

INCLUSIVE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE COLLABORATIVE ROLE OF LAGs AND VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Daniel GREBELDINGER¹, Marius VASILUȚĂ-ȘTEFĂNESCU²

¹PhD Student at Sociology, West University of Timișoara (Romania),
E-mail: daniel.grebeldinger80@e-uvvt.ro

²Associate Professor, PhD, West University of Timișoara (Romania),
E-mail: marius.vasiluta@e-uvvt.ro

Abstract: *Since the first years of operation of the Local Action Groups, the LAGs have started to have a positive impact on the social and economic development of rural areas. By involving vulnerable groups, implicitly Roma people, they can generate positive effects manifested through the creation of new jobs, the modernization of infrastructure, the improvement of the quality of life or even the preservation of cultural heritage. To answer the research question, we aim to verify how LAG organizations, NGOs for vulnerable groups and Roma communities contribute to local development through the Local Development Strategy and what impact their actions have on the communities, we conducted qualitative research. More precisely, I used the focus group interview. The conclusions obtained demonstrate the importance of the involvement of NGOs made up of vulnerable groups in Local Action Groups, while reflecting the importance of strengthening partnerships and links between organizations.*

Keywords: Local Action Groups (LAG); vulnerable groups, Roma

1. Introduction

In the last decades, the concept of social inclusion has become central in the elaboration of development strategies at the European level, being approached from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. Social inclusion is essential for creating fair and cohesive societies, and this is particularly relevant for vulnerable groups such as Roma communities. According to recent studies, the Roma continue to face social, economic and cultural marginalization, highlighting the need for mechanisms to facilitate their active involvement in local decision-making processes (UNDP, 2018; European Commission, 2020).

The participation of Roma organizations and vulnerable groups in the development of Local Development Strategies (LDS) is a key factor for promoting social inclusion and reducing disparities. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, social and cultural capital is essential for mobilizing communities in development processes. However, the lack of organization and formal structures remains a major challenge in the territories, which limits the opportunities for these groups to express their needs and interests (Zamfir & Zamfir, 1993).

Previous studies have highlighted a direct relationship between the participation of disadvantaged communities in decision-making processes and increased social cohesion (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000). In Romania, the specific context of LAGs (Local Action Groups) provides a platform for such initiatives. LAGs can become important mediators between local authorities and marginalized communities, facilitating a constructive dialogue. However, the qualitative analysis carried out through focus groups showed that the level of involvement of Roma organizations varies significantly, from total lack of participation to active and direct involvement.

This article aims to explore how Roma organizations and other vulnerable groups participate in the development of SDL, analyze the success and challenges of their involvement and identify mechanisms by which this involvement can be improved. Building on the theoretical framework developed by authors such as Sen (1999) and Woolcock (2001), we will examine the contributions and obstacles from the perspective of the actors involved. Also, the analysis is based on empirical data collected through focus group interviews conducted in four regions of Romania: South Muntenia, West, East and North-East.

Thus, the article contributes to the specialized literature by offering a practical perspective on the participation of vulnerable groups in SDL, in the broader context of social inclusion. The study emphasizes the importance of partnerships between NGOs, LAGs and local authorities, demonstrating that real involvement can lead to the creation of more cohesive and equitable societies (Rawls, 1971; Giddens, 1991). At the same time, it emphasizes the need to adapt strategies to the specific needs of marginalized communities (National Roma Agency, 2019).

2. Local Action Groups

Community development initiatives play a crucial role in addressing societal challenges, supporting sustainable development goals and strengthening social cohesion. In the rural environment, one of the most significant such initiatives is represented by Local Action Groups (LAGs) (Palmisano et al., 2016). These structures contribute to the creation and implementation of local development strategies through the LEADER approach, a program aimed at the economic revitalization of rural areas, which, at the same time, improves local governance by increasing social effectiveness and democratizing decision-making processes at community level (Esparcia et al., 2015).

