

## PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATION REGARDING MULTIFUND APPROACH

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**Abstract:** *The future construction of National programming frames for 2021-2027 period, offers a new approach and new opportunities for all the EU countries. What is the best future for local development strategies in Romania? Which is the best public policy for the best results? The paper explores the verified and rational possibility to approach the territorial development via the LEADER initiative using the multi-fund construction. The coherence and rationale behind the proposition is analysed from all angles including the already existing EU experience. The construction builds into a public policy proposal based on the consultation of the public-private partnerships with regard to the possibility to attach different programmed sources of public co-financing. The content of the policy recommendation is included and represents a milestone in rural territorial development based on community initiative.*

**Key words:** LEADER; multifund; European Commission; development strategy

### INTRODUCTION

Rural development, as an important part of the Common Agricultural Policy, should benefit from a sustainable, coherent and integrated programming strategy in order to respond to the needs of rural areas and to create a good foundation for future growth. One of the best instruments to obtain such a strategy it is LEADER approach, an instrument that turns 30 years in 2021.

The proposal of this study is in the direction of LAGs to draw up local development strategies that will include financing measures with correspondence both in the NRDP and in the financing lines of the structural funds.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology is based on a need analysis assessed and supported by primary data generated during the survey implementation conducted by the LEADER Federation. Secondary data originates from the official programming documents of EU, ELARD data base, case studies, reports, DIGI AGRI reports.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

#### Framework

In the last ten years, in Romania, the LEADER program has supported those involved in rural areas to assess the own region's potential and has demonstrated effectiveness and efficiency as tool in terms of implementing development policies.

- Local development strategies finance projects identified and selected locally by the LAG, together with the Agency for the Financing of Rural Investments (AFIR)
- In the 2007-2013 programming, the LEADER program reached a degree of absorption of European funds of 98%, and the corrections applied to the program are almost 0%.
- In the 2014-2020 programming, the LEADER program has an allocation of 563.5 million Euros from PNDR, for a number of 239 Local Action Groups that cover local needs
- The allocation available in the 2014-2020 programming does not cover even 10% of the development needs identified at the community level

- LAGs have their own structures with 12 years of experience in evaluating, selecting and monitoring projects funded under local development strategies
- European funds (except PNDR) have a very low absorption rate
- In the 2021-2027 programming, the PNDR allocation will be reduced by 2 billion Euros and implicitly the allocation for the LEADER Program will decrease
- Local development needs have been met to a very small extent
- In the 2021-2027 programming there is the possibility to allocate amounts from all EU funds to finance the LEADER Program - multi-fund LEADER
- Within the MFE it is desired to realize a Sectorial Program for the implementation of CLLD
- MFE does not have the necessary expertise to manage all areas of activity and does not have structures at county and regional level to ensure the implementation of funds in the territory
- LAGs have the necessary experience to select, evaluate and implement projects in a multitude of technical fields
- LAGs can identify the real needs of communities and implement sustainable projects
- The absorption of European funds will be accelerated through the multi-fund LEADER Program, by financing sustainable projects
- AFIR has national coverage (regional and county structures) and experience of over 12 years in managing the LEADER Program
- AFIR has expertise in implementing projects related to all areas of activity

For the last 20 years in Europe, the DLRC (Local Development under Community Responsibility) as sub-regional tool is convergent to other development forms of support at local level. DLRC can mobilize and involve local organizations and communities to contribute to the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, to stimulate territorial cohesion and to achieve public policy objectives. The European Commission has also promoted this method of implementation through Community initiatives, such as URBAN (2) and EQUAL (3). The LEADER initiative, which has received permanent EU support since 1991, has become an important element of rural development policy and is widely accepted throughout Europe. Since 2007, rural development has also been used under the European Fisheries and Maritime Fund to support the sustainable development of fishing communities.

Articles 32-35 (4) of Regulation (EU) no. 1303/2013 establishing common provisions [2] is based, as far as DLRC is concerned, on the LEADER approach and refers to four of the funds covered by the common strategic framework - European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund, European Agricultural Fund for rural development, European Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Fund - in the 2014-2020 programming period (ESI Funds - European Structural and Investment Funds). The central aims of this common approach to funding were to simplify and expand the use of DLRC as a development tool.

