

THE CONTRIBUTION OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ALBA COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract: This study examines the pivotal role of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in revitalizing Romania's rural areas through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan 2023–2027. Since 2007, LAGs have expanded significantly, from 163 to 246, underscoring their enduring importance. These local partnerships drive Local Development Strategies (LDSs) using the LEADER methodology, emphasizing local participation, innovation, and cooperation. Focusing on Alba County, the research highlights LAGs' diverse territorial structures, including inter-county collaborations, showcasing LEADER's adaptability. Despite a condensed implementation period, substantial financial allocations require robust managerial capacity. Ultimately, LAGs are crucial for mobilizing local resources and fostering collaboration for sustainable rural development.

Key words: LEADER, LAG, SP CAP 2023-2027, Alba County, Romania

INTRODUCTION

As a European Union (EU) Member State since 2007, Romania has benefited from financial allocations under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) across three programming periods: 2007–2013, 2014–2020 and, 2023–2027. Local Action Groups (LAGs) played a significant role within the LEADER Axis in previous funding cycles, as part of the National Rural Development Programs (NRDPs) financed through Pillar II of the CAP [1].

These funds supported the establishment and operation of LAGs, thereby facilitating the implementation of local development strategies. A LAG is a local association, composed of representatives from the private sector, public authorities and civil society, including individuals relevant to the area eligible for the LEADER programme. The primary objective of this partnership is to develop and implement a Local Development Strategy (LDS) for the region concerned. At the decision-making level, social and economic partners, along with civil society representatives (such as farmers, women, rural youth and their associations), must constitute at least 50% of the local partnership [4].

In Romania, the establishment of LAGs started in 2011, when 163 partnerships were selected through the National Rural Development Programme (NRDP) 2007-2013 - Axis IV LEADER [7]. In their initial stages of establishment, LAGs were tasked with conducting assessments of the needs within rural areas, formulating LDGs, and subsequently implementing these strategies [10]. From the initial selection of 163 LAGs selected in the first financial period, the number increased to 239 LAGs for the 2014-2020 funding period, further reaching 246 LAGs for the 2023-2027 period. This demonstrates the sustained interest in this type of organization at the rural level, and in eligible urban areas with a population of less than 20 000 inhabitants. During the 2014 -2020 period, the 239 LAGs received a public allocation valued at 563 515 550.96 euros. The majority of LAGs are concentrated in the North-East and South regions, which also received the highest financial allocations [9]. Through their activities during the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 financial

years, LAGs contributed to the improvement of living conditions in rural environment, precisely through their realistic analysis of the areas they cover [2].

LAGs play a central role in fostering territorial development through the application of the LEADER methodology, which is founded on several essential principles: active participation, ensuring the direct involvement of the local community in all stages of the development process; innovation and adaptability, supporting new and flexible solutions, designed to meet the needs and particularities of each community; and cooperation and partnership, strengthening collaborative relationships among various stakeholders to achieve common objectives [11]. Furthermore, LAGs maintain sustained, long-term relationships of information exchange and communication with farming communities and rural stakeholders.

By complementing the activities within their mandate, they achieve significant savings across all categories. This approach, moreover, enhances the likelihood of timely reaching end-users and strengthening processes of knowledge transfer and consolidation [18]. The involvement of local actors should be fair and transparent, encompassing the general population, economic, civic, and social interest groups, as well as representative public and private institutions [13]. The primary function of a LAG is to foster the active involvement of the local community in decision-making processes, thereby enabling the identification and enhancement of needs and opportunities specific to the respective territory [16]. According to some authors, LAGs can serve as key intermediaries between local authorities and marginalized communities, fostering constructive dialogue and mutual understanding.

Considering the evolutionary trajectory of LAGs from 2007–2013 to the present, this study aims to highlight their contribution to the revitalization of rural areas. This will be achieved by examining the financial support granted under the Strategic Plan for the Common Agricultural Policy 2023–2027 (SP CAP 2023–2027), which is adapted to local needs and territorial specificities, with applicability in Alba County, Central Region, Romania.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this paper, we employed the desk research method, which entailed a comprehensive review of specialized literature and official documents pertaining to the implementation of LAGs. This approach acknowledges that Romania is currently in its third programming period of accessing EU funds for community-led local development. The analysis specifically focused on Alba County, within the Center Region, with the objective of exploring how LAGs in this territory are financed and how they contribute to rural development under the 2023–2027 programming framework.

Consequently, we analysed documents related to the operation of the LAGs during the 2023–2027 period, which are publicly available on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR). Following the submission of their LDSs, the LAGs were selected for operation.

Furthermore, we analysed data concerning the LAGs in Alba County, including those whose territories encompass the entirety of Alba County as well as those spanning parts of both Alba and Sibiu Counties. The indicators examined included the areas covered by LAGs, correlated with their respective number of inhabitants.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In the current funding period under the SP CAP 2023–2027, 246 LAGs received national funding. Given the scope of this work, the research was specifically conducted at the level of Alba County, within the Centre Region. Alba County's location within the

Centre Development Region provides it with the opportunity to establish and maintain direct links with all other development regions [5].