Since their introduction into the European Union in 1991, Local Action Groups (LAGs) have established themselves as a successful model in the revitalization of rural areas, consolidating their role as an essential tool in regional development policies. These structures were created to respond to specific challenges faced by rural communities, such as depopulation, lack of economic opportunities, reduced access to services and infrastructure, and declining social cohesion. (Pártlová & Hron, 2016). Thus, LAGs had a significant impact on the development of rural areas, contributing to economic growth by financing local businesses, promoting traditional products and stimulating entrepreneurship, which led to improved incomes and living conditions. At the same time, the implemented projects created jobs in various sectors, such as construction, tourism, agriculture and gastronomy, highlighting the importance of strengthening health and education services to support them. Investments in infrastructure, upgrading roads and expanding digital connectivity have improved mobility, affordability and access to technology, with further digitization efforts recommended. LAGs have also improved the quality of life by expanding access to clean water, sanitation, health services and education, as well as by organizing cultural events that have revitalized the lives of communities. In addition, by promoting traditions and preserving cultural heritage, LAGs have strengthened local identity, attracted tourists and supported sustainable rural development (Buda & Pop, 2024).

In Romania, Local Action Groups have become key actors in community development efforts, covering all regions of the country. They play a strategic role in addressing the needs of vulnerable communities, including Roma, by implementing projects aimed at reducing social exclusion and promoting inclusive growth (Parno and Vasilută, 2021).

3. The importance of social involvement of vulnerable groups

The involvement of vulnerable categories in the development processes of society is an essential factor for ensuring genuine social inclusion and for reducing socio-economic inequalities. Studies show that the participation of these groups in decision-making processes and the implementation of local development strategies contribute to increasing social cohesion and promoting their rights (Putnam, 2000; Sen, 1999; Gaventa, 2004). Studies show that the involvement of marginalized communities in decision-making processes increases the efficiency and relevance of social interventions, adapting them to the specific needs of these groups (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Likewise, the participation of vulnerable categories in local development facilitates their access to resources and opportunities, contributing to the improvement of living conditions and the development of social capital (Narayan, 2002). Thus, promoting the active participation of vulnerable categories not only improves development results, but also strengthens the social and democratic structure of society (Hickey, 2004).

Within the Local Development Strategies (SDL), the involvement of vulnerable groups, such as Roma communities or other disadvantaged categories, allows a deeper understanding of their needs and aspirations, facilitating the implementation of measures that effectively respond to these requirements (Barca, 2009), while participating in reducing inequalities and increasing social cohesion (Moulaert et al, 2009). In the context of LAGs and NGOs, strong partnerships and inter-institutional collaborations have proven to be key elements for integrating the needs of vulnerable groups into public policies (Moulaert et al., 2005). Also, taking into account the difficulties of integration into the labor market of certain vulnerable categories, especially people of Roma ethnicity (Duminiță & Preda, 2003; Preda et al, nd), GALs can represent a solution in reducing this social problem, by creating new jobs. Therefore, the active involvement of vulnerable categories in the development of society is not only a matter of social justice, but also a catalyst for economic progress and societal cohesion.

4. Methodology

This research aims to analyze the involvement of LAG organizations, NGOs, which include members from vulnerable groups and Roma communities, in local development through the Local Development Strategy (LDS) and to assess the impact of their actions on communities. Thus, we formulated the following research question: How do LAG organizations, NGOs for vulnerable groups and Roma communities contribute to local development through the Local Development Strategy and what impact do their actions have on the communities? Based on this, we formulated the following research objectives:

1. Analyzing the involvement of Roma organizations and vulnerable groups in the process of developing and implementing SDL.
2. Evaluation of projects implemented by NGOs dedicated to vulnerable groups and Roma, focusing on their objectives, activities and results.
3. Identifying specific actions of LAGs and NGOs that have generated interest among members and the local population.
4. Determining the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the involvement of organizations and communities in local development.

I also formulated the following secondary questions:

1. How do Roma organizations and vulnerable groups participate in the SDL development and implementation processes and what specific initiatives have been undertaken?
2. What types of projects have been proposed and funded by NGOs for vulnerable groups and Roma and what have been their results?
3. What specific actions of LAGs and NGOs generated interest and what factors contributed to the success of these initiatives?

