

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND THE LEADER APPROACH IN ROMANIA

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*Abstract: The LEADER approach as one of the successful Community Development models has maintained the settlement of the method by encompassing the information, communication and animation techniques as part of the facilitation process designed to accomplish the initial crystallisation of the future Local Development Strategies. The benefits of the participatory approach and the community validation processes are not revisited along the implementation of the strategies despite the sound success of the programme. The compulsory scale replication of the Rural Development Programme and the resistance to innovative measures and actions coupled to the absence of the multi-fund support for the real trans sectoral needs of the rural territories prevent the Local Action Groups from proposing and implementing integrated strategies for the benefit of the rural areas.*

**Key words:** *community development, LEADER approach, rural development*

### INTRODUCTION

The development of the communities, particularly of the rural communities, has evolved as conceptual and practical approach through the participative and inclusive community development processes and created the space and the specific methodologies for a new and positively different practices. In this respect, the past three decades were dominated by the community development approaches given their richer content, the wider participation and more importantly, the empowerment these processes are bringing to the respective communities and to their members. A large set of models and methods using directly or indirectly the community members were developed, tested and validated in the Romanian rural over the reference period. Certain models were developed, tested, branded and institutionalised by different rural NGOs, often accompanied with the required expertise and facilitation provided by the same brand-owner. One particular case is the migration and integration of a community initiative into a completely (public) administrative setup and that is the case of the LEADER approach.

