomes discussed in existing literature, the task of establishing effective governance systems guided by the LEADER principles may pose significant challenges, particularly in nations characterized by inadequate institutional frameworks, including those transitioning from socialism (North, 2006). An illustration of this can be seen in the obstacles faced in implementing a truly grassroots-driven approach, fostering partnerships, and encouraging innovation, all impeded by the absence of robust social capital, a culture of entrepreneurship, and compounded by demographic factors such as an aging and under-educated populace (Chevalier & Maurel, 2013). Furthermore, certain cultural aspects like mutual distrust and the absence of a culture of open dialogue (Iașu & Alupului, 2013) further exacerbate the challenges by hindering collaboration among various stakeholders. Networking capacity is limited too in such countries, as connections between actors are rather selective and elitist, leaving behind most of the citizens and including only several key actors (Damurski, 2015); in the case of LEADER projects, these are specific stakeholders which are very close to politicians and project heads. Moreover, a true local approach, by means of a comprehensive, place-based strategy is hindered by the dependence to the national level (Chevalier & Maurel, 2013). However, according to our knowledge, the scientific evidence on the degree of LEADER principles implementation is non-systematic, stemming from case study, qualitative research. While factors and mechanisms that hinder a successful implementation of these principles have been highlighted in these in-depth individual case analyses, a quantitative assessment of the actual degree of implementation is lacking.

Against this background, the present paper proposes a two-step approach for assessing the commitment of LAGs to the LEADER principles in a post-socialist country, Romania, based on the perception of local actors. Firstly, we follow a quantitative approach, aiming to identify the degree of commitment of LAGs to LEADER principles by means of a survey applied to the representatives of 150 Romanian LAGs. Secondly, the results are validated through a qualitative approach, based on 3 extensive structured interviews with local leaders. Our approach allows a systematic perspective on the perception of local actors on the integration of

LEADER principles in local development, following the implementation of LEADER projects.

The extent to which the LEADER principles are put into practice by Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the post-socialist setting of Romania is examined through the lens of local actors participating in the LEADER program. This inquiry encapsulates the primary aim of the research, which is to scrutinize the overall viewpoint of LAG representatives regarding the implementation level of the LEADER principles in Romania, a nation transitioning from socialism. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study seeks to evaluate the dedication of LAGs to LEADER principles by conducting a quantitative survey involving 150 LAG representatives alongside qualitative interviews with local leaders. The research question is centered on the execution of LEADER principles as perceived by local actors engaged in the program, thus aligning with the study's objective of comprehending the standpoint of local actors concerning the assimilation of LEADER principles in local development.

The paper is structured as follows. After this short introduction, section two provides a short literature review on the main aspects underlined so far in case studies regarding the implementation of LEADER principle at local level. Section 3 briefly presents the methodology, including both survey and interview design and interpretation. Sections 4 and 5 focus on the results and their discussion compared to the existing literature: section 4 reports the results of the quantitative assessment - namely the extent to which each of the seven LEADERs is applied in Romanian LAGs and depicts the mechanisms through which these principles are followed or not, providing real examples and specific insights from local leaders; section 5 compares our finding with what previous research studies have highlighted. The final section presents the conclusions of the study, including its policy implications, its limitations as well as some future research directions.

2. Previous research

The main results obtained so far on the fulfilment of LEADER principles at LAG level come from case studies. They often assess, through qualitative methods, directly or indirectly, the extent to which some of the LEADER principles have been met.

Most of these case studies refer to the first and most important principle underlying the LEADER program, namely the bottom-up approach. Previous studies often point to the monopoly of local public authorities in decision-making and the lack of interest of local people in getting involved in the work of LAGs as being the main problems in implementing this principle (Chevalier & Maurel, 2013; Navarro et al., 2015; Sykala et al., 2015). Surveys applied to stakeholders show that in some cases the public authorities consider the participation of the citizens in the decisional process as difficult to achieve and not necessary. In their view, the wish of the

citizens is that of being properly governed, but not to be involved in the decision-making process (Chevalier & Maurel, 2013). Thus, previous studies show that the bottom-up approach exists only on paper in most of the LEADER beneficiary countries (Navarro et al., 2015).

The over-representation of the public sector in the work of LAGs also has repercussions for the proper implementation of the area-based approach principle underlying the LEADER program. Thus, studies show that LAG actions are designed to satisfy the interests of certain communities/mayors, but not necessarily the interests of the association seen as a unitary territory as foreseen by the area-based approach (Esparcia Perez, 2000). Another aspect affecting the good implementation of the area-based approach is the use of external consultancy firms for the design of the local development strategies. This practice leads to a depersonalisation of LAG strategies (Chevalier, 2012; Chevalier et al., 2012). Also, the insufficient uniformity of LAGs is a prevalent issue in the broader European framework. Navarro et al. (2015) and Chevalier (2012) assert that the territorial configuration of LEADER alliances frequently adheres more to the administrative borders of the municipalities, rather than a specific level of likeness in terms of past, culture, customs, natural attributes (as advocated by the area-based approach). This results in the formation of heterogeneous LAGs that would likely dissolve without LEADER funding.