The Centre Region, one of Romania's eight development regions, comprises six counties: Alba, Brașov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureș and Sibiu. This region is characterised by remarkable geographical and socio-economic diversity. Alba County, situated in the western part of the region, distinguishes itself through a mixed economic structure, which combines traditional activities in agriculture and forestry with emerging sectors such as the food industry and cultural tourism. Concurrently, Alba County benefits from a considerable natural and historical heritage, which fosters the development of integrated rural revitalisation projects and interregional cooperation, thereby consolidating its role in the dynamics of the Centre Region.



Figure 1. Map of Romania, Center region
Source: [12]



Figure 2. Map of Romania, Alba County
Source: [13]

The territorial configuration of the LAGs also permits the inclusion of administrative units from neighbouring counties. In this context, two of the LAGs operating in Alba County also encompass territories from Mureș and Sibiu Counties, thereby extending the total covered area to 2,279.08 km² and the population to 98,261 inhabitants.

In the 2023–2027 programming period, four LAGs with territories entirely circumscribed within Alba County were selected for funding at Alba County level, reflecting a coherent approach to rural development at the local scale. Additionally, two LAGs whose territories primarily include localities from Alba County, while also extending into the neighbouring Counties of Mureș and Sibiu, were approved for funding. This highlights the inter-county nature of territorial cooperation. Furthermore, another selected LAG has a majority territory in Sibiu County, but also integrates localities from Alba County, thereby strengthening partnership networks and joint intervention within the Centre Region.

This organizational structure of LAG territories demonstrates both the flexibility of the LEADER instrument and the commitment of local actors to forge functional partnerships. These partnerships are specifically adapted to the particularities of rural communities, with the aim of capitalising on local resources and support territorial inclusion within the SP CAP 2023–2027.

Table 1.
Territorial and demographic structure of Local Action Groups financed in Alba County, during the SP CAP 2023–2027

No. crt.	GAL Name	County	Territorial coverage	Area (km ²)	Population (number of inhabitants)	Number of inhabit./ km ²
1	Local Action Group Association "Drumul Iancului"	ALBA	Avram Iancu, Bistra, Rosia Montana, Sohodol, Vidra	377.03	10,946	29
2	Local Action Group From The Metallic Mountains, Trascau And Muntele Mare - Gal	ALBA	City of Baia de Aries, Cricau, Galda de Jos, Ighiu, Intregalde, Livezile, Lupsa, Miraslau, Mogos, Ocolis, Ponor, Posaga, Rametea, Rametu, Salciua, Stremt, Unirea	1,473.75	33,833	23
3	Association "Local Action Group From The Area of Ampoiului and Mureşului" (LAG Valea Ampoiului-Valea Mureşului)	ALBA	Almaşu Mare, Blandiana, Bucium, Ceru-BăcăiŃi, Ciuruleasa, Meteş, Pianu, Sălişte, Săsciori, Şibot, Vinţu De Jos, Zlatna City, Abrud City	1,239.25	36,424	29
4	Association "Arieşul Mare Local Action Group"	ALBA	Albac, Arieseni, Garda De Sus, Horea, Poiana Vadului, Scarisoara, Vadu Motilor, Campeni Town	494.24	16,588	34
5	LAG on the Mureş and on the Târnave	ALBA, MUREŞ	Cetatea De Balta, Farau, Hoparta, Jidvei, Lopadea Noua, Lunca Mureşului, Noşlac, Rădeşti, Şona, Sâncel, Teius City, Ocna Mureş City (Alba County), Aţintis (Mureş County)	837.28	44,024	53
6	Association of the Country of the Alba-Sibiu	ALBA, SIBIU	Berghin, Bucerdea Grănoasă, Călnic, Cenade, Cergău, Ciugud, Crăciunelu De Jos, Cut, Daia Română, Doştat, Gârbova, Mihălţ, Ohaba, Roşia De Secaş, Sântimbru, Spring, Valea Lungă, (Alba County), Apoldu De Jos, Loamneş, Ludoş, Păuca, Slimnic, Şura Mare, Şura Mică, Ocna Sibiului City (Sibiu County)	1,441.80	54,237	38
7	Association of LAG Marginimea Sibiului	SIBIU, ALBA	Cristian, Gura Răului, Jina, Orlat, Poiana Sibiului, Poplaca, Răşinari, Răului Sadului, Sadu, Tilişca, Sălişte City, Miercurea Sibiului City (Sibiu County), Şugag (Alba County)	1,429.70	39,845	28
Total				3,584.27	97,791.00	27.28

Source: List of Local Action Groups 2023-2027 selected by MAD, 2025 [14]

Four LAGs, with territories exclusively located in Alba County are highlighted as follows (Table 1):

- ✓ *GAL "Iancului Road"*: This GAL has a relatively small area (377 km²) and a low population density (29 inhabitants/km²);
- ✓ *GAL MMTMM*: Constituting the most extensive among these (1,473 km²), it exhibits a demographic density of merely 23 people/km². This is attributable to the mountainous nature of the area and the specific character of the localities;
- ✓ *Ampoi Valley-Mureș Valley GAL*: Spanning 1,239 km², this LAG presents a density of 29 inhabitants/km²;
- ✓ *Arieșul Mare GAL*: Although possessing a smaller area (494 km²), this LAG demonstrates the highest density among the exclusively Alba LAGs (34 inhabitants/km²). The composition of this LAG contributes to the slight increase in the number of inhabitants per km, considering that it encompasses the localities of Albac, Arieșeni, Gârda De Sus, Horea, Poiana Vadului, Scărișoara, Vadu Moților, Oraș Câmpeni, the latter having, at the last population census in 2021, a number of 6 569 inhabitants across an area of 88.09 km², resulting in a density of 75 inhabitants/km² [15].