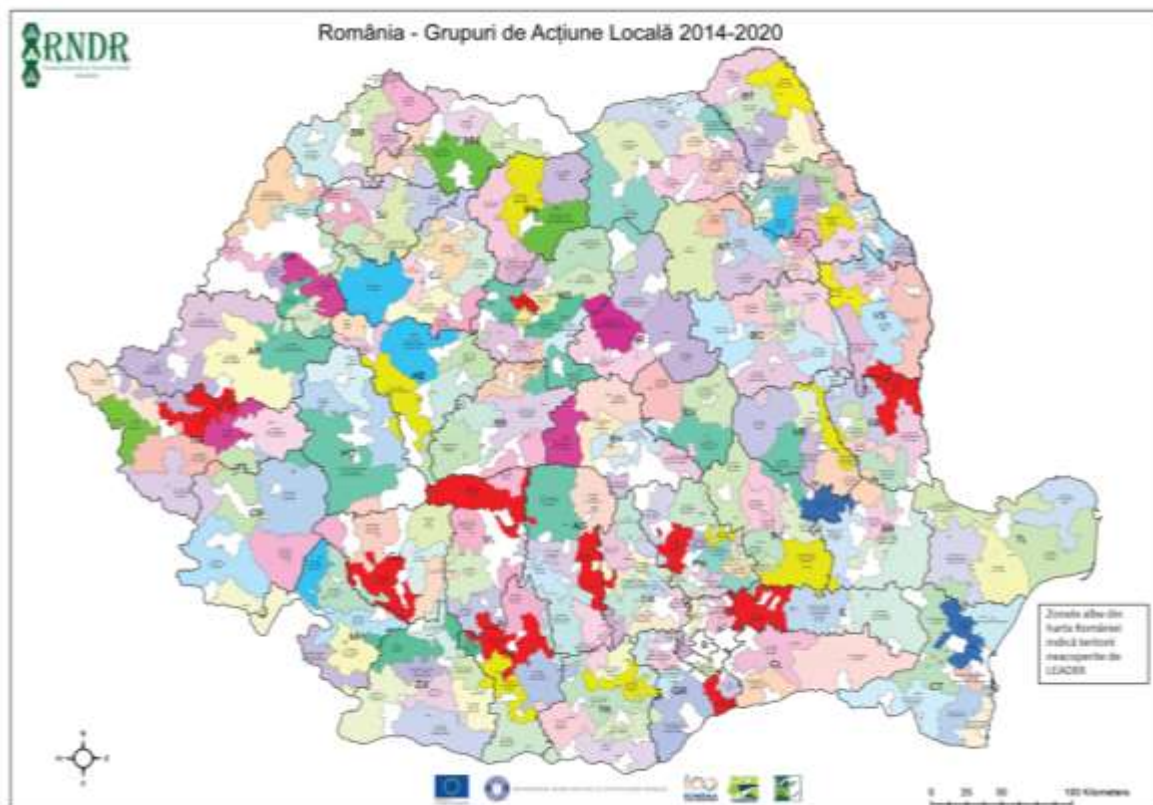
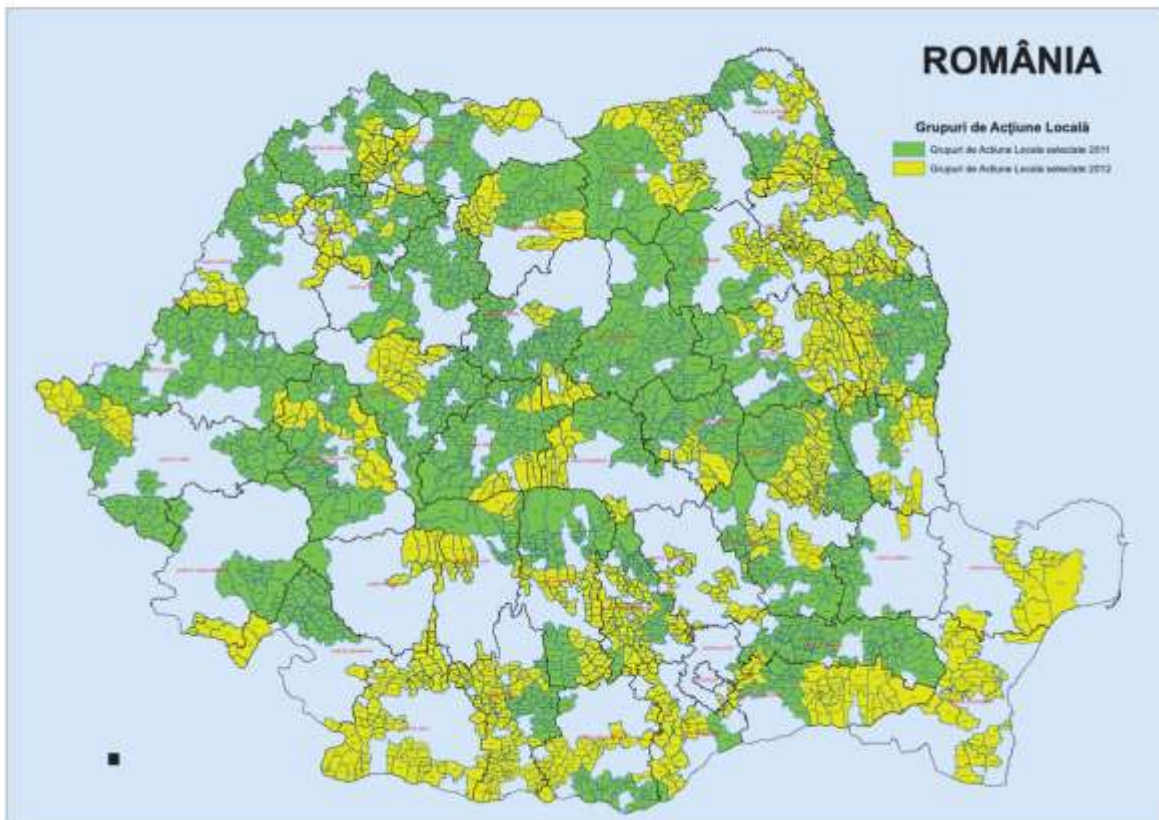
The target of the current paper is to analyse and report to what extent the original community initiative LEADER with all the subsequent changes and adaptations still represents a model of community development in Romania. To this purpose the approach and its implementation is observed from the early stages when the future Local Development Strategies (LDS) are formulated and consolidated, along their implementation paralleling the programming periods for the Rural Development Programmes (RDP) and concluding with the final reporting and the transitional periods. Any relevant findings along the implementation of the LDSs are reflected based on observations and their occurrence is highlighted when relevant [2][3].

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper relays on synchronic approach for the analysis based on secondary sources and official referred and reported documents.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

As introduced in the Fig.1 the coverage of the Local Action Groups (LAGs) and their respective Local Development Strategies (LDSs) practically blasted within the second



**Figure 1. Distribution of Local Action Groups in Romania along the two programming periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2020**

*Source: MADR, NRDP 2007-2013 and NRDR 2014-2020 [12] and [13]*

programming period in Romania (2014-2020) [14]. If during the first programming period (2007-2013) the first round of selection hardly covered half of the rural eligible territory and a second call for selection in 2012 compensated to a certain extent, the distribution and coverage from 2014 onwards practically leaves no uncovered area aside from large urban and metropolitan areas. In figures, the first programming exercise accounted for 163 LAGs covering 142.267 km<sup>2</sup> and 6.770.589 inhabitants, while during the second programming period 2014-2020 and in present there are 239 LAGs covering 90,81% of the Romania's rural population [8][9].