With regard to partnership, the case studies show that this LEADER principle is difficult to implement because of the way the LAGs were set up. In order to access funding, LAGs were, to some extent, forced to be formed (Pechrova & Boukalova, 2014), but without paying much attention to the partners involved. This has led to the formation of less successful LAGs to the extent that some partners exist only on paper and this compromises the fulfilment of the principles of partnership and cooperation. In addition, the lack of interest of partners to take part in the work of the LAG, but also the lack of trust between them led to the absence of collaborative projects between partners (Marquardt et al., 2011).

As with partnership, the principle of networking is difficult to achieve when there is a lack of trust and communication at LAG level. The interest of LAGs to collaborate not only at local level, but also with other organisms at national or international level is low, in many cases individualism being predominant in the creation of LEADER projects (Marquardt et al., 2011).

Bureaucracy is often mentioned in studies as being one of the aspects affecting the good implementation of development measures at local level (Cehan & Iatu, 2023), including the LEADER philosophy, especially when it comes to the principle of a bottom-up approach and the principle of innovation. The integration of LEADER into the National Rural Development Programs (NRDP) has diminished the effectiveness of LEADER in implementing these principles (Dax et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2015). This is because bureaucracy and administrative burdens on LAG staff have increased significantly (Dax et al., 2016), which leads to less time available to provide support, advice to beneficiaries and reduces the quality of

projects. Not only innovation was affected by bureaucracy, but also other principles, such as cooperation (Pylkkanen et al., 2020) and integrated and multi-sectoral strategies (Dax et al., 2016). Cooperation projects are at risk when the procedures to implement them are unclear and hinder their implementation. Thus, the tendency is that of applying for projects with tangible results and very clear objectives.

The case studies carried out so far on the implementation of LEADER principles have been able to highlight some of the issues underlying the poor results achieved so far at LAG level. However, what is missing is an integrated approach, an extended analysis of all seven principles and on a larger scale to be able to assess the changes made in the governance of beneficiary communities. This study wants to fill this gap by combining a quantitative approach (survey applied to the representatives of 150 Romanian LAGs) with a qualitative approach (3 extensive interviews with local leaders). At the heart of the study is one main objective: analyzing the general perception of LAG representatives on the degree of LEADER principles implementation. This will allow the identification of the specific principles which seem more difficult to integrate at LAG level and will provide a basis for future policy design, this being the aim of the study.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Study area

The study focuses on the analysis of the implementation of LEADER principles in Romania, a post-socialist state facing sharp internal development gaps (Goschin, 2015; Precupetu & Precupetu, 2014; Torok, 2019) and a predominance of top-down governance (Georgescu, 2022). LEADER funding in Romania started in 2007, which marked the start of the fourth LEADER programming period in the EU, when the program became part of each beneficiary country's NRDP. However, the first quantitative results of the LEADER program in the Romanian countryside appeared in 2011 when the first 82 Local Action Groups (LAGs) were set up. The number of LAGs has increased over the 16 years of implementation in Romania to 239. They cover 88.9% of Romania's territory, so that the majority of rural settlements are included in a LEADER-type partnership. In terms of their internal structure, these LAGs are based on municipalities characterized by different levels of development. Most of the higher developed LAGs are located in the western part of the country, in stark contrast to the north-eastern and southern parts (see Fig. 1).

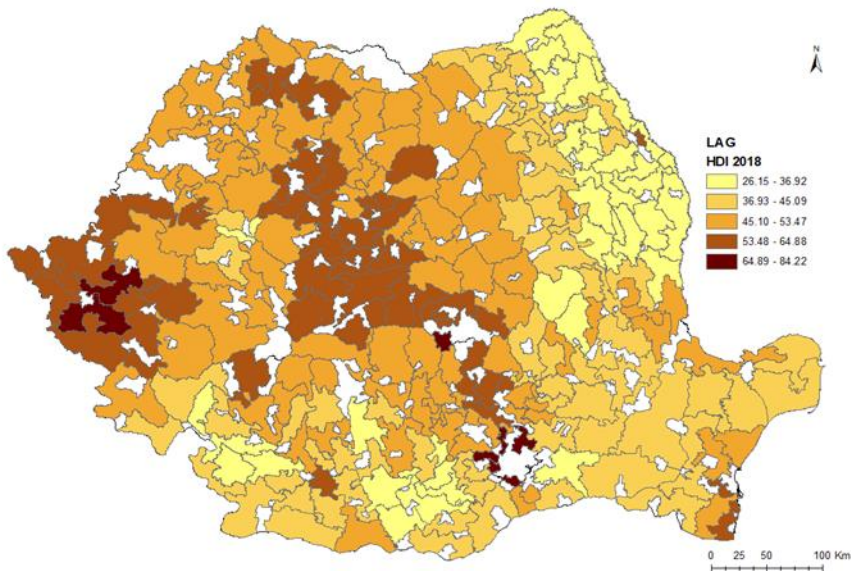
Over the two funding periods that took place so far, more than 14,000 LEADER projects have been financed in Romanian rural communities, most of them aimed at developing the agricultural sector (e.g. setting up young farmers, setting up farms, purchasing agricultural machinery) and local infrastructure (building parks/sports centers/social centers, rehabilitating cultural centers). In terms of funds absorbed, these amount to approximately €820 million. Although agricultural and

infrastructure projects were predominant in numerical terms, the costliest projects were those with a non-agricultural focus (e.g. establishment of hostels, riding centres, afterschool centres) submitted by private beneficiaries (Opria et al., 2021).

