

STRENGTHENING RURAL COMMUNITIES: THE IMPACT OF LOCAL ACTION STRATEGIES ON VULNERABLE GROUPS

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Abstract: *Local Action Groups (LAGs) are essential tools in promoting rural development and social inclusion in the European Union. They can have a significant positive impact on local rural areas and implicitly on vulnerable groups within them, promoting inclusion and social cohesion. On the other hand, there are LAGs that may face various barriers that may limit the expected results. The main purpose of this study is to analyze and evaluate the impact of Local Action Groups (LAGs) on the process of social and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups, with a special focus on Roma communities, in the territories where these organizations operate. To answer the research question, which aims at how the activities and collaborations of the LAGs influence the social and economic integration of vulnerable groups, especially the Roma communities, in the territories where they operate, we conducted a qualitative study, a focus group, based on a semi-structured interview guide. The results of the study confirm the positive influence of the LAGs, along with the importance of simplifying administrative procedures, diversifying funding sources and stimulating the involvement of young people*

Keywords: Local Action Groups (LAGs), vulnerable groups, Roma

1. Introduction

The integration of vulnerable groups in local development processes is an essential priority in the social and cohesion policies of the European Union (Barca, 2008; European Commission, 2020). In this context, the Local Action Groups (LAG) play a central role by implementing the Local Development Strategy (SDL), which provides a framework for the development of projects aimed at reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion. The active involvement of LAGs can have a positive impact on communities and implicitly on vulnerable groups within them (Tuesta-Tapia et al, 2024; Klamár, 2019).

The specialized literature emphasizes the importance of collaboration between local organizations and LAGs in promoting social inclusion. Putnam's (2000) study highlighted that collaborative relationships and social capital are determinants of community development. These relationships facilitate the participation of vulnerable groups in decision-making processes, thus promoting social cohesion and reducing marginalization. The LAGs represent a platform for promoting inter-institutional collaboration and for developing sustainable partnerships that support the inclusion of marginalized groups. Projects financed by LAGs cover a wide range of fields, from health and education to labor market integration and supporting social entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2019; World Bank, 2014). These initiatives not only provide direct support to beneficiaries, but also contribute to the strengthening of social capital in local communities (Healy & Côté, 2001; Woolcock, 2001).

This research aims to analyze the impact of LAG activities on the social and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups, with a particular focus on Roma communities. Through a qualitative approach based on focus group interviews and primary data analysis, the study investigates collaborations between LAGs and other local entities, as well as the results of implemented projects. In addition, the research explores the challenges encountered in the implementation of SDL and formulates recommendations for optimizing future strategies, emphasizing inclusive and sustainable development (Miroiu, 2011; Moulart et al., 2010; Gaventa, 2004).

2. The importance of LAGs

Local Action Groups (LAGs) are essential tools in promoting rural development and social inclusion in the European Union. These public-private partnerships are fundamental in the implementation of the LEADER approach, which aims to develop local communities through the direct

involvement of local actors in the decision-making process, alongside the development of the local rural community (European Commission, 2013; Esparcia et al., 2015). In Romania, LAGs have played a significant role in supporting vulnerable groups, including Roma communities, through projects aimed at improving living conditions and facilitating socio-economic integration (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2015).

Recent studies highlight the positive impact of LAGs on social inclusion (Vávra, 2002; Guzal-Dec & Zwolińska-Ligaj, 2017; Buda & Pop, 2024). For example, a World Bank report emphasizes that the active involvement of local communities in the development and implementation of projects contributes to reducing poverty and increasing social cohesion (World Bank, 2014). In addition, research carried out by the Institute of Social Economy shows that LAGs have facilitated the access of vulnerable groups to resources and opportunities, thus promoting the sustainable development of rural areas (Institutul de Economie Socială, 2016 Ilie et al, 2021; Palmisano, 2016).

However, challenges remain. The lack of adequate financial resources limited institutional capacity and bureaucratic barriers, along with limited experience can hinder the effectiveness of LAGs in achieving the proposed objectives (European Court of Auditors, 2010; European Court of Auditors, 2010; Institutul de Economie Socială, 2016). Also, the diversity of funding sources used by LAGs highlights the complexity of resource management and the need for innovative strategies to maximize impact (OECD, 2019). In order to maximize the positive impact on vulnerable groups, a continuous evaluation of the strategies and practices implemented, as well as their adaptation to the specific needs of the communities served, is essential.

3. Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to analyze and evaluate the impact of Local Action Groups (LAGs) on the process of social and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups, with a special focus on Roma communities, in the territories where these organizations operate. The research aims to provide a detailed perspective on how LAGs contribute to reducing inequalities and promoting social cohesion through initiatives and projects dedicated to these categories.