In order to answer the research questions and achieve the proposed objectives, we used the sociological focus group interview method. This method is suitable as it allows the collection of qualitative information, providing a detailed insight into participants' perceptions, experiences and practices related to involvement in SDL (Local Development Strategy). Through direct interaction between participants, the focus group fosters an open discussion dynamic that can reveal relevant opinions, ideas and examples.

As the research tool we used an interview guide with semi-structured questions, which includes the following main questions:

1. How do Roma organizations and vulnerable groups participate in the development of the Local Development Strategy (LDS)? Can you provide examples of their initiatives and actions in the LAG area, particularly in terms of information, consultation, participation, involvement and initiative?
2. Have there been NGOs focusing on vulnerable groups or Roma communities that have successfully submitted and received funding for projects under SDL measures? If so, can you detail the main objectives, activities and results of these projects?
3. Can you share some specific actions carried out by your LAG or NGOs for vulnerable groups/Roma that generated interest among LAG members and the population? What were the reasons behind their success? Do you have volunteer initiatives in the territory of the GAL? If so, who are the beneficiaries and volunteers?

Questions were addressed to members of Roma organizations and representatives of NGOs that support vulnerable groups in the territories covered by the LAGs. The objective was to recruit a minimum of 20-24 participants at the national level, including the organization of focus groups made up of at least 5-6 relevant people from the respective areas. The focus groups were distributed as follows: one dedicated to the North-West region, one to the South-West region, one to the North-East region and one to the South-East region.

The aim was to gain a detailed insight into how these organizations and groups participate in the development and implementation of SDL. At the same time, the research aimed to identify the factors that contribute to the success of the projects, as well as the challenges encountered in supporting vulnerable groups.

4. Results

Regarding the organization of the focus groups, they were held online on the Google Meet platform with different profile people from a macro region of the country (Southern Region of Muntenia, Western Region, Eastern Region, respectively Eastern Region). The meetings were set in advance, to ensure the availability and involvement of the respondents during the focus group. They lasted around

two hours, during which ideas were developed, and the participants had the opportunity to learn new things or different perspectives from colleagues with the same interests from the same territorial region. We obtained the consent of the participants to record (audio and video) the discussions, so that the information provided by them can be used and processed in the present study under the protection of anonymity.

When we refer to the way in which Roma organizations and other vulnerable groups participate in the elaboration of the Local Development Strategy, there were situations in which the lack of these organizations was reported:

"We don't have Roma organizations or other vulnerable groups in the territory. People are present as often as we need, help us with everything that is needed, involvement. We are quite active with our partners."(FG3, R1, M).

"We do not have Roma organizations in the GAL, nor any organizations that are the object of activity for vulnerable people."(FG3, R3, F.).

but in the cases where they exist, we can see that the answers can be divided into three main categories, reflecting the different levels and forms of involvement of these actors in the decision-making process:

- **Lack / Non-existence of organizations representing the Roma or other vulnerable groups in the territory**- fact that raises an important problem in the process of drafting the Local Development Strategy. This situation highlights a lack of organization and even the lack of structures and mechanisms to facilitate the participation and representation of these groups in decision-making processes at the local level. As for the Roma community, there was a lack of their representation, either due to the fact that the official leaders migrated, and the community remaining in the territory did not mobilize to nominate another representative, in the absence of the initially accredited one, or at the level there are only informal leaders in the community, there is no question of establishing a legal organization under the auspices of which to function. In this situation, the consequences in terms of social inclusion are negative, the rights of these communities being silenced, because the lack of an organized and representative voice can lead to the underrepresentation of their needs and concerns in the decision-making process. Moreover, the lack of organization and representation can amplify the marginalization and discrimination faced by these vulnerable groups within society, without raising the question of their involvement.