3.2. Methods and data

In order to identify the degree of commitment of LAGs to LEADER principles, a survey was applied to the representatives of 150 Romanian LAGs. The survey was structured in seven sections and included a number of 21 closed-ended questions and two open-ended ones. Each section addressed issues related to one of the seven LEADER principles: bottom-up approach, area-based approach, partnership, integrated and multi-sectoral strategies, networking, cooperation, innovation. The survey was applied between October and December 2021 on a number of 150 LAGs, chosen at random from the total of 239 LEADER associations in Romania.

Figure 1. Level of development of Local Action Groups (HDI 2018)



Source: authors' representation

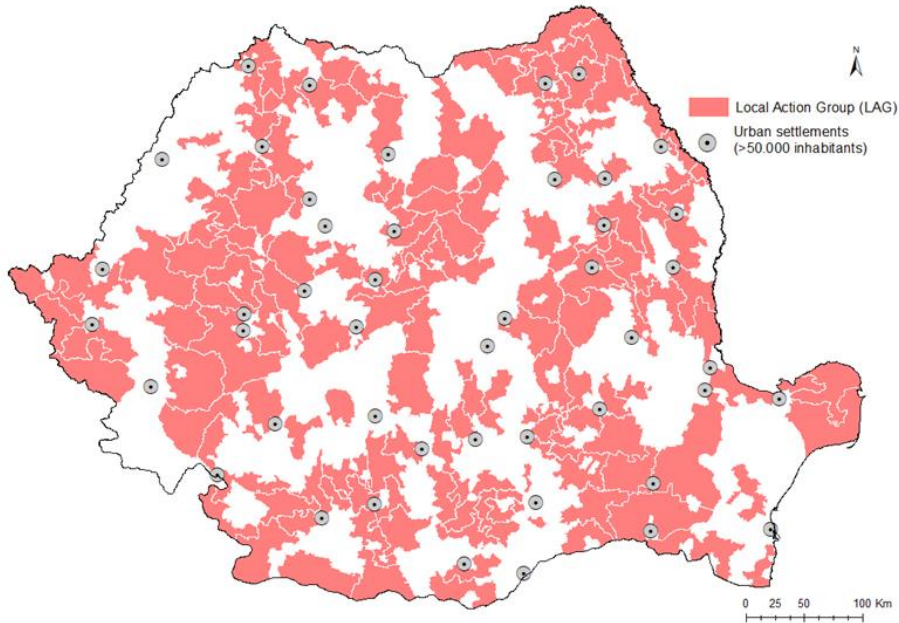
The first step was to calculate the sample size on which to apply the survey. For this, the formula developed by Yamane (1967) was applied. Considering that the total population in the case of the present study is represented by the 239 Romanian LAGs, a sample size of 150 associations resulted. By applying the survey to a number of 150 LAGs, a degree of confidence of 95% was ensured, the margin of

error being $\pm 5\%$. Also, in order to reduce the variability of the sample, the method of stratified proportional sampling was applied.

The spatial distribution of the 150 surveyed LAGs is a uniform, balanced one (see Fig. 2). The randomly selected associations are located both in the more developed western part of the country and in the southern and northeastern areas that concentrate most of the disadvantaged communities (Opria et al., 2021). The location of the surveyed LAGs in both the more developed and the less-favored areas balances the sample even more, given that in this way perceptions from different territorial contexts can be captured.

Representatives of the sampled LAGs were contacted by e-mail and asked to fill out the survey. For this, the online software Google Forms was used, which facilitated the completion of the survey and the collection of answers.

As part of the second phase of the research methodology, a comprehensive qualitative analysis according to the guidelines presented by Yin (2011) has been meticulously carried out. This particular approach was deemed essential as it provides a profound and detailed insight into the underlying rationales influencing the decisions made by the various actors involved, shedding light on their strategies for implementation and the subsequent outcomes achieved, as eloquently highlighted by Kyj and Kyj (2009, p. 301). The qualitative analysis was complemented by a series of three in-depth interviews conducted with LAG managers. These interviews were meticulously structured around the seven fundamental principles that underpin the LEADER approach to rural development. In the selection process of the three LAGs for these interviews, a comprehensive assessment of their performance metrics was conducted. Factors such as the absorption rate of LEADER funds and the diversity of projects undertaken played a pivotal role in the selection criteria. The primary objective behind this selection process was to pinpoint LAGs that exhibited a performance level that was indicative of the average within the larger population of Romanian LAGs. To achieve this, a median value representing the overall performance of all Romanian LAGs in terms of LEADER fund absorption and project diversity was calculated. Subsequently, the three LAGs chosen for the interviews were found to closely align with this calculated median, thereby rendering them as suitable representatives for the broader spectrum of LEADER associations across Romania. The distinctions observed among the selected LAGs can be attributed to various factors such as their geographical expanse, the number of municipalities falling under their jurisdiction, and their proximity to urban settlements. By considering these key variables, the analysis led to the identification of three distinct typologies among the LAGs, namely predominantly urban, predominantly rural, and transition LAGs. Each of the three LAGs selected for the interviews was deliberately chosen to exemplify one of these typologies, thereby ensuring that the findings derived from the interviews are as comprehensive and representative as possible of the entire LAG population in Romania.