Starting from the main research question: "How do the activities and collaborations of LAGs influence the social and economic integration of vulnerable groups, especially Roma communities, in the territories where they operate?", we formulated the following research objectives:

1. Identification of organizations in the territory of the LAGs that focus on supporting vulnerable groups and evaluation of their collaboration with the LAGs.
2. Analysis of the objectives, activities and results of social projects financed by LAGs, with a special focus on projects dedicated to vulnerable groups and Roma communities.
3. Evaluation of the impact of social projects financed by LAGs on the social and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups.
4. Proposing solutions and strategies for optimizing the actions of LAGs in supporting local development and social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

We also stated the following secondary questions:

1. What are the main organizations that collaborate with LAGs in supporting vulnerable groups and how do they contribute to the development of SDL?
2. What types of social projects have been funded by LAGs and what have been their results on the targeted communities?
3. What are the challenges and successes encountered in the implementation of social projects and what strategies could be adopted to improve their impact?

Regarding the method used, the research was based on the sociological focus group interview, an approach that facilitates obtaining valuable qualitative information through structured and semi-structured discussions. The choice of this method was justified by its ability to capture multiple perspectives and provide an in-depth understanding of the collaborations, initiatives and project outcomes implemented by the LAGs.

The main tool used was a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore key themes related to collaboration with other organizations, outcomes of social projects and challenges encountered. The guide included central questions designed to investigate the objectives, activities and impact of LAG-funded projects on vulnerable groups:

1. Which organizations in the LAG area primarily focus on addressing issues related to Roma or vulnerable groups in SDL development? Could you explain how you collaborate with these organizations and what are the main activities, projects and results they have achieved in the territory of the LAG?
2. Could you describe the main objectives, activities and results of LAG-funded projects in the social field, especially those submitted or awarded to NGOs focusing on vulnerable groups (VG) or Roma communities? In addition, can you provide information on all projects funded by the LAG in the social component, including social POCU funding lines and other funding lines specifically targeting vulnerable groups?
3. What are the successes and failures you have encountered in your work and what would be related to these successes-failures? What are your proposals to optimize local development actions in the future?

The respondents were strategically selected to include relevant members of the LAG structures, such as representatives of the LAG management, members of the local public administration, representatives of NGOs and partner companies, but also direct beneficiaries of the financed projects. The research included four focus groups, held in the North-West, South-West, North-East and South-East regions of Romania, each focus group being organized within a representative LAG territory for that area. This regional approach ensured the diversity of perspectives, and the relevance of the conclusions obtained

4. Result

Within this study, four focus groups were organized, each including five participants, which allowed the collection of relevant responses to the proposed themes. The participants, of whom 9 women and 12 men, had diverse profiles, being selected to provide varied perspectives based on their professional experience. They included people active within the LAGs, occupying positions such as executive director, LAG manager, project evaluator, president or legal officer.

The obtained results highlight the importance of understanding the contributions of LAGs in promoting social and economic inclusion, as well as in facilitating the access of marginalized communities to resources and opportunities. Evaluating the performance of these organizations provides a basis for developing more effective strategies adapted to the specific needs of vulnerable groups. LAGs that stand out through successful activities can be considered good practice models for less active ones.

The analysis highlighted a division between the LAG organizations, they being divided into two categories: on the one hand, those that do not collaborate with organizations focused on vulnerable groups, either because of the lack of these groups in the territory, or because of the lack of steps necessary to create structures functional representatives

"Like I told you, we didn't have any collaborations." (FG1, R3, M).

"On the territory of the Association [...] we do not have Roma associations, or at least we have not identified ourselves until this moment." (FG3, R4, F).

"We don't have a Roma organization in our LAG and we don't need associations targeting minorities." (FG3, R7, F).

respectively those where there are such NGOs active and with outstanding results in terms of their involvement in the development of vulnerable groups.

"[...] we have within the GAL, in the association, three member associations that are very active. [...] we partnered two or three more associations that still support vulnerable groups: [...] children with disabilities, [...] vulnerable people from the territory of the city of Negrești de Iași, [...] both young children, as well as people with disabilities, elderly people, respectively sick people." (FG1, R1, F).

"We have a member association in the GAL, which represents the Roma minority, and on the new strategy we have another association in the partnership agreement [...], which already carries out activities with children, especially from vulnerable groups - they have activities in school. The association that is a member of Gal did not have an intensive activity, they did not provide us with information about their results." (FG1, R5, M).

"The two associations we had were formed in two localities of Roma ethnicity. An association was led by a priest and his wife, the teacher, and then there was a local actor who managed to have some punctual actions. Some activities to support the Roma community, whether they were cultural or medical support. On the other side, it was about another Roma community, quite obvious, and there were also some collaboration projects with the Dutch and Germans, but the actions are punctual, and the NGOs, [...] were active, had certain booms in within a project." (FG2, R1, F).