In this sense, at the level of these territories, it is essential to develop mechanisms and initiatives that encourage and support the organization of Roma communities and other vulnerable groups at the local level by facilitating the establishment of community organizations, providing support and resources for capacity building them, and promoting a culture of participation and dialogue between local authorities and communities. By creating such structures and mechanisms for representation and participation, it can be ensured that the voice and perspectives of Roma and other vulnerable groups are considered in the process of drawing up local development policies and strategies, thus contributing to greater social cohesion and building a more inclusive and equitable society.

"As I said, we did not have the Roma minority in our partnership. We know them, let's say, we know the communities pretty well. The bigger problem is that there is a diversity, a very wide range from the very poor, to those within the Roma minority, who have a better financial situation, and we will have to analyze, see exactly how we will succeed and what let's approach it more seriously. Of course with the support and following the advice of the town halls or the UATs of which those communities are a part."(FG1, R3, M.).

"As a representative of the Roma minority, during the first programming period we had organizations with which, unfortunately, the ties were no longer maintained. I don't know what happened [...]" (FG1, R4, M.).

- **Limited or passive participation** -this category includes Roma organizations and other vulnerable groups that have little or passive participation in the process of drafting the Local Development Strategy. In this sense, the respondents declared that there is involvement only when their help is requested, any other initiative on their part being lacking. This can be driven by various obstacles, but it is important that local authorities, the LAG organization and other stakeholders identify and address these obstacles to ensure that all community groups are properly represented and can express their views vision and needs in the strategy development process.

"Unfortunately, the NGO component in this sector in our country is not extremely active, although there are needs, although on the consultation side we have such NGOs and they are key local actors at the territory level, which somehow they themselves are both a guide and a landmark. The actual logistical component of an NGO involved in such activities is non-existent. A large part of the activities is carried out through a collaboration between the local public administration, 2-3 local actors who are seen as a key factor in the development of this component."(FG2, R1, F.).

"We tried to attract them, but there were NGOs that, even if they exist, don't really work."(FG2, R2, M.).

- **Intermediate or representative participation:** This category includes organizations or representatives that act as voices of the Roma community and other vulnerable groups in the decision-making process. These organizations are NGOs, associations or other entities that represent the interests and perspectives of these groups in strategic discussions. Through these representatives, the needs and concerns of the Roma community and other vulnerable groups can be integrated into the strategy-making process, contributing to a better representation and consideration of these groups in local decisions.

"We also have many associations that have been created lately, but they are not involved in the mod direct. Maybe they lack experience or don't know." (FG2, R2, M.).

- **Active and direct participation:** This category involves Roma organizations and other vulnerable groups that are directly involved in the strategy development process. These entities are regularly consulted, being involved in working groups and participating in public meetings and consultations. Through this active and direct participation, Roma organizations and other vulnerable groups can express their specific needs, aspirations and perspectives, thus having the opportunity to influence the content and direction of the local development strategy, so as to bring more to the community they represent. So, this category is made up of organizations involved at the level of the LAG, they have the role of members, so they get involved in all the actions and activities provided.

"Some of the organizations are also members of the LAG."(FG1, R1, F.).

"The communities we still have represent the Hungarian minorities and pensioners, these are among the partners who attend the meetings very often. Wine, discuss, they are really interested and therefore we try to find solutions for them as well. I don't know if we manage to finance them, to help them somehow, but they have an involvement far beyond expectations."(FG1, R3, M.).

"Within the GAL we have several associations that work with young people, with individuals disadvantaged with whom we had a good collaboration and who will also be part of the future partnership agreement within the SDL 2023-2027."(FG3, R6, F.).

Good collaboration between organizations was not a neglected aspect during the discussions, thus it was highlighted that a special bond is created between organizations, even if their goals and spheres of interest are common, they know the procedures, as well as the difficulties encountered when the core business is so tightly bound by a rigid framework.

"The collaboration is good. A relationship was created from NGO to NGO, we also know our difficulties and problems, but also the possibilities to solve for them, to a small or large extent, the problems they face." (FG3, R6, F.).