Answering the obvious success of the LEADER approach reveals a number of known features common with the Community Development approach among which the already validated specific tools: animation, information and communication actions. These elements became compulsory toolsets components and steps to undertake in exploring the needs and the problems of a defined territory. Nowadays all RDPs are including these elements as compulsory during the approach phase in order to ensure the representativity, the participation and the voice of the rural actors. Originally, the LEADER approach that stands as acronym for "*Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*" was a Community Initiative or a Community Development Action and therefore information and animation were the cornerstone of the model since its first stages [1].

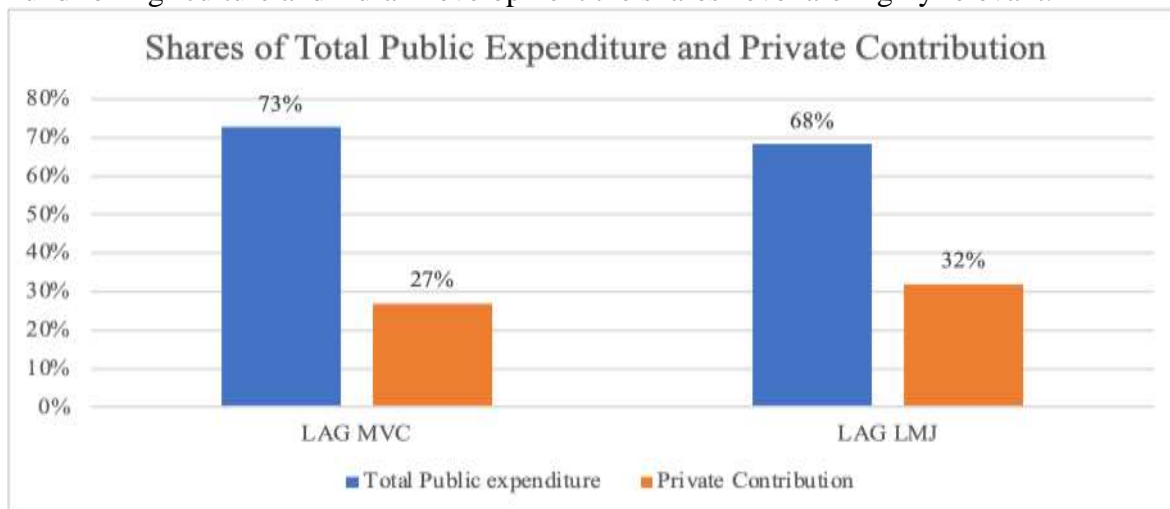
The evolution of the initiative into the complete administrative setup of the RDPs has retained, as potentially a quality component of the LDSs, the promotion of the community priorities. For EU New Member States, such as Romania, the new structures (the LAGs) are registered as NGOs acting as real private-public partnerships, where the private component is to remain dominant. Even in the case of the first programming period these partnerships proved to be the best success story of private-public partnership over the past three decades achieving unexpectedly high absorption rates [15]. The success repaid over the following programming period with a larger coverage and an extra improvement in terms of financial allocation; if during the first period all territories received the same budget with an upper ceiling, during the second, current, period the allocations are tempered with the number of inhabitants and the size of the territory. This second improvement is still limited and requires transitory support for the LAGs over the last years of the programme while a large number of local projects are still uncontracted as the funds are lacking.

The focus of the present paper is concentrated to the Community Development component within the LEADER approach as used in Romania today. The interest for this particular yet very relevant type of development resides from its participatory approach (regardless the employed model) and the capacity to involve a maximum number of relevant development actors. Most Community Development models or methods have been tested and proved in comparable conditions, territories and communities building into a successful approach and moreover they wear a quality mark as being validated by the communities.

The most important feature of the Community Development models or methods is represented by the community validation for the future objectives, approaches, changes and paths to follow. The involvement of the communities in the initial stages of analysis and isolation of problems and needs justifies entirely their common decision, ideally in an unanimously manner, for the upcoming developments. Basically, this participatory process sets the grounds for the promotion of the community priorities and values in the most respectful way.

Following the experience and the results recorded over the past ten years and two programming periods and closely analysing two LAGs from the Western Romania during the first implementation period allows the observation of a series of outstanding facts [10][11].