"Yes, in the GAL territory, apart from our association that works with seniors, I think there are also associations that work with children, I am not aware of any Roma communities in this territory." (FG3, R10, M).

"There are NGOs that deal with disadvantaged people, but not only Roma. There is also within our GAL, an NGO that deals with disadvantaged people, children, Roma, elderly people, disabled people, so it does not specifically treat only Roma, but quite a wide range." (FG4, R1, M).

Therefore, during the discussions, the collaborations with various member associations of the Local Action Groups (LAGs), which are active and support vulnerable groups, including disabled children, vulnerable people from different localities and Roma ethnic communities, were emphasized. However, difficulties were also reported in the activity of some member associations, such as the lack of information regarding the results obtained. It was also highlighted that some associations, especially those from Roma ethnic communities, had specific support actions, while others had more consistent activities within specific projects. In addition, other NGOs supporting various disadvantaged categories, including but not exclusively Roma, were mentioned, demonstrating a wide range of social interventions within local communities.

For organizations in the first category, it is important to highlight the reasons behind the lack of engagement, and opportunities to increase engagement in this direction can be identified. On the other hand, the organizations in the second category should benefit from permanent support from the LAG organizations, in order to intensify their efforts to address the specific problems of vulnerable groups within local development. It is essential to promote collaboration and exchange of best practices between all LAG organizations to ensure inclusive and sustainable local development for all segments of the community.

"The NGOs that we have as partners in the LAG carry out activities not through the LAG, but in particular with children, [...] including those with autism and other integration problems. In principle, the most important thing is that in the direction of social needs or needs for vulnerable groups in the social category, we really need a lot of money and involved people who want to change something, to be able to help as much as possible. Indeed, those who are involved in the projects and receive support are involved." (FG3, R1, M).

In the absence of specialized organizations dedicated exclusively to the defense of the interests of vulnerable groups, the LAG organizations are committed to carrying out projects aimed at providing support to the disadvantaged community. So, these LAG organizations adopted a proactive approach, trying to provide support on multiple levels for these vulnerable groups. Through their projects, they have tried to cover various aspects of the life of these communities, from access to health and education services, to the promotion of employment opportunities and economic development. They also provided assistance in issues related to housing, social integration and combating discrimination. Their efforts were primarily aimed at improving the quality of life and increasing the chances of success for vulnerable groups in the community.

"At the moment we have that project we did on the digitization side, in which we are willing to help, so we are waiting at the headquarters for anyone who wants to be helped on this side. At the events we participate in, we promote this initiative and we are ready to receive them." (FG1, R4, M).

In some cases, in the absence of specialized non-governmental organizations, the social services within the town halls have intervened to cover the needs of the communities, initiating and running projects aimed at solving problems and supporting members of the Roma community. These projects were designed to address the specific needs identified at the community level and to ensure access to services and resources needed to improve the quality of life. Through these initiatives, social services have played a particularly important role in promoting social inclusion and improving living conditions for members of Roma communities, as well as disadvantaged groups, thus contributing to increasing social cohesion and reducing inequalities.

"The best collaboration is with Baia Sprie town hall, with their social service. Since we are also based in Baia Sprie, they have addressed this issue to minorities, and they actually have quite a few projects in this direction." (FG1, R3, M).

"We collaborated with the social services in all the town halls, in the UATs, in the territory, which facilitated our contact with the people who needed support, and so I got to know the territory and the people in the territory very well." (FG1, R1, F).

"Regarding vulnerable groups, through a project in which the city of Târgu Neamț was the beneficiary, a day care center was created for people with disabilities, and here I am referring to children

with autism. The center was equipped with equipment and furniture specific to children with such a deficiency. The project was completed, it had a value of 134,000 euros. It was also implemented with continuity on the POCU, it was included in the successful projects [...]. It was a working visit with all the LAGs from the North-East region who also visited this center, very interesting, useful and useful for children and families who have children with disabilities. We hope in the future we can continue and do more for these issues and this social sector." (FG3, R8, F.).

On the other hand, it is important to highlight the fact that there are also isolated cases where organizations dedicated to assisting vulnerable groups are present in the territory, but effective collaboration between them and the Local Action Group (LAG) has not materialized. These organizations may already be engaged in activities and projects targeting the specific needs of vulnerable communities but may not be integrated into local networks or aware of opportunities to collaborate with the LAG in the area. Lack of collaboration can be caused by various reasons, such as lack of communication, shifting priorities or misunderstandings about shared goals. It is essential that all parties involved identify and overcome obstacles to build effective partnerships and maximize the impact of their actions in support of vulnerable communities. By strengthening the collaboration between specialized organizations and LAGs, a more holistic and coordinated approach can be ensured to improve the situation of vulnerable groups in the territory. From this point of view, an openness on the part of the LAG can be observed in order to establish an open, collaborative relationship with them.