According to the European Commission, in the 2014-2020 funding period, 19 Member States adopted the multi-fund approach for the Rural Action Groups while other 9 countries among which Romania chose not to opt for it for the time being. The contribution of the complementary funding amounts almost half of the total in several Member States[1]. The multi-fund approach demands political decision, consideration for the advantages of DLRC at the national level and good co-operation among the involved ministries. The aim of the DLRC approach is to remove barriers between funds and thus stimulate synergy and coherence, both locally and regionally.

The importance of Local Action Groups lies in using the LEADER approach for the socio-economic development of rural areas because these entities respect the principle of Local Development placed under Community Responsibility beyond the operational programs for the period 2014-2020, constantly identifying ways to finance projects leading to the mitigation of the problems identified in their territories, external to the LEADER sub-measure of PNDR 2014-2020[14]. These local action groups, in Romania, represent approximately 93% of the rural population: 8,456,952 inhabitants out of a total of 9,113,095 inhabitants plus approximately 12% of the population in the small urban area, respectively: 1,288,048 inhabitants out of the total 10,531,255 inhabitants, according to the data communicated by MADR in 2020, respectively to the INS data from 2018. The most important contributions that LAGs have made to rural communities are: encouraging small entrepreneurs and diversifying non-agricultural economic activities in rural areas; the creation, improvement and diversification of economic development facilities, small-scale local physical infrastructure and basic services that could not be achieved through nationally funded measures; increasing the attractiveness of rural areas and reducing the migration of the population to the urban area, especially young people; improving the social, economic and environmental conditions of rural areas; protection and conservation of rural natural and cultural heritage; diversification of the ecotourism offer; encouraging local development initiatives with a high degree of innovation; creation of Operational Groups that promote research and technology transfer in rural areas. In recent years, LAGs have gained major importance in the development of the areas served, developing viable strategies and finding funding solutions to the real problems of those communities. LAGs also have the capacity to take over program extensions that fund projects in metropolitan areas, so that urban areas are properly complemented by projects with an impact in adjacent rural areas (eg mobility).

An interim analysis of the EAFRD-funded Local Action Groups in the 2013-2020 program shows that of the total number of projects contracted by the beginning of 2020 (79.65%), a relatively equal share of investment in the non-agricultural sector ( whether it refers to the establishment of such businesses, or are developments of existing businesses) - 24% and the opportunity of ATUs to improve their services to the population, by developing local emergency services (1310 localities purchased equipment to improve the living conditions of their citizens) - 25%. There is a relatively large share of agricultural investment (20%), including the installation of young farmers, the development of small farms, but also modernization and even processing. In most cases, these projects served local needs that were not eligible under national measures[14].

Local communities have achieved an increase in their quality of life through measures inaccessible through NRDP, but accessible through LEADER, as follows: 10% of investments are represented by leisure and sports infrastructure, 5% is represented by social infrastructure (with a complementary component through POCU , axis 5.2), energy efficiency / creation investments represent 3%. It is noted that 47.66% of the investments made so far have been financed due to the LEADER program, as there are no national sources to cover these needs.

Within the Local Action Group, the financial decision-making process is the final product of the management process carried out within the financial actions taken depending on the funding sources they implement. The decision to implement the LEADER or DRLC program, similar to the other types of decisions in the management arena of the Local Action Group (economic, social, organizational), is the result of a complex decision-making process, which includes the stages of knowing the reality of the territory. the form of the popular / depopulation phenomenon and the economic and social realities in the represented territory, as well as the stages of acquiring the optimal solution,

which will constitute the content of the decision and will be realized in the context of the Local Action Group option regarding the 2023-2030 Financing Program. The decision is a rational process for choosing the best financial solution that will generate the efficient use of the community resources it represents so that the Association can obtain an increase in the quality of life in rural areas. The financial option of the Association must fulfill the following desideratum: to be statistically substantiated, to be correlated with an analysis of the territory, to be adopted by the governing bodies, to be precise and succinct, to be announced in due time.

The managerial decision on the implementation of DRLC within a Local Action Group involves decisions on long-term financing of rural areas, decisions on the working capital of the Association and long-term capital investments and the efficient use of multiple sources of funding. In the event that a Local Action Group decides to implement the DRLC mechanism in the future funding program, its management must determine ways to build up equity and build up financial reserves. At the same time, it is very important to clarify the internal long-, medium- and short-term indebtedness policies and the self-financing policy of the Local Action Group.