Figure 2. Spatial distribution of LAGs surveyed

Source: authors' representation

The interviews were based on the same structure used in the construction of the survey, the questions asked being organized according to the seven principles of the LEADER program. This ensured both a broad view of the changes generated by the European program in rural communities and the comparability of the results of the questionnaire with those of the interviews. Regarding the interviewees, the selection criterion was their administrative position held within the LAG. Consequently, all the interviewees were LAG managers as they possess the best knowledge of the results obtained and insights into the local working mechanisms (Butkus et al., 2023).

4. Results

4.1. LEADER principles implementation in Romania – quantitative and qualitative assessment

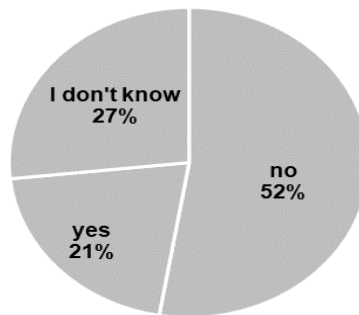
Partnership

The first section of the questionnaire aimed to assess the fulfilment of the first LEADER principle: partnership. To this end, the 150 LAGs were asked whether

there had been partnerships at local level between public authorities, private enterprises and civil society prior to the establishment of the LAG (see Fig. 3). The results highlight the absence of such initiatives, with 79% of respondents stating either that there had been no such collaboration at local level before or that they were unaware of its existence. Thus, according to the quantitative evaluation, LEADER can be considered the starting point in the formation of public-private partnerships.

Figure 3. Partnership status prior to the formation of the LAG

Were there any local projects/partnerships between public authorities, private enterprises and civil society before the LAG was established?



Source: authors' representation

The 3 interviews conducted subsequently complement the results obtained. Thus, 2 of the 3 managers interviewed stated that LEADER was not the first form of partnership set up at local level, but it can indeed be considered the first partnership that really worked:

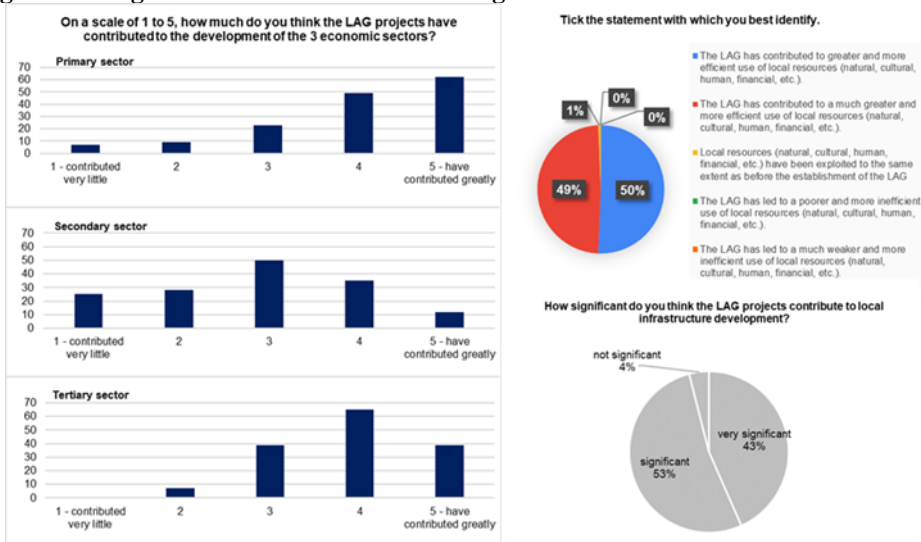
“There was a local partnership initiative in 2006 when an Intercommunity Development Association (IDA) was set up. Subsequently, these municipalities were included in the LAG, and they were the starting point in the formation of the new LEADER association.” (LAG S.T. manager)

“There have been a few attempts to create such partnerships in the past, with the initiative generally coming from NGOs. However, these partnerships did not work very well because of the partners' lack of interest in collaborating, in working together. The material benefits offered to the partners, generally public partners (municipalities), were too small or non-existent. Thus, the lack of this financial incentive led in most cases to a lack of interest in collaboration and ultimately to the failure of the partnerships created.” (LAG S.M. manager)

Integrated and multisectoral strategies

One of LEADER's targets is to build and implement integrated, multi-sectoral strategies that can best respond to local needs. The answers provided by the 150 LAGs surveyed indicate that the strategies implemented through LEADER have been successful. According to the general perception, they have succeeded in stimulating the 3 economic sectors in different proportions through the projects implemented (see Fig. 4), have contributed to a greater and more efficient use of local resources (99%), as well as to a significant development of the local infrastructure (96%).