"Now we also have two organizations with which we have not yet succeeded. We will also see what they want, what are their guidelines, and I hope it will be useful." (FG1, R3, M).

"We found such an organization. This week will be the first on-site meeting. We preferred to go and see what is happening there and not to have some discussions from the office or on the phone. I hope it will be a good collaboration [...]" (FG2, R2, M).

During the discussions on this topic, collaborations with associations outside the territory were also highlighted, which, unfortunately, did not always materialize in funded projects. These collaborations can be extremely valuable, bringing experience, resources and new perspectives within local communities. However, although the intentions may be good and there is a desire to collaborate, practical obstacles such as difficulties in obtaining funding or discrepancies in priorities and objectives can prevent the realization of concrete projects. It is important that all parties involved make efforts to overcome these obstacles and turn collaborations into tangible and sustainable projects. Transparent communication, mutual understanding and ongoing engagement can play a crucial role in facilitating productive collaborations and maximizing positive impact on vulnerable communities.

"And we have collaborated here before, at the level of a larger city, of a municipality. It's an association ASOC, let's call them, and they deal with vulnerable groups. There was collaboration with them, but it did not materialize through a project (from outside the territory)." (FG1, R3, M).

Situations were also reported in which the GAL teams faced a barrier put up by those with whom they wanted to collaborate. In the specific context mentioned, difficulties were encountered in establishing partnerships with groups that managed projects for vulnerable communities, within the Human Capital Operational Program (POCU). Even if there were clear needs and vulnerable groups in the territory that would have benefited from these projects, communication with these entities also proved to be impossible, with "closed doors". This highlights the lack of openness and cooperation on the part of organizations or interest groups, which could have contributed to solving social problems in the community. Such obstacles to collaboration can hinder the effective implementation of projects and affect the desired results in terms of development and improvement of living conditions for vulnerable groups. It is essential to identify these barriers and try solutions to overcome the obstacles and facilitate collaboration between all actors involved in promoting the social and economic well-being of communities.

"There were also those projects on POCU for vulnerable communities. We really tried to have a collaboration with you because they were vulnerable groups from our territory. It was impossible to talk. So there were some closed doors." (FG2, R2, M).

The lack of consistency among NGOs, their lack of preparation to function as long-term institutions, as well as the absence of specific programs or activities, in short, obstacles to balanced social development, represent another issue raised in this theme.

So, it is emphasized that Local Action Groups (LAGs) have produced effects and are actively involved in the community, but collaboration with all the factors involved is essential to achieve common goals. So, due to the existing difficulties in this regard, as well as in the absence of the desired results, it is considered to abandon certain efforts, as well as to reorient the financial allocation.

"NGOs are not prepared to function as an institution for a long period of time. For various reasons [...] Punctual on activities, on certain projects, there are not even programs. It does not seem natural for us, the LAGs, to touch this component. Because we have a balanced social development to do. The gals are active and have produced some effects, they haven't hit the market since yesterday. I believe that in any relationship the interest of society should prevail and, in this context, all involved and interested factors should somehow be willing to collaborate, regardless of who takes the first step. Unfortunately, things don't go the way we wanted. We'll try one more financial allocation, and if things don't work out, we'll probably give up." (FG2, R1, F).

An example of a successful project with significant impact in the community is the project carried out by the local UAT, with Radio-Prăjeni LAG as partners. Its main objective was to provide integrated social services for 250 people. The association focused on seniors in rural communities, the school offered after-school services and trips for students, and the LAG supported entrepreneurship by financing small rural businesses. Also, the project included the professionalization of people from the countryside through guard courses. Running for 2 years, the project was extended by an additional 6 months for certain components and had a significant impact in the community. The elderly also received furniture for their homes, and social activities such as thematic meetings, hot meals and material support were greatly appreciated. Such services are essential in rural areas and bring significant benefits to the respective community.

"it was not an easy project, because it is not easy to work with vulnerable people in many ways, but it was a great benefit in the community." (FG3, R8, M).

The difficulties encountered in accessing the Human Capital Operational Program (POCU) for the operationalization of the social infrastructure have significant consequences for one of the organizations. In the absence of such funding, the responsibility for ensuring the functionality of the infrastructure rests entirely with the non-governmental organization (NGO). This means that the NGO must find other sources of funding or bear the costs of building and maintaining the infrastructure needed for the project. For example, the NGO may have to allocate financial resources for the payment of utilities or for the provision of the necessary personnel to operate and administer the social infrastructure. This implies additional pressure on the financial and human resources of the organization, as well as more rigorous management of these resources to ensure the smooth running of the project.