In this process, one of the most important decisions concerns the procurement and maintenance of the necessary infrastructure for the flow of implementation of the DRLC mechanism. Decisions on working capital refer to the sizing of current assets meant to ensure the substance and continuity of the impact generated by the financing implemented within the represented rural territory.

The importance of these decisions is generated by the concrete way of using the capital embedded in financing without which the Local Action Group will not be able to implement the DRLC mechanism.

**Identified Need.** Strategic planning of the territory in integrated rural development, for a sustainable and balanced dimension

**Recommendation.** Implementation of the multifund approach (CLLD system) in the programming of financial instruments for the horizon 2021-2027 for rural LAGs

**Analysis.** Since its establishment, one of the main desideratum of the LEADER Federation has been the creation of DLRC in Romania. In this sense, the Federation has made over time many steps in support of this desideratum, from formal and informal discussions with the decision-making institutions and to the consultation of the LAGs on this subject.

Thus, in June of this year, about 60 LAGs in Romania responded to a questionnaire sent by the LEADER Federation, a questionnaire that aimed to identify as accurately as possible the needs of the territories covered by LAGs and the potential interest in the multi-fund approach, respectively for the implementation of integrated strategies at the level of these territories.

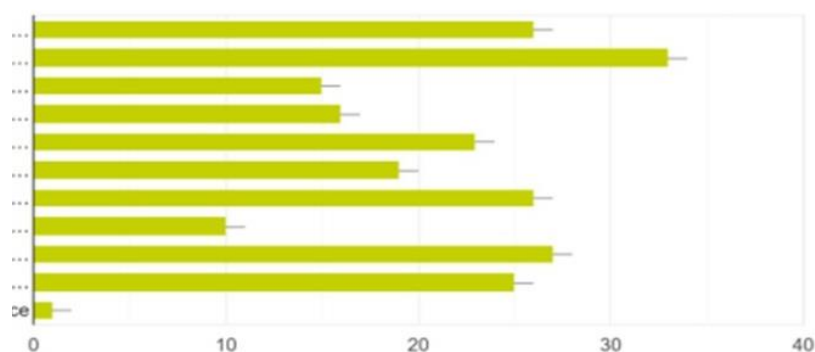
Absolutely all respondents to this questionnaire (presidents or managers of LAGs) said they were interested in implementing integrated strategies, respectively the CLLD mechanism.

Regarding the needs identified in most territories, respondents considered that they could be covered from:

1. Sustainable Development Operational Program (PODD)
2. Education and Employment Operational Program (POEO)
3. Regional Operational Programs
4. Social Inclusion and Dignity Operational Program (POIDS)

With regard to actions that have been considered a priority by LAGs, they are structured by program as follows:

**Sustainable Development Operational Program (PODD):**



**Figure 1. Sustainable Development Operational Program**

- Circular economy pilot projects (prevention, preparation for reuse and recycling of waste to the detriment of their storage and incineration), with a focus on waste from agricultural activity- (70.3%) \*

- Waste collection / recycling systems in rural areas - (89.2%)

- Management plans for protected natural areas in the LAG territories - implementation, in partnership with specialized institutes, etc. and their implementation, by providing financial support - (40.5%)

- Development of intelligent energy systems, networks and storage outside TEN-E- (62.2%)

- Energy efficiency - enveloping public buildings and energy efficiency by placing panels and heat pumps for private - (51.4%)

- Installation of charging stations for electric cars - creation of a network at the level of LAG- (70.3%)

- Greening and education projects on environmental protection/Creation of ecotourism routes accredited according to the legislation/Afforestation /Landscaping (27%)

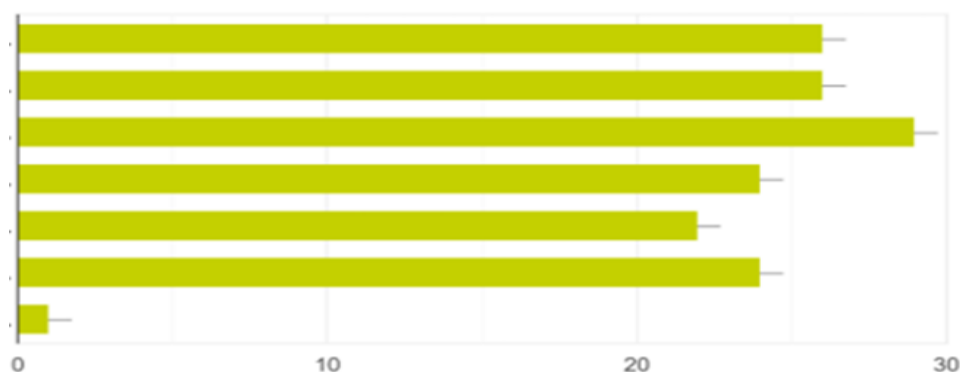
- Forest development update project - (73%)