Concurrently, official documents indicate the existence of three inter-county structures:

- ✓ *LAG "On the Mureș and on the Târnave"*: This LAG possesses a majority of the territory in Alba County, but also extends into Mureș County, exhibiting a significantly higher density (53 people/km²), which suggests a considerably more compact rural area in terms of population;



Figure 3. "Pe Mureș și pe Târnave" LAG

Source: [17]

- ✓ *"Țara Secașelor - Sibiu" Association*: This association encompasses localities from both Alba and Sibiu Counties, covering an area of 1 441 km² with an average density of 38 people/km², thereby highlighting an active rural profile;
- ✓



Figure 4. Secașelor Country LAG

Source: [18]

- ✓ *LAG "Mărginimea Sibiului"*: This LAG is predominantly located in Sibiu County, but includes the locality of Șugag in Alba County. It has a similar area (1 429 km²) and a comparable density (28 inhabitants/km²).



Figure 5. Sibiu LAG boundaries, including Șugag commune, Alba County

Source: [16]

Overall, the cumulative territory of these LAGs covers 3,584 km², representing a significant proportion of the area of Alba County and its adjacent counties, with a total population of 97,791 inhabitants. This results in an overall average density of approximately 27 people/km², which reflects a predominantly rural space characterised by challenges related to housing dispersion and accessibility of services.

This diversified territorial structure demonstrates the potential of local and inter-county partnerships to respond to the specific needs of rural communities, thereby facilitating the application of integrated development strategies. These strategies are adapted to both the population density and the geographical and economic particularities of each territory.

The financial support allocated through LAGs for the implementation of LDGs constitutes a fundamental pillar in the process of revitalizing rural areas, especially in Counties such as Alba, where the socio-economic structure presents a series of particularities. The current financing period, regulated by the SP CAP 2023–2027, is notable for a specific configuration: although the implementation interval is shorter than initially foreseen, the financial allocations are maintained at the level established for the entire 2021–2027 programming cycle. This situation imposes increased responsibility on the LAGs, requiring them to possess a high managerial capacity to ensure the absorption of funds and the achievement of the proposed objectives within a compressed time horizon.

From the perspective of its socio-economic structure, Alba County is characterized by a mixed economy, in which the agricultural sector continues to play a significant role, alongside traditional industries and emerging activities in the fields of tourism and services. The LAG territories within this county precisely reflect this economic and social diversity: they encompass rural communities with varying levels of development, exhibiting diverse needs concerning infrastructure, public services, human capital and entrepreneurial initiative. In this sense, the SP CAP 2023–2027, through measures intended for community-led local development (LEADER), provides the necessary framework for formulating interventions adapted to the concrete needs of these micro-territories.

Thus, LAGs in Alba County emerge as strategic actors in mobilising local resources and stimulating cooperation among the public, private and civil society sectors.

Their aim is to reduce territorial disparities and creating sustainable foundations for the economic and social development of rural areas.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has highlighted the critical role of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in revitalizing rural areas of Romania, particularly within Alba County, under the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan 2023–2027. Romania's consistent engagement with CAP financial allocations since 2007 has fostered the growth of LAGs, increasing their number from 163 in the 2007-2013 period to 246 for 2023-2027. These local partnerships, comprising private, public, and civil society representatives, are fundamental to community-led local development (LEADER methodology), emphasizing active participation, innovation, adaptability, and cooperation.

The analysis of LAGs in Alba County demonstrates their diverse territorial configurations and strategic importance in addressing specific rural needs. Four LAGs operate exclusively within Alba County, showcasing varying densities and local particularities. Furthermore, the presence of three inter-county LAG structures, extending into Mureș and Sibiu Counties, underscores the flexibility of the LEADER instrument and the commitment to inter-county cooperation. This diversified organizational structure allows for integrated development strategies tailored to local demographics, geography, and economic structures.

The financial support channeled through LAGs is a fundamental pillar for rural revitalization, especially in counties like Alba, which possess a mixed economy blending agriculture, traditional industries, and emerging sectors such as tourism. The 2023–2027 programming period, despite a compressed implementation timeframe, maintains substantial financial allocations, demanding high managerial capacity from LAGs to ensure effective fund absorption and objective achievement.

Ultimately, LAGs in Alba County function as strategic actors for mobilizing local resources and fostering collaboration across public, private, and civil society sectors. Their efforts are pivotal in reducing territorial disparities and establishing sustainable foundations for the economic and social development of Romania's rural areas, reflecting an adaptive approach to community needs and opportunities.

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