Figure 4. Integrated and multi-sectoral strategies



Source: authors' representation

However, the interviews highlight that the contribution made in all three areas (development of economic sectors, development of local resources and development of infrastructure) is minimal and fails to bring about a noticeable change in the communities:

“The contribution to the development of economic sectors is quite small precisely because most of the funds are allocated to public development projects. The changes brought to the infrastructure of the municipalities included in the LAG are not large because the funds are quite small and do not allow the realization of large projects with a strong impact.” (LAG B.F. manager)

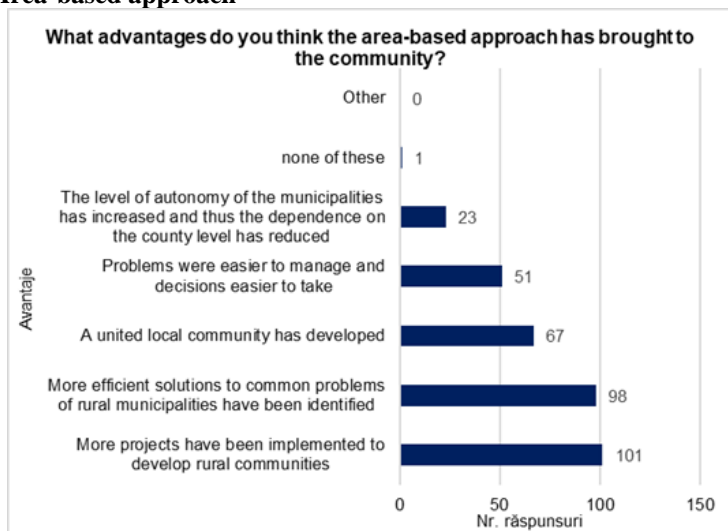
Moreover, the results are sometimes contradictory in that one of the three managers interviewed considers that LEADER has made no contribution to the development of local infrastructure:

“LAG projects have not been at all geared towards upgrading or developing community infrastructure. This is because the funds are too small to cover such large-scale projects.” (LAG S.T. manager)

Area-based approach

The third LEADER principle evaluated was the area-based approach. It aims to build homogenous, united communities that share the same traditions and customs, and to make the actions implemented inclusive, beneficial and responsive to community-wide problems. However, the questionnaire revealed that the area-based approach does not seem to be a principle satisfactorily achieved so far in Romania in terms of quality. According to the perception of the 150 LAGs interviewed, the objective of creating homogeneous, united communities was not best achieved (see fig. 5). The main focus was on achieving tangible, quantitative results (implementation of rural development projects), and less on the development of the LAG community as a whole (qualitative result).

Figure 5. Area-based approach



Source: authors' representation

The 3 interviews carried out support the results of the questionnaire. Thus, in the view of the three managers interviewed, LEADER is mainly a way in which small-scale local initiatives can come to life thanks to the financial support provided. The qualitative contribution cannot be denied, as it consists in the development of

united rural communities as a result of collaboration between local actors for the implementation of LEADER projects. However, the risk of dissolution of the LAGs and thus of the communities formed by them is high in the absence of constant financial support provided by European instruments such as LEADER:

“Most likely, without LEADER funding, LAGs would dissolve. Although the advantages of an area-based approach are recognised, the lack of a financial incentive (even a small one) discourages, leads to a lack of interest among actors to collaborate.” (LAG S.M. manager)

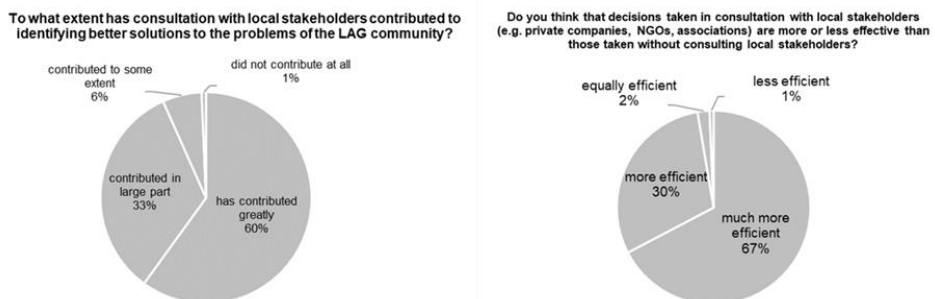
Bottom-up approach

The main objective pursued through the LEADER program is to introduce a bottom-up approach involving local actors in the governance process of rural communities. When asked to what extent the LAGs have succeeded in achieving this objective and what benefits they have brought at local level, the 150 respondents underlined the substantial contribution made by LEADER in terms of identifying better solutions and making more effective decisions as a result of consultation with local actors (see fig. 6).