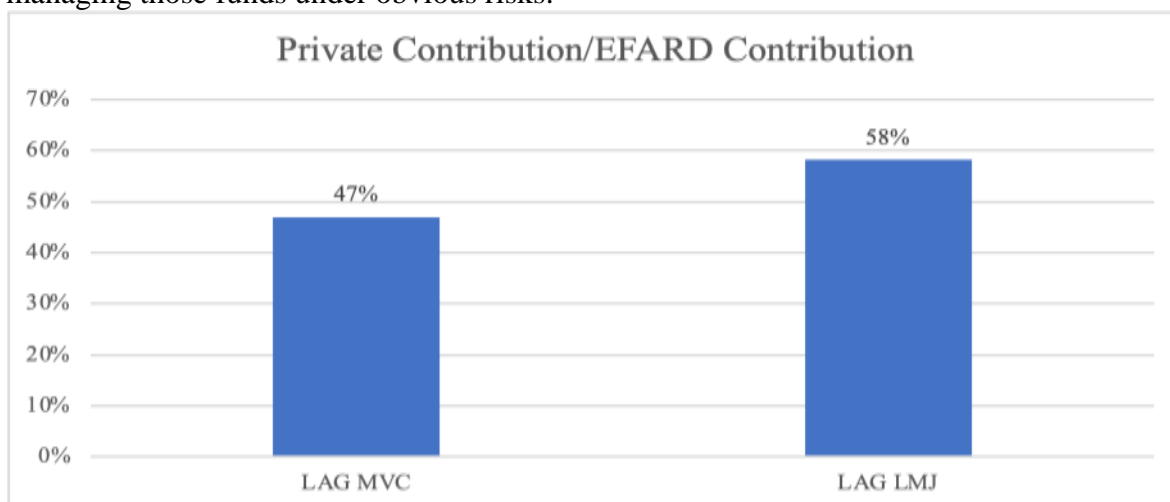
The shares of total public expenditure and the private contribution for the two selected LAGs is presented in the Fig.2. If the apparent high levels of the private contribution do not seem to be too high as neighbouring the 30% of total, in the Fig. 3 presenting the same private contribution as reported to the contribution of the European Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development the shares' level are highly relevant.



**Figure 2. Shares of Total Public Expenditures and Private Contribution for the LAGs MVC and LMJ for the period 2007-2013**

*Source: Calculations based upon the Reports on Financial Implementation of the Local Development Strategies of the Local Action Groups MVC and LMJ 2015 [4] and [6]*

Reaching almost 50% in the case of the first analysed LAG and almost 60% for the second indicates not only a high commitment for the development goals set in the Local Development Strategies yet an unprecedented effort for mobilising, accessing and managing those funds under obvious risks.



**Figure 3. Shares of Private Contribution and EFARD Contribution for the LAGs MVC and LMJ for the period 2007-2013**

*Source: Calculations based upon the Reports on Financial Implementation of the Local Development Strategies of the Local Action Groups MVC and LMJ 2015 [4] and [6]*

Worth stating that the territories and the LAGs are far from being the largest or richest among the LEADER territories and that the over one million euro in modernisation investments alone occurred in communities with 60-70.000 inhabitants covering 1.300-1.800 km<sup>2</sup>.

The observations also indicate a number of shortcomings in terms of Community development as the process does not seem to be revisited after the consolidation of the Local Strategies. These developments are originating from a number of elements among which the restrictive operating area as sectoral limit appears to be the central one. Since Local Development Strategies are framework defined within the boundaries of the RDPs, they cannot cover areas of interest, needs or problem-solving from other sectors yet required for a balanced territorial and human development. The strategies are hardly incorporating any transversal multi-fund supported actions as Romania is one of the two member states not using currently this option at the level of the programmes' management.

Another serious bottleneck preventing the LDSs to reach a greater impact is represented by the quasi-absent innovative measures and actions as being prevented by the scale replication of the RDP and the administrative "resistance" to "atypical measures" while by definition the LEADER approach operates outside the standardised typical measures from the programme. A consistent step forward could be represented by the operation under the financing by objectives logic where the only required setup as actions or measures is given by the impact of the attainment results at the level of the assumed objectives, transversally from the programme level down to the local strategies [15][16].

Another pressure factor over the actively involved staff in managing the LAGs activities is embodied by the interrupted developments between the programming periods when the only support coming from the transitory financing allows the structures to survive at a very low level of deployed activities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis draws clear elements of common evolution and toolsets used in the facilitation process along the LEADER approach allowing the Local Development Strategies to reflect a maximum of territorial specificities, needs and development vocation. As Community Development the LEADER approach remains the soundest and most widespread model achieving unprecedented developments at small local scale.

On the pure level of practical methodology, LEADER represents the only territorial development approach in the present succeeding where the regional development tools fail to reach. Besides, the continuity component as part of the compact and continuous territories it manages to reach remote areas not competitive in national project's competition.

The perspective of multi-fund could return the integrative character to the Local Development Strategies and resettle the position of the LAGs in the centre of the territorial development approach as defined at the foundation of the initiative.

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