Regarding the participation fence, the biggest challenge that associations face in this regard is the right formula in which they can operate, so that NGOs, as well as other stakeholders, fulfill their roles. have responsibility and assumption. So that from one programming period to another, the structure, as well as the composition of the LAG undergoes changes, so that it has reliable partners, can address a target group with the most diverse needs and requirements, but also can attracts more funds in the territory in which it operates.

"As a good part, we partnered with a municipality that has enough this side is represented, it has organizations that will deal with it and we will be able to support them further."(FG1, R4, M.).

"Now we have identified an association - the Union of Roma from Videle. You guys are in partnership with the city hall, and this very week we have meetings with them to bring them to the GAL and to be able to develop programs, activities for the Roma community, which is quite a large community in Videle." (FG2, R2, M.).

"We also intend to include as many types of measures as possible in the new strategy social, let's continue to work with these organizations and possibly with others that they will show interest in collaborating and being partners in the LAG."(FG3, R6, F.).

"We have a partnership with some NGOs that also deal with the Roma side. Now for the new financing tranche we have also co-opted other NGOs whose activity objective is also the part of disadvantaged groups. At the moment we are trying to organize ourselves so that in the next period we can hold these meetings with the partners and the other representatives of the town halls in order to take the pulse and make a new strategy." (FG4, R1, M.)

Being asked to give examples of initiatives and actions of these organizations (which represent the Roma and vulnerable groups), some of the participants offered as examples their own actions initiated by the LAG organizations, through which they came or intend to come to the support of the most slightly favored. *"[...] we will support the provision of a canteen for people without opportunities where Roma people from the city will also attend. And within the new strategy we want to get funds to further support children from troubled families."* (FG1, R1, F.).

But there were also situations in which we were presented with proposals from these organizations that are part of the LAG

"we have an association that wants to establish the day center for disabled children, we have and of these in the territory, we also have poor families, among which are also Roma families." (FG1, R1, F.);

"Also, almost all associations would have small requests now in the period of writing new strategies to see them a little, analyze them and see what we could do for them. It is possible to take a measure or see what their needs are, but we have not had too many problems of action on vulnerable groups [...]. For the rest, we will see in the next period." (FG1, R2, F.);

"At the level of Baia Sprie, [...] the city that is part of the GAL, there are many and quite a few programs running through POCU, related to the Roma minority and including entrepreneurship programs. That social center funded by the LAG was not long ago completed and has not yet managed to get off the ground very well, so we still do not feel the pulse of that project." (FG1, R3, M.);

"More than that, UAT Berzunți, which has around 988 Roma on the territory of the commune, has accessed a measure that refers exactly to the Roma population, they are building a sports base where they will attract and organize activities for Roma children to be present all the time." (FG3, R2, F.).

but also initiatives from organizations that are not members of the LAG that supported the development of the financing, initiatives that should not be neglected.

"And we have a project financed on the HARD infrastructure, which was financed by the GAL, a day center for families with children. The applicant was a parish from our territory, but this is not a GAL member. There they did activities, it allowed them to access others funds through POCU and they continue, so they want to develop and they want to continue these activities." (FG1, R2, F.)

"Recently, the NGOs, which are active, have somehow started to be a little more active at the national level. I had some discussions in this regard last week, with an NGO that it is called "Casa Bună", an association from Bucharest. [...] The point is that I debated with them some extremely interesting aspects in setting the wheels in motion regarding the social infrastructure component for all vulnerable groups. For them it is very important first of all education." (FG2, R1, F.).

"We actually have two associations that are not from us in the territory, but we have them as partners and contribute to supporting vulnerable groups, they do all kinds of medical actions, even with caravans, with ophthalmologists, because they have very good national partners good at the level of Bucharest." (FG2, R2, M.).

In terms of attracting funding from organizations representing the Roma minority and vulnerable groups, they are not very many.

Some of the projects carried out, financed and implemented, through which funds were attracted, and which were shared by the members of the LAG associations, were aimed at community development and the provision of social services for vulnerable groups, including the Roma minority.

These funds were used for projects such as establishing social day care centers, improving the quality of social services for children in certain communities, and modernizing the infrastructure for care and education facilities. The mentioned organizations obtained funding to implement these projects, thus contributing to increasing the quality of life and social inclusion of vulnerable people in the respective communities.