These statements were validated by the answers given in the interviews. Discussions with the three LAG managers revealed that the main contribution made by LEADER is in this direction, that of involving local actors in the decision-making process, which has a direct impact on the quality of local governance:

“Consultations with local stakeholders are crucial in identifying the real needs of municipalities. These consultations with local stakeholders bring consistent results and benefits for rural communities, on the one hand because they identify more effective solutions to the problems of the communes, and on the other because they open up new directions for development projects. The bottom-up approach has allowed the involvement of all categories of local actors in the decision-making process and has contributed greatly to a better management of local problems.” (LAG S.T. manager)

Figure 6. Bottom-up approach

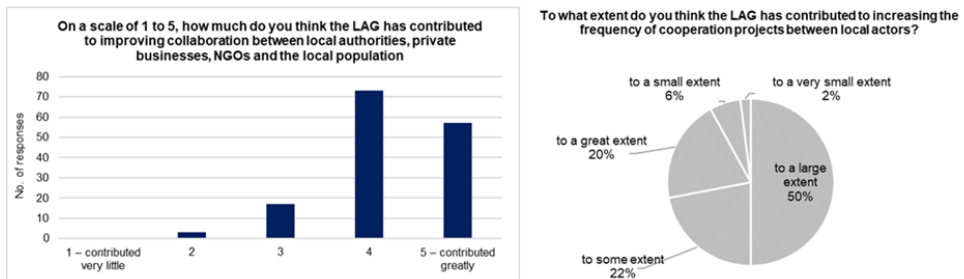


Source: authors' representation

Cooperation

Stimulating cooperation between local actors is one of the seven LEADER principles. According to the results of the questionnaire, LAGs have made a substantial contribution to improving cooperation between the main categories of local actors and have encouraged an increase in the frequency of projects carried out jointly by them (see fig. 7).

Figure 7. Cooperation



Source: authors' representation

The interviews highlighted the same idea. There are cooperation projects between actors and there are plans to continue this practice in future programming periods. Involvement in the decision-making process is much greater and public authorities provide support to private actors and NGOs in carrying out different activities for the local population or projects that contribute to the development of the LAG communities.

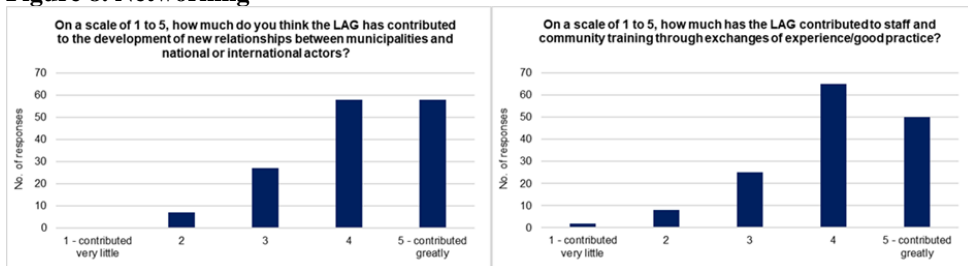
“Through the activity of the LAG (e.g. working meetings) and through the implemented projects, cooperation relations between local authorities, local companies and the local population have been developed. The LAG has also created a favorable framework for the exchange of experience, good practices and ideas between the actors in the territory, all of which have strengthened relations between the actors and developed better communication between them.” (LAG B.F. manager)

“There has been a lot of development of collaborative relationships between local authorities, local businesses and local people. Public authorities provide support to private actors and NGOs in carrying out various activities for the local population or projects that contribute to the development of the LAG’s communities (e.g. they have offered premises to private actors and NGOs to carry out their activities).” (LAG S.T. manager)

Networking

Beyond improving cooperation between local actors, LEADER aims to develop collaborative relationships between LAGs and between LAGs and other external actors or bodies. The vast majority of LAGs interviewed considered LEADER's contribution to be substantial in terms of developing relations between the municipalities included in the associations and other actors at higher hierarchical levels, as well as its contribution to staff training and the exchange of good practice (see Fig. 8).

Figure 8. Networking



Source: authors' representation

The potential of the LEADER program to stimulate networking was also very well highlighted in the interviews. Thus, the 3 managers interviewed consider that this was one of the main qualitative results achieved with the support of the LEADER program.

“Networking was ensured through the various events organized on the LEADER theme or through projects managed jointly with other LAGs. For example, currently we are running a cooperation project with Poland and a project with another LAG in Cluj county where the objective is to promote local craftsmen and producers through workshops, fairs with traditional products.” (LAG S.T. manager)

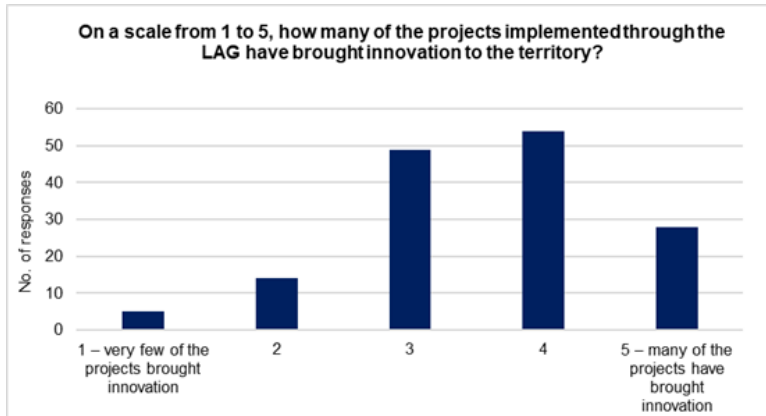
“The biggest contribution of the LAG has been in this direction, in creating connections, collaborative relationships at local, national and even international level. Currently a collaborative project with other LAGs in the region is underway (QR4all project). The project aims to enhance the tourism resource.” (LAG S.M. manager)