- Street lighting at the territorial level - with green energy systems - (67.6%)

- Supply with green energy systems of public buildings - (2.7%)

\* the percentage of respondents interested in such actions

**Education and Employment Operational Program (POEO):**



**Figure 2. Education and Employment Operational Program**

- Establishment / development of pilot youth centers / clubs at community level with the involvement of local authorities and public or private entities to offer specific activities adapted to young people, including cultural and educational activities (open and individual counseling for young people, workshops, creativity , development of

entrepreneurial and green skills, as well as social entrepreneurship, social and civic skills, training for the use of modern technology, digital education sessions, career management, communication and teamwork, to participate in training in occupations required on labor market, information on rights and obligations on the labor market and interaction with labor institutions: ITM, AJOFM, etc.), including activities to promote them - (70.3%)

- Providing integrated packages of activation and return measures in rural areas of birth of young people in rural areas, customized according to their profile (counseling, including entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship, mediation, employment bonuses, employer grants, training / apprentices / internships / internships, skills assessment, enrollment and support participation in flexible second chance programs, including vocational training modules, provision of personalized support services: training bonuses to cover training costs - transport, meals, etc., subsidization costs related to obtaining a driver's license (in various classes, depending on needs), stimulating young pre-employment through short internships at different employers to get in touch with the respective field of activity, stimulating post-apprentice employers, organizing programs such as " Young volunteer ".- (70.3%)

- Activation of the entrepreneurial potential of young people in rural areas: training of entrepreneurial skills, tutoring / mentoring, assistance / counseling, role models, training in project management, including access to grants for starting new businesses (start-ups) or business incubators, assistance and post-establishment consulting. Encourage rural employers to use flexible forms of work and to finance investments that allow them to use these forms by facilitating access to finance for SMEs and providing accompanying measures to finance the benefits provided to young people. Stimulating social inclusion enterprises to support young people in rural areas with a focus on the inactive, the unemployed and the long-term unemployed by covering the costs of on-the-job qualifications, counseling and career guidance, subsidizing employment contracts and placing them on the labor market at the end of support, including the provision of socio-professional and social support services. - (78.4%)

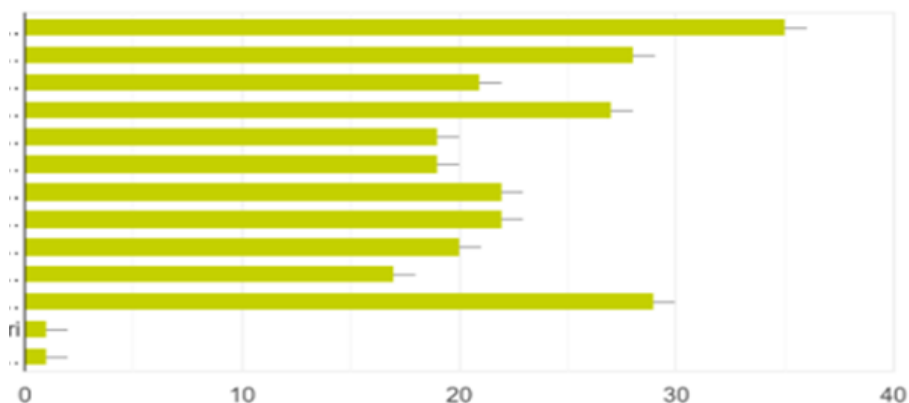
- Funding for pilot programs against early school leaving and early school leaving - Second Chance (ADS) / funding for after-school programs (SDS) in rural areas / funding for integrated services to improve access to the labor market for all jobseekers, especially young people, the long-term unemployed and disadvantaged groups in rural areas. - (64.9%)

- Actions to promote lifelong learning, in particular flexible opportunities for professional development and retraining for all, taking into account digital skills, better anticipating changes and new skills requirements based on labor market needs, facilitating professional transitions and promoting professional mobility. - (59.5%)