Some of the projects presented by members of the LAG associations focused on addressing these specific needs. For example, in the case of the Community Development Association, funding was allocated for the establishment of a social day center aimed at supporting people from vulnerable groups, including Roma minorities. Also, the IANA Foundation submitted funding requests to the LAG for various projects, such as improving the quality of social services for children from the Nicolae Bălcescu community. This is one of the organizations with the most elaborate activity and with the most projects implemented within

the LAG. Furthermore, other organizations, such as Civitas, have benefited from funding through the LAG for various initiatives.

"We have that community development association that we funded for financing the social day center. And within the activities it is addressed to people from vulnerable groups, including Roma minorities. The association on the territory of UAT from Negresti Oaş, where we also have the largest Roma community." (FG1, R1, F).

Members of the Associations of Local Action Groups (LAGs) believe that the result of low involvement, as well as inconsistent funding obtained by organizations representing the interests of disadvantaged groups, is largely attributed to the fact that few representatives of these communities are willing to take responsibility. This reluctance can be determined by various reasons, such as lack of confidence in decision-making processes, administrative difficulties or lack of resources necessary for active involvement in organizational activities. Thus, this lack of active participation can affect the ability of organizations to obtain adequate funding and support for their projects, ultimately reducing the positive impact of these initiatives in disadvantaged communities.

From the answers received from the participants in the dialogue, ideas are highlighted that indicate a lack of involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the submission of projects within the social measures launched by the Local Action Groups (LAGs). And instead of the NGOs being the beneficiaries of these measures, the applicants and the main beneficiaries were the administrative-territorial units (UATs) within the LAGs. This suggests a difficulty encountered among NGOs in the process of accessing funds available for social projects aimed at disadvantaged groups.

"I am not aware of any NGOs that have submitted for vulnerable groups [...]." (FG3, R1, M).

"We do not have NGOs that have submitted projects within the social measure launched by the LAG. The applicants and beneficiaries of these measures were the UATs within the GAL." (FG3, R8, F).

Difficulties and even delays are also observed in the submission of projects intended for the Roma minority. This situation can be attributed either to a delay in assessing and understanding the specific needs of this community, or to the fact that community members do not take responsibility for coordinating these types of efforts or are reluctant. These situations lead to the loss of funding opportunities and the implementation of projects necessary for these disadvantaged groups.

"As organizations, we did not have as a result the fact that we held the call launched for the Roma minority for almost a year and a half. As a result we should submit and do what I thought would be necessary for them now." (FG1, R5, M).

"Our association was not the beneficiary of a project either. The i-Leader day center was done by the LAG within measure 6, the creation of social infrastructure. So another organization for minorities did not participate and did not benefit from funds." (FG1, R4, M).

Despite the many difficulties encountered by Local Action Groups (LAGs), they demonstrate a capacity for adaptation and innovation through activities and initiatives designed to respond to the needs of local communities. Events open to the public, such as fairs, festivals or community days, have become an essential mechanism for promoting LAG activities and community involvement. The high participation in these events shows a clear interest of the communities in the projects and initiatives of the LAGs. These activities not only promote initiatives, but also contribute to strengthening relations between LAGs and communities, generating greater public engagement.

"As specific actions, I remember the last actions we did to promote the quality schemes in the territory, where many participants came, more than we expected" (FG1, R5, M).

Collaborations between LAGs and Administrative-Territorial Units (UATs) play an important role in the promotion and implementation of projects. In many cases, events organized in partnership with UATs, such as community days, have been an effective vehicle for disseminating information about funding opportunities and for strengthening transparency and trust in the work of LAGs:

"In each partner UAT, we organized, together with the respective UAT, community days. During the community days, we also did animation, in the sense that we had a tent and distributed leaflets about the financing possibilities" (FG3, R2, F).

These initiatives provided a framework for direct interaction with the community, helping to increase the visibility of LAGs and strengthen relationships with community members.