Innovation

Through its specific approach, the type of actions funded and the formation of new territorial bodies, LEADER aims to bring innovation to rural areas. When asked to what extent the program had succeeded in achieving this goal, 68% of LAGs said

that the projects implemented through LEADER had a medium to high degree of innovation, generally giving scores of 3 and 4 (see fig. 9).

Figure 9. Innovation



Source: authors' representation

According to the three managers interviewed, the degree of innovation of projects is also a selection criterion. Thus, all projects receiving LEADER funding must have an innovative element to some degree. The extent to which projects were innovative, however, differs from case to case. Thus, 2 of the 3 managers interviewed consider the projects implemented in their community to be innovative, while the third manager interviewed considers that the projects implemented were not innovative, the classic projects with common objectives generally prevailing:

“The projects were not innovative. Projects with fairly common, simple objectives, without innovative ideas, predominated. Nor were the solutions innovative. Through consultation with local stakeholders, new ideas were identified, but not necessarily innovative.” (LAG S.M. manager)

5. Discussions

The results of the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the implementation of the LEADER principles in Romania show differences in the extent to which each of the 7 principles has been achieved.

The principle of partnership is generally perceived as being well implemented in Romania, having created the first forms of partnership between actors from different spheres (private sector, public sector, citizens), through LAGs. In the wider European context, the results in Romania are positive compared to other countries. For example, in the Czech Republic studies show that some of these LEADER bodies do not really function because they were somewhat “forcibly” built in order to access EU funds, thus hindering a genuine partnership (Pechrova & Boukalova,

2014). The lack of experience in collaboration between local actors prior to the LEADER program (Chevalier, 2012; Chevalier et al., 2012) and the negative experience of communist collectivisation (Petrescu, 2015) are some of the factors explaining the poor implementation of the partnership principle targeted by LEADER in some cases.

As far as the integrated strategies are concerned, our results indicate a partial achievement of this principle by LAGs. Regarding the LEADER objective of implementing integrated and multi-sectoral strategies at local level with the help of LAGs, the results showed differences in perception. According to the local actors, increasing financial support could contribute to better results, by generating opportunities for more projects with different objectives and potential impact on different economic sectors to be carried out. In addition, administrative procedures need to be simplified and clarified in order to achieve better results in future programming periods (Petrescu, 2015), as projects aiming to diversify the local economy have been avoided because of administrative uncertainties that could generate bureaucratic problems.

The area-based approach was also limited, as the majority of actors consider that the associations formed are not homogeneous and that the LAGs would most probably dissolve without LEADER funding. These results are in line with the evidence from other countries, as the low homogeneity of LAGs is a common problem in the wider European context. Navarro et al. (2015) and Chevalier (2012) state that the territorial configuration of LEADER associations follows more often the administrative boundaries of the communes, rather than a certain degree of similarity in terms of history, culture, traditions, natural features (as recommended by the area-based approach). In addition, the use of external consultancy firms in the design of the LEADER associations' development strategies leads to a standardisation and depersonalisation of strategies, that fail to accurately capture the real needs of the community, thus limiting the implementation of the projects (Chevalier & Maurel, 2013; Chevalier, 2012). Moreover, in some cases, the decisions are monopolised by the public sector (even by a reduced number of public actors) or the projects carried out by the LAG are mainly directed towards the needs of a single community (usually the one led by the LAG president) rather than maximising the development of the whole territory covered by the LAG (Chevalier & Maurel, 2013).

On the other hand, our results suggest a good implementation of the bottom-up approach in Romania. Both the questionnaire and the interview underline that the bottom-up approach has been well received by rural communities and the involvement of local actors in the decision-making process has become a reality. However, case studies from other European countries report a certain lack of interest of the local population to get involved and the over-representation of the public sector in the decision-making process (Navarro et al., 2015; Chevalier, 2012) which are often common in post-socialist countries. Other studies point towards the

integration of LEADER in the overall NRDP scheme starting with the 2007-2013 financing period which diminishes the autonomy of LAGs and the good implementation of the bottom-up approach (Dax et al., 2016). Therefore, in the European context, the positive perception of Romanian LAGs regarding the implementation of the bottom-up approach is a rarity and stands out from the results obtained in other cases.

The results also indicate that the LEADER program contributed to strengthening the cooperation between local actors. On the contrary, other studies show that local cooperation has been limited by bureaucracy and complicated administrative procedures that have discouraged the implementation of collaborative projects between local actors (ENRD, 2014; Pylkkanen et al., 2020). In some cases, projects with clear, simple objectives (such as infrastructure investments) have been favoured in the selection process over more innovative projects, aiming to foster cooperation in order to avoid possible bureaucratic problems (Petrescu, 2015).