- Development of pilot collaborative / participatory structures in rural areas ("hubs") to promote and raise public awareness about entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship and social economy, entrepreneurial support programs (training in entrepreneurial skills, tutoring / mentoring, assistance / counseling, role models, training programs in project management training programs for entrepreneurship scheme administrators, etc.), including by activating the entrepreneurial potential of people belonging to disadvantaged groups, granting grants for starting new businesses (start-ups) and incubators business, assistance and consultancy in post-establishment business, including through training programs for managers or measures to improve the access of SMEs to various ways of digitizing their business (eg: SME Digital Start Pack), granting grants for setting up development / innovation / scaling / extension / int social enterprises and social insertion enterprises, etc. - (64.9%)

- Business incubators for young people - (2.7%)

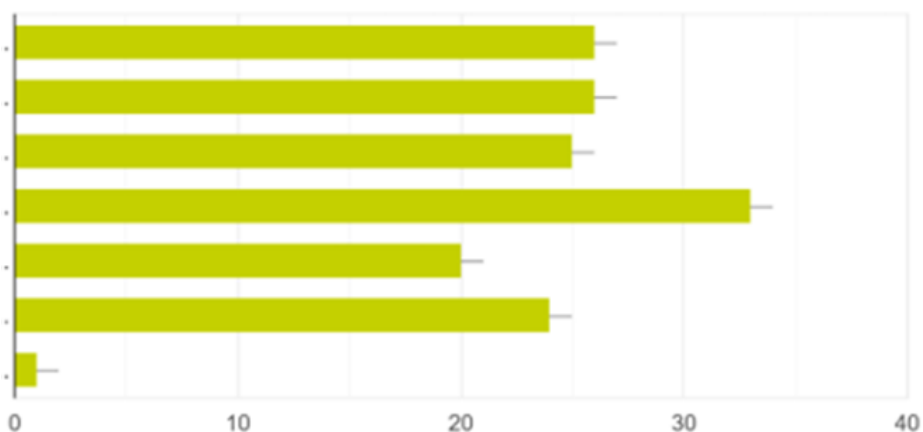
**Regional Operational Programs:**



**Figure 3. Regional Operational Programs**

- Financing of micro and small enterprises in rural areas - (94.6%)
- Supporting the adoption of SMART VILLAGE solutions (75.7%)
- Improving the energy efficiency of public and residential buildings in rural areas, including those with seismic risk- (56.8%)
- Creation of recreational facilities- (73%)
- HARD investments in vocational/technical /dual education + SOFT from POEO- (51.4%)
- Conservation, protection, restoration and sustainable use of cultural heritage and cultural services, including increasing accessibility and rehabilitation of adjacent infrastructure; highlighting cultural or industrial heritage buildings for new economic, social and cultural-creative activities; development of pedestrian areas and promenades- (51.4%)
- Capitalizing the tourist potential in non-urban areas (59.5%)
- Mobility project at LAG territory (59.5%)
- Student and preschool camps / multidisciplinary youth centers- (54.1%)
- Establishment of a multidisciplinary youth center (45.9%)
- Infrastructure for vulnerable groups - elderly (permanent care centers and day centers) - (78.4%)
- Business incubator- (2.7%)
- Development of tourist potential in rural areas- (2.7%)

**Social Inclusion and Dignity Operational Program (POIDS):**



**Figure 4. Social Inclusion and Dignity Operational Program**

- Reducing the degree of social exclusion for vulnerable groups - (70.3%)
- Increasing the capacity of local authorities to identify and assess the social needs of the community in a participatory way - (70.3%)
- Development of the primary social assistance system, with social workers and social assistance technicians at local level as well as by ensuring integrated intervention through the development of the community health care network and school counselors- (67.6%)
- Development of care services for the elderly at the local level in rural areas - (89.2%)
- Needs assessment and implementation of action plans for the development of social services and one for the development of services at the local level- (54.1%) 20 (54.1%)
- Retirement homes (hard + soft) - (64.9%)
- Decision-making transparency through the direct participation of stakeholders in the decision-making process, local- (2.7%).[15]

In addition, according to the Simplification Manual (80 simplification measures in cohesion policy 2021-2027) developed by the European Commission[3,4,5]:

- The merger of the ESF, FEAD and YEI will lead to increased visibility and readability of EU action in the social and employment fields. It will also facilitate the combination of social inclusion and activation measures, while ensuring that simpler rules for tackling material disadvantage are maintained (ERDF / CF ESF +).[5,6]

- Existing programming and implementation structures can be continued, including local development under the responsibility of the community (DLRC) and integrated territorial investments (ITI) established in 2014-2020. Choosing a single dedicated policy objective means fewer specific objectives when using indicators. The territorial instruments used under OP5 can combine activities funded under all other policy objectives - allowing for a truly multisectoral integrated approach, adapted to the local context (Art. 4 (1) (e), 22-27 DRC Art. 8-9 ERDF / FC)[6,7]

- Clarity on requirements, simpler wording: much shorter provisions on DLRC and ITI; key requirements are identified in regulations, national territorial instruments are recognized (Art. 22-28 DRC Art. 8-9 ERDF / CF)[7,8,11]

- When using the DLRC, it is now possible to nominate a 'principal' fund and apply only the rules applicable to that fund (Art. 25, paragraphs 4 to 6) DRC)[9]

- DLRC, ITI and the amounts programmed under OP5 are all taken into account in achieving the objective (Art. 22 RDC and art. 9 ERDF)[10]

- Large-scale use of simplified cost options ("SCOs"): Instead of reimbursing actual invoice-based expenditure, payment will increasingly focus on flat-rate reimbursement, unit costs or lump sums; CMOs are further encouraged by simplifying the rules and calculation methods, offering more ready-to-use options and making them mandatory for small-amount operations; OCS not only reduces the bureaucracy related to checks, but also reduces the risk of errors (Art. 48-51 DRC)[11].

- In accordance with the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (C 129/36 EN Official Journal of the European Union 11.4.2018 (1) In line with Priority 10: A Union for Democratic Change) on "The benefits of the development approach Local Community Responsibility (DLRC) for Integrated Local and Rural Development" emphasizes that EU Member States can regain the trust of its citizens through a properly implemented local Community Responsibility (DLRC) approach that allows for integrated local development and the involvement of citizens and their organizations at the local level. The EESC is convinced that the DLRC could have many benefits as a successful European local development tool and recommends[6]:

- developing a clear vision for the mandatory implementation of multiple DLRC funds in the European Union, ensuring that the DLRC approach will be applied to all types of territories: rural (including peripheral, mountainous and island), urban and coastal;
- recognizes that DLRC, which is a strengthening of the LEADER method, offers Member States a unique opportunity to develop their areas in a more inclusive, sustainable and integrated way, in partnership with local stakeholders; in order to achieve a greater impact, sufficient financial means must be made available for the implementation of the DLRC in the 2021-2027 programming period;
- recommends that the European Commission establish a mandatory requirement for Member States to allocate at least 15% of the budget of each ESI Fund to the DLRC Fund, which in turn must be supported by sufficient national resources[12,13];
- recommends avoiding any interruption between the programming periods and launching the 2021-2027 programming period in better conditions[12,13];
- notes that a complicated legal framework and lengthy procedures have led to a significant increase in the bureaucratic burden for all DLRC actors; in order to be effective in the future implementation of the multi-fund DLRC, the EESC called for a significant simplification of the legal framework for the DLRC, the implementation procedures and the model for the 2021-2027 programming period[6,12,13];
- recommends that, instead of the emphasis on error prevention, there is a need for regulations that can truly support local action groups (LAGs) as well as local beneficiaries (end-users) in implementing their own development strategies local and projects.

### CONCLUSIONS

- Realization of a sectoral LEADER Program or of a LEADER sub-program within PNDR or POS CLLD
- Implemented the LEADER Program for the rural environment within MADR through AFIR and the CLLD Program for the urban environment within MFE
- The LAGs will draw up local development strategies that will include financing measures with correspondence both in the NRDP and in the financing lines of the structural funds
- Designation of MADR as manager of the multi-fund LEADER Program, through AFIR
- The Managing Authorities of the structural funds will delegate to AFIR the functions of authorization and payment for the component related to the LEADER Program
- The selection of multi-fund local development strategies will be made by an inter-ministerial committee, with representatives of the responsible Managing Authorities
- The implementation of the multi-fund local development strategies will be carried out exclusively by the LAGs together with AFIR, in order to eliminate the institutional obstacles

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