Cooperation projects between several LAGs are an example of good practice, demonstrating the impact of collaboration at an inter-regional level. Such initiatives not only promote cultural identity, but also contribute to social cohesion and local economic development.

"We had a cooperation project with four other Romanian LAGs on the topic of gastronomy. When we had the event in the territory, it was a very successful event" (FG1, R1, F).

A recurring aspect of the participants' responses is the difficulty of NGOs accessing funding for projects aimed at vulnerable groups. The dominance of UATs in accessing funds reflects a limited capacity of NGOs to organize and respond to administrative requirements:

"The applicants and beneficiaries of these measures were the UATs within the GAL" (FG3, R8, F).

The lack of active NGO involvement is attributed to bureaucratic barriers, lack of resources and, in some cases, the reluctance of community leaders:

"As organizations, the fact that we kept the appeal launched for the Roma minority for almost a year and a half was not a consequence" (FG1, R5, M).

A proposed solution to increase the efficiency and accessibility of funds is the digitization and simplification of administrative procedures. This would help eliminate red tape and speed up project implementation.

"Digitalization actions would be great to happen, to simplify the procedures more and we can move forward with shorter steps" (FG1, R4, M).

5. Conclusion

Through this research we aimed to analyze the involvement of LAG organizations, NGOs, which include members from vulnerable groups and Roma communities, in local development through the Local Development Strategy (SDL) and to evaluate the impact of their actions on the communities.

The obtained results highlight the complexity and importance of the involvement of LAG organizations, NGOs for vulnerable groups and Roma communities in local development processes through Local Development Strategies (SDL). An essential aspect consists in the lack of organization and structured representation of vulnerable groups, which significantly limits their access to decision-making processes and available resources. This situation amplifies marginalization, perpetuating socio-economic inequalities and reducing the positive impact of initiatives aimed at these communities.

In order to combat this reality, it is imperative to support efforts to form solid organizational structures that ensure the legitimate and active representation of vulnerable groups. Creating and strengthening local organizations capable of representing the interests of marginalized communities is an essential step for including their needs in SDL. Also, the limited participation of existing NGOs underlines the need for interventions aimed at developing organizational capacities. Training programs for community leaders, administrative support and reducing bureaucratic barriers can help facilitate more active and effective participation.

Effective collaboration between LAGs, NGOs and UATs is an example of good practice, highlighting the role of strong partnerships in integrating the needs of vulnerable groups into development strategies. Cooperation projects, such as those dedicated to the promotion of local gastronomy or other cultural initiatives, demonstrate that unity in action can lead to significant results in terms of promoting cultural identity and local economic development. Thus, stable partnerships not only increase the impact of initiatives, but also contribute to the creation of an environment favorable to social inclusion and inter-regional collaboration.

However, the capacity of NGOs to access funds and implement projects remains limited. The dominance of UATs in the process of accessing funding shows the need to strengthen the position of NGOs as main actors in social initiatives. Lack of resources, administrative skills and trust in decision-making processes are factors that affect the involvement of NGOs and reduce their potential to contribute significantly to local development.

The digitization of administrative processes and the simplification of bureaucratic procedures are priority solutions for overcoming these challenges. Transforming workflows into electronic formats and using online platforms for project management would facilitate access to resources, improve transparency and increase the efficiency of project implementation. These measures would reduce the administrative burden on NGOs and allow for a more efficient use of available resources.

Public events organized by LAGs have proven to be an essential tool for increasing their visibility and stimulating community involvement. Through such initiatives, LAGs manage to create stronger links with local communities, promote transparency and generate support for development projects. These events provide opportunities for community members to actively engage and access relevant information about the activities and resources available through the LAGs.

Active community involvement is crucial to the success of SDLs. Promoting a culture of active participation and strengthening links between LAGs, NGOs and communities can ensure a better representation of local interests, contributing to social cohesion and sustainable development. In conclusion, the success of SDL depends on creating an enabling framework for the collaboration and

involvement of all relevant actors, from local organizations and authorities to community members, to promote equitable and inclusive development.

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