In addition, the lack of POCU funding can affect the effectiveness and sustainability of the project in the long term, as NGOs have to find alternative ways of funding or take on additional operational costs. Thus, failure to access POCU can put considerable pressure on the organization's ability to deliver quality services and support the needs of the vulnerable community effectively and sustainably.

"As a social project, we also encounter problems in addition to depopulation and the aging population. In this sense, we had the initiative to make day centers by measure of social infrastructure. So we have a beneficiary who has signed a financing contract, is at the last request for payment, is about to be licensed. The only problem is that he has not been able to access through the POC to operationalize the infrastructure and it will fall to him to keep the day center operational after he finishes the payment request." (FG1, R5, M).

Even in the absence of accessing POCU funding, organizations find alternatives to support their projects and meet their proposed objectives. They are turning their attention to identifying other available sources of funding. Although some projects were financed exclusively through the LAG, they are already starting to generate positive results. The lack of access to POCU funding does not discourage the efforts of organizations, but on the contrary, leads them to explore other funding opportunities in the future.

A relevant example is the project for the multifunctional center, which was designed to support and integrate people in vulnerable situations. This project was not limited only to children with disabilities or those of Roma ethnicity, but also considered mothers in difficult situations, such as divorce or abortion. Also, direct beneficiaries of the project included family members of people with disabilities or those affected by drug use.

These initiatives were designed to address the various aspects of social marginalization and to provide the necessary support to a wide spectrum of beneficiaries. The interest in the continuation of these projects remains high, and the organizations are determined to continue efforts towards ensuring the support and inclusion of these vulnerable categories in the community. Therefore, funding alternatives are being considered and plans are being made to continue these initiatives in future financial allocations.

"We have several projects. Those that were exclusively financed through the LAG are already generating results. Even if the POCU funding was not accessed, this does not mean that another funding will not be taken into account in the future, and the objectives are intended to support and integrate people in

various vulnerable situations. For example, the project for the multifunctional center was not addressed only to children with disabilities, only to children of Roma ethnicity, it also targeted mothers in situations of divorce or abortion. Direct beneficiaries of the project were considered including those who are disabled or drug users. It is again a topic that has aroused interest and interested us recently. Consider that these things have been thought of as direct beneficiaries and indicators to be achieved in a social infrastructure project, as I mentioned, as far back as 2018, and the interest is still there. That we are talking about children with parents who have gone abroad, that we are talking about children from single-parent families or any other category identified at the territorial level in a situation of marginalization, are beneficiaries within such projects, and we take into account that these things be continued on the next financial allocation." (FG2, R1, F).

The representatives of the organizations also highlighted the importance of using transition funds for project implementation. A relevant example is the project financed under the strategy, which allowed the construction of a day care center. The allocation of transitional funds allowed the support of future activities and the obtaining of licensing for the social service provided in this center. Moreover, funds were allocated for the energy efficiency of the center, underlining the intention to continue investments to improve the infrastructure and services offered.

"And here, a project, the HARD project, was financed through the strategy, the construction of the day center. The activities will be supported, there will be licensing for social service in that day center in the near future and on transition funds. Funds were also allocated to us for the energy efficiency of the center. So we will also have money for another project submitted for the center from the transition funds." (FG1, R3, M).

Also of note is the decision to allocate transition funds for three other projects soon. This demonstrates a strategic and responsible approach to the management of available resources, ensuring that investments are directed to the priority needs of the community and that the focus is on sustainable development and increasing the quality of life for project beneficiaries. The use of transition funds in this way reflects the organization's commitment and ability to maximize the impact of investments and ensure the continuity and sustainability of the initiatives implemented.

"We financed a project, from the body of the strategy, we had money for a single project. From the transition money we allocated money for 3 more projects, we just left the call and instead we financed the first POCU. So two projects so far and three more in the near future." (FG1, R1, F).

The mention of AFIR funds in the context of project financing highlights the diversity of funding sources sought and used for community development. AFIR (Agency for the Financing of Rural Investments) represents an important source of financing for projects aimed at rural development, especially in areas such as agriculture, rural infrastructure and economic diversification.

"Theoretically, from what was predicted in our strategy as an objective, it was achieved. We had allocated 40,600 euros to the social area for two projects. The two projects were submitted in two rounds of funding and were funded. Everything was ok, they were completed at least on the AFIR side." (FG4, R1, M).

In the case of Confluence Moldave LAG, AFIR funds seem to be one of the main sources of funding accessed, especially for projects related to rural and agricultural development. This may indicate a specific orientation of local development strategies towards the needs and economic potential of the rural area.