Besides the local collaborations, LEADER has also contributed to enhancing networking between local actors and external actors or bodies. In the early years of the LEADER program in Romania, case studies revealed a lack of trust between actors, poor communication between them and a lack of awareness of the need and importance of networking (Marquardt et al., 2011). However, after the end of two funding periods, the results have improved as shown by the results obtained in the present study, which underline a general positive perception of the implementation of this principle. The evaluation of the networking provided by LEADER in other beneficiary countries has been little addressed in the literature, which makes it difficult to position Romania in the European context from this point of view.

Finally, a central objective of the LEADER program is to stimulate innovation (Dax et al., 2016), which is also included in the list of 7 principles underlying the program's philosophy. The results obtained in the present study showed that innovation is not a strength of LEADER in Romania. Indeed, all initiatives receiving funding must have an innovative element, but respondents highlighted that the level of innovation provided by LEADER projects is often minimal. Case studies in other beneficiary countries show similar results, with LEADER's contribution to innovation in rural areas being much lower than expected (Dax et al., 2016). The increasing administrative burden on LAG staff reduces the quality of LEADER projects, due to the reduced time allocated by the LAG team to provide support and advice to beneficiaries in the implementation of projects (Sykala et al., 2015). Also, administrative uncertainties in the process of selecting and establishing the eligibility of submitted projects hinder the implementation of more innovative LEADER projects (Petrescu, 2015). In addition, the integration of the LEADER program into the NRDP from the 2007-2013 funding period affected the effectiveness of the financial instrument in fulfilling some of its principles, including that of innovation, as some of the program's autonomy in deciding on locally funded actions has been lost (Lukesch et al., 2004; Dax et al., 2016; Bock, 2012).

Conclusions

The present paper provided a systematic perspective on the extent to which each of the seven LEADER principles is followed in Romania (a post-socialist country), allowing to identify the specific principles which seem more difficult to integrate in this specific context, according to the perception of LAGs representatives.

The results, based on 150 questionnaires and 3 interviews, indicate a general positive perspective on the program, compared to other countries and to some previous studies. However, perceived achievements of the LEADER program are not uniform across the seven principles. On the one hand, LAG representatives acknowledge significant improvement of partnerships, local cooperation, external networking and bottom-up led development after the launch of the LEADER program. On the other hand, the more substantive principles, referring to the actual content of the proposed strategy of development (namely the integrated, multi-sectoral strategic planning, the area-based approach and the innovation), were less present, according to the LAG representatives.

At the same time, both questionnaires and interviews highlight the important role that local actors attribute to immediate financial incentives, in order to foster the implementation of LEADER principles, by mentioning the EU funding availability as the main driver of the collective involvement of actors in local projects and the limited amount of funding as the main factor limiting the implementation of more integrated, strategic and innovating projects.

These results indicate that the LEADER program generated a visible impact on local governance systems in Romania, which may serve further local development. One of the most important challenges for the moment resides in the capacity of local actors to make use of and even to enhance their internal and external cooperation outside the LEADER program. At the same time, the positive results recorded by some principles related to actors' involvement should be interpreted with caution, as the perception and the discourse of local leaders may illustrate an incomplete reality. Further studies could use qualitative comparative case study methodologies or even network analyses to compare our results (which are mainly based on perception) with more visible outcomes of the implementation of each principle.

The policy implications of our results include the importance of integrating multiple funding programs in order to accelerate local development in rural areas, including funds oriented towards infrastructure development, human capital, innovation and networking capacity. The integrated territorial investment represents a useful tool in this respect, but the adequate training of local staff, followed by a sustained involvement of public bodies in education and increasing awareness of potential local beneficiaries represent critical steps in order to create strong and diverse local actor constellations and to maximise the funding opportunities from

various sources. The findings from the implementation of the LEADER program in Romania could significantly influence rural policies in other post-socialist countries by highlighting several critical areas for improvement. First, emphasizing the importance of genuine partnerships between diverse local actors could encourage these countries to facilitate collaboration beyond mere formalities, thus fostering real community engagement and ownership of development initiatives. This could lead to the creation of more effective and sustainable local action groups (LAGs). Second, the partial success in implementing integrated strategies suggests that increasing financial support and simplifying administrative procedures can enable more comprehensive and multi-sectoral rural development projects. Post-socialist countries might adopt policies that provide clearer guidelines and reduced bureaucratic hurdles to encourage diverse economic activities and improve project outcomes. Moreover, simplifying procedures and providing clear guidelines could prevent the hindrance of innovative and collaborative projects, which is a common problem in post-socialist countries. Lastly, the positive impact of LEADER on networking and cooperation highlights the need for policies that build trust and communication among local actors. Investing in capacity-building and fostering networks could enhance the effectiveness of rural development programs.

By integrating these lessons, post-socialist countries can develop rural policies that are more inclusive, efficient, and responsive to local needs, ultimately leading to more sustainable rural development.

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