The mention of the fact that, apart from the AFIR funds, no other funding lines, such as POCU, were accessed, suggests that the process of accessing European funds within the Moldavian Confluence LAG is still under development or that priorities have been more focused much on the funds available through AFIR. However, this observation may provide an opportunity to diversify funding sources and explore other available European programs and funds, which could complement and expand the LAG's project portfolio.

"Unfortunately, GAL Confluence Moldave, apart from AFIR funds and the AFIR line, we did not access other financing lines, such as POCU or ... that is the only one from us at AFIR and they are the specific objectives of AFIR." (FG3, R2, F).

The implementation of social projects involves a considerable volume of documentation, which adds an additional level of difficulty to the implementation process. This aspect related to the large volume of documents that is necessary to ensure compliance with legal requirements and to justify each stage of the use of funds, is one of the challenges that LAG associations face. Unfortunately, this aspect can sometimes become difficult, as the need to prepare and present a large number of documents can consume significant resources of time and energy.

Therefore, in this section, valuable recommendations from the respondents were provided, highlighting both the weaknesses of the current process and suggestions for improvement. One of the reported problems was related to the large volume of documents required in the implementation of social

projects. The implementation of these projects often involves complex bureaucracy and the need to prepare and present a large amount of documents can be a challenge for organizations.

"Plus, the enormous volume of documents needed to implement social projects. From some money that does not materialize in a physical investment, the implementation is a bit difficult in the sense that you need a lot of supporting documents for the travel of that money. And even if the experts find that there is a need in the territory, the work was done according to the documents, but they additionally ask for other justifications and other documents that, I don't know if instead of doing something useful in that time, we have to sit and think about a document through to demonstrate the activities." (FG3, R1, M).

Achievements are the backbone of any LAG association, as they not only validate the efforts made, but also fuel the teams' motivation to continue their valuable work. When members see that their projects have a significant impact on the community, that they bring tangible change and that they are valued by its residents, they feel encouraged to move forward. These successes become sources of inspiration and encouragement, turning obstacles into challenges to overcome and fueling their ambition to successfully achieve their proposed goals.

In most cases, successes represented completed projects that had a significant impact and generated positive effects at the community level. These projects were the turning points that brought tangible and beneficial changes in people's lives. For example, upgrading local infrastructure, implementing educational programs or organizing community events were initiatives that brought a sense of unity and progress to the community. Such successes not only improve the quality of life of residents, but also strengthen community spirit and confidence in the ability to make positive changes.

The perspective expressed by one of the respondents brings into discussion an interesting view on the value of projects financed by European funds. For him, the importance of a project is not only determined by its scale or complexity, but also by the fact that any project implemented with the support of these European funds represents in itself a valuable success. Moreover, once the project is won and materialized into tangible achievements, its level of success increases significantly. This perspective emphasizes the importance of European funding in stimulating the development of communities and in achieving the established objectives.

"[...] I would like to say that the fact that you have implemented a project through European funds, whether small or large, is already a success. I no longer say the fact that you won it, that there was also a need for involvement and that's why I would take it as a success. The fact that I have implemented it, again increases the area of success." (FG3, R9, F).

One of the notable achievements mentioned by the dialogue participants is the financing of the kitchen modernization of a children's center, an essential contribution that had a significant impact on the development of the community. The moment when the members of the GAL association could taste the dishes cooked in that modernized kitchen brought an additional source of motivation. This strengthened the association's team, demonstrating to them that their sustained work and active involvement in projects bring tangible results and improve the quality of life in their community, in turn benefiting from the results of their work.

"The greatest satisfaction was when I participated with the children from the IANA Foundation. Last year, within the IANA Foundation, there are two centers in Nicolae Bălcescu's town together with the children, the second center was inaugurated and where I saw, together with the Prince of Liechtenstein, who has an important contribution, the sign on which was written GAL Confluente Moldave a sponsored with 82,000 euros the kitchen. The moment we were served with products from that kitchen, we also felt a sense of pride that we were able to make a small contribution to the development of the community." (FG2, R2, M).

The inauguration of sports bases or multifunctional fields is another remarkable success assumed by the associations, because they bring multiple benefits to the community. These facilities offer residents the opportunity to enjoy recreational spaces and practice various sports activities, thus contributing to the promotion of a healthy lifestyle. Moreover, these places become meeting and socializing centers for people in the community, giving them a chance to interact and engage in collective activities.

Through these initiatives, people feel part of the community, regardless of their differences, and strong bonds are formed between its members, thus strengthening social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

"Now we await with interest the inauguration of the sports base or the multifunctional field. We hope with God's help this fall to inaugurate and be there with the children and participate in a mini-football match. These would be the satisfactions." (FG2, R2, M).

The beneficiaries declared themselves very satisfied with the collaboration they had with the LAG associations and appreciated the support they received from their members.

"As a beneficiary, we are watching the next stage, but we are happy with how this stage has gone. For us it was the first project to put on. After we tried a start-up, there we realized that four employees were needed. We only put three, we didn't succeed. We hope the new program will be just as accessible. I have no recommendations to make. We were satisfied with the advice of the GAL, with their guidance." (FG3, R3, F).

Another significant achievement highlighted is given by the fact that the associations were able to promote their cause effectively, being present at various cultural and social events. Here, they had the opportunity to present their activities, concerns and projects to the wider community, thus helping to increase people's awareness and involvement in their initiatives.

The organization of public meetings and various cultural events is a vital aspect in community involvement and the promotion of local traditions. Most of the Local Action Groups (LAGs) I interacted with had the opportunity to either organize public meetings or organize various events such as local fairs and festivals. Although financial resources were limited for such initiatives in some communities they managed to organize successful events, representative of local traditions and folklore.

In this regard, a festival was exemplified that attracted an impressive number of participants, over 17,000 people, and had a positive impact on the promotion of local culture. With displays of folk motifs, traditional costumes and local folklore performances, an authentic experience was provided to those who attended, attracting visitors from outside the area as well. Through these events, the organizers strove to promote and preserve local traditions, thus contributing to their understanding and appreciation by a wider audience.

"We, like the LAG, have organized meetings several times, public meetings, meetings for various other actions, such as fairs. We had public meetings in every commune, at least one. [...] We have here, in the Gurghiului Valley, a festival of the Gurghiului Valley, at which I am also the president of this association. I was also the festival organizer for the last two years. It was quite a successful festival with over 17,000 people in attendance. First of all, this festival is not a party, like in other places. Everything is tradition, local folklore, popular wear. That's what it all boils down to, besides the fact that each town hall, a partner in this association, has an allegorical house there, where popular motifs from the past, popular costumes and old things that have been used in households over the years are displayed, we also have a local vocal group, each presenting a 15-20 minute show. So a nice thing to know that a lot of people come from other parts, who have nothing in common with our area. We try to promote our local traditions and folklore." (FG4, R1, M).

However, respondents claimed that they also encountered difficulties. One of the main challenges mentioned is related to the insufficiency of material funds intended for LAGs. The amount allocated to these organizations is considered insufficient considering the needs that are imposed at the level of certain territories. Although LAGs make considerable efforts to implement projects and initiatives beneficial to communities, financial limitations sometimes prevent them from fully achieving their goals. Participants stress the importance of more substantial funding to be able to effectively address the issues and support the sustainable development of local communities. It is expected that action will be taken in this regard in the future.

"The dissatisfactions would be that the money for the LAGs is quite small and that the funding should be a bit higher. We are waiting for the funds on FSE Plus and we will see how we will write the strategy." (FG2, R2, M).

Not only do the representatives of the LAGs believe that the funds are insufficient, the beneficiaries of the projects have the same perspective, so the funding for the Local Action Groups (LAGs) is also considered low by the participants. They suggest that an increase in funding would be beneficial, given the experience and confidence the associations have gained in project management. It also emphasizes the importance of simplifying administrative procedures to make the project management process more efficient and accessible.

"The funding at the GAL, as a colleague said before, is quite small. If it were bigger, it wouldn't hurt because the GAL already, these associations, are not from yesterday and today. For example, GAL Podul Inalt, for some time. So it already has many projects won, at least the GAL Podul Inalt really has many projects won. At one point I knew it was somewhere in the 2nd place in the country. So there are many of us who have gained some trust, we are in a feeling with them and we interact easily. We could handle bigger, more serious projects, it wouldn't hurt and if the procedure were simplified a bit, that would be the icing on the cake." (FG3, R9, F).

Human resources are a major challenge in general, underscoring the idea that the professionalization of staff is extremely important for the success of the organization. This is achieved over time by ensuring continuity and rewarding employees appropriately. In addition, it emphasizes the importance of offering competitive wages to attract and retain qualified employees.

"[...] the human resource is a big challenge, it is very important to professionalize the staff we work with and this is only done over time, through continuity and through funding. If you have good wages, good people will come. At least he will come." (FG3, R10, M).

The highlighted problem is not only perceived by the representatives of the LAG associations, but also by the project beneficiaries who received support from these associations to start their own businesses. However, they face difficulties in recruiting staff and barriers in people conception.

Perspectives

It is encouraging to note that, even if not all organizations have submitted and implemented projects on the social component, they have shown their interest and openness to also focus on social measures in future strategies. This indicates an evolution in thinking and adaptation to the needs and demands of changing communities. By addressing social issues, these organizations can contribute to increasing the quality of life in their communities and strengthening social cohesion. In this sense, these initiatives are expected, which should be followed by concrete actions that bring tangible benefits to community members.

"We have every interest to catch in the future strategies and ... social measures." (FG2, R2, M).

The recommendation is to ensure the continuation of the financing of the social infrastructures that have already been built, using other European or governmental funding sources to keep them active and functional, considering the existing financial limits in the rural environment.

Since financial resources are reduced in rural areas, it is necessary to explore other sources of financing, such as European or government funds, to ensure the functioning of social infrastructures. Given that these infrastructures were financed through the National Rural Development Program (PNDR), an option would be to continue their financing through the Human Capital Operational Program (POCU). This continuity of funding would allow these infrastructures to continue to provide services and benefits to the community.

The possibility of accessing Norwegian funds to support the association's projects should also be explored. It is important to document and understand the procedures for accessing these funds in order to identify the optimal solutions for the organization's needs.

"in rural areas, due to low financial resources, the only possibility is other European or government funds for operation. I think that, considering that social infrastructures were financed by AFIR, the solution would be a continuity of the POCU project for the further operation of these social infrastructures, the construction of which was financed by FADR. That would be a recommendation, to finance what has already been built and established. We are not familiar with Norwegian funds. I don't know if Norwegian funds are a solution for our association. We are going to investigate." (FG3, R10, M).

The feedback received from a beneficiary underlines the fact that the project implementation process can neither be described as difficult nor as easy, but involvement is essential to overcome this stage. However, the beneficiary suggests that the procedure could be simplified, as it is currently considered a bit cumbersome.

The beneficiary notes that implementing a project and submitting the necessary documents are not impossible but require considerable effort and continuous dedication. However, he believes the procedure is too complicated and could be streamlined to make the process easier for everyone involved. A simplification of the procedure would be welcome and would significantly improve the experience of the beneficiaries in the running of the projects.

This simplification of administrative procedures could reduce administrative burdens and make the process more accessible and manageable for all involved. In this way, the participation of more community members and their involvement in projects can be further encouraged, but at the same time, a more efficient use of available resources can be ensured.

"As a project to be implemented, as a way to submit documents, it is neither difficult nor easy. All in all, it all gets done in the end if you put in the effort. But, the procedure is rather cumbersome, it could be simplified a bit. A simplification would be welcome, indeed welcome." (FG3, R9, F).

A pertinent recommendation comes from a beneficiary who encountered considerable bureaucratic difficulties. According to his experience, the situation would improve significantly by implementing a digitized system that would simplify the process and save time resources. More precisely, the beneficiary suggests that it would be ideal to be able to send the documents in digital format, thus avoiding the need to make repeated trips to institutions such as the town hall to obtain and submit the necessary documents.

"This digitization should make the documents as digital as possible Without going to the town hall seven times for a role certificate." (FG3, R6, F).

5. Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this study highlights the crucial role of collaboration between organizations in the territories of Local Action Groups (LAG) and entities dedicated to supporting vulnerable groups, especially Roma communities, in the implementation process of the Local Development Strategy (SDL). The results obtained underline the complexity and potential of these partnerships, demonstrating that effective collaboration can lead to successful initiatives in health, education, employment and social inclusion. However, the lack of adequate representation and collaboration in certain LAG territories was identified as a major challenge, suggesting the need for proactive measures to involve organizations representing the interests of these groups.

In regions where collaboration is active, projects funded by LAGs have demonstrated a significant positive impact on social inclusion, providing improved access to essential services and economic opportunities. However, the study also identifies important limitations, such as lack of financial resources and inconsistency of data, which affect the effective implementation of projects. These challenges underscore the need for more rigorous strategic planning, more effective communication and a clear alignment of priorities between LAGs and their partners.

In terms of funding, the diversity of sources used reflects the complexity of the social funding landscape, but also the ingenuity of organizations in using available resources. Successful projects demonstrate a comprehensive approach, integrating both infrastructure and social services, which has significantly contributed to the development of communities. Collaborations with schools, associations and other local entities have expanded the range of services offered to beneficiaries, although challenges related to accessing funding, maintaining sustainability and navigating administrative complexities remain, indicating the need for innovative strategies.

The study demonstrates that LAGs have a strong positive impact on vulnerable groups, by promoting inclusion and social cohesion, supporting sustainable development, and improving the living conditions of vulnerable groups. However, the results of LAGs can be limited by financial, bureaucratic and logistical constraints that need to be addressed. Based on the analysis carried out, we recommend simplifying administrative procedures, diversifying funding sources by adopting a multi-fund approach and stimulating the involvement of young people in the local development process. By adopting coordinated and innovative strategies, LAGs can continue to make a significant contribution to creating more inclusive and resilient communities.

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