STUDY ON THE LAG APPROACH IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The study analyses the implementation of the LEADER approach and Local Action Groups in Romania, in the European context, for the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods, with an outlook on the 2021–2027 framework. Using a mixed methodology, the research integrated official statistical data, European Commission reports, and national evaluations, tracking financial allocations, expenditure structure, and performance indicators. The results show that Romania stood out for the speed of LAG approval, averaging five months, in contrast to delays of over two years in some Member States, and financial execution showed that over 77% of expenditure was directed towards local projects, with administrative costs at 22%, reflecting a balanced use of resources. However, cooperation projects accounted for less than 1% of the total, indicating limited integration into transnational networks. At European level, over two-thirds of LAGs used single fund financing, in particular the EAFRD, while only 24% applied the multi-fund model, including Romania. The comparative analysis showed that, although Romania exceeded the target for covering the rural population through local development strategies, it performed modestly in improving services and infrastructure, as well as in creating jobs. The conclusions suggest that the LEADER approach has contributed to mobilizing rural communities and strengthening local governance, but needs a stronger focus on measurable socio-economic impacts and inter-territorial cooperation in the current programming exercise.

Keywords: LEADER, Local Action Groups, rural development, European Union, Romania

Rural development policy is one of the key components of the Common Agricultural Policy, aiming to promote the sustainable development of European rural areas by integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions (European Commission, 2025). In this context, the Leader approach has emerged as an innovative and flexible method, designed to give local communities the opportunity to capitalize on their resources and respond to contemporary challenges.

Practical implementation has shown that Leader has the potential to transform rural communities, providing innovative solutions to old and new problems and functioning as a "laboratory" for local capacity development and consolidation. This approach supports the testing of tailored ways of meeting the needs of rural communities and has led, over time, to significant results in many EU Member States (European Commission, 2021).

Launched in 1991, the Leader initiative has provided rural areas with a framework for active involvement in shaping their own future, and its evolution has been closely linked to the dynamics of the CAP. and evaluations show that the method successfully adapts to the specific diversity of rural Europe, encouraging local participation in the development and implementation of development strategies (European Commission, ENRD Contact Point, 2021).

A key aspect of this approach is its integration into national and regional rural development programs, especially since the 2007–2013 programming period (European Commission, 2014). This inclusion has allowed the Leader method to be applied to a wider range of areas and projects, increasing its impact on the competitiveness of rural areas, the use of resources, and the mitigation of structural difficulties such as population aging, low levels of services, or limited employment opportunities.

Another advantage of the method is its complementarity with other European and national programs, by supporting diagnostic studies, feasibility projects, and local capacity-building actions. Leader strengthens the ability of communities to access not only dedicated funds but also other sources of financing (European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2020). Furthermore, the approach facilitates initiatives that are not usually

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prioritized by other programs, such as the revitalization of architectural heritage, the promotion of rural tourism, the protection of the natural environment, or the strengthening of relationships between producers and consumers (Kah S., 2021).

In Romania, the Leader approach was introduced relatively late compared to other EU Member States, but it has had a significant impact on the rural development process (Ciobanu F.-B. & Vladu M., 2024). The first experiences in applying this method appeared during the 2007–2013 programming period, when Leader was integrated into the National Rural Development Program through the creation and support of Local Action Groups (Buda D. & Pop A., 2024). These partnership structures, made up of representatives of local public authorities, the private sector, and civil society, formed the core of the Leader approach at the national level.

The main objective of the implementation of LAGs was to mobilize endogenous resources and involve communities in the development and implementation of local development strategies (Sălășan C. *et al*, 2019). Unlike other rural development policy instruments, Leader allowed interventions to be tailored to the needs and characteristics of each territory, encouraging innovation and cooperation between local actors (Florescu M.F. & Turek Rahoveanu A., 2021). Thus, Romania has benefited from an important opportunity to strengthen social capital and stimulate bottom-up initiatives, which until then had been poorly represented in rural areas.

Throughout the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods, the number of LAGs grew steadily, gradually covering the entire rural territory of the country (Opria A.-M. *et al*, 2024). These structures have carried out a variety of projects, ranging from investments in local infrastructure to support for small businesses, promotion of rural tourism, environmental protection, and enhancement of cultural heritage. At the same time, LAGs have played a formative role, contributing to the development of management skills and the strengthening of public-private partnerships in rural communities (Kah S., 2021).

Currently, in the 2021–2027 programming period, LAGs in Romania continue to be supported as key instruments for implementing the Leader approach. The focus is on strengthening administrative capacity, diversifying the rural economy, and integrating environmental and innovation objectives more strongly (Opria A.-M. *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, LAGs are seen as essential actors in the transition to sustainable and resilient agriculture, and are supported in developing integrated projects that combine economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Kah S. *et al*, 2023).

In Romania, Leader is not only a funding mechanism, but also a method of local governance that stimulates the participation and empowerment of rural communities. LAGs thus represent the bridge between European policies and local realities, ensuring coherence and relevance in the implementation of rural development strategies.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study was based on a mixed analysis, integrating quantitative and qualitative data, with a focus on the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods, as well as on the trends outlined for the 2021–2027 period. The research tracked the institutional and financial dynamics of the LEADER initiative, reporting on developments at European level and the specificities of LAG implementation in Romania.

The empirical basis of the study consisted of official data sources and public documents, including Common Agricultural Policy regulations, reports and summaries from the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, evaluations from the European Court of Auditors, program sheets and progress reports prepared by the European Network for Rural Development, as well as national documents issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Agency for Rural Investment Financing.

The units of analysis were represented by the European level, comprising all LAGs registered in the EU, the national and regional level, reflected in the selection of Member States and regions for comparison, and the Romanian level, where the focus was on the structure of expenditure, the speed of approval procedures, and the value of result indicators.

The comparative analysis aimed to identify national particularities in relation to other Member States, as well as the advantages and constraints associated with the single fund or multiple fund financing model. Thus, the limitations identified derive from the incomplete nature of some indicators, which reflect the level of implementation rather than the real impact on communities, as well as from the heterogeneity of administrative procedures between Member States.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The evolution of the LEADER initiative reflects both the maturation of European rural development policy and the diversification of its areas of application. The data summarized in Figures 1-2 show a steady increase in LAGs, parallel to the increase in financial resources allocated by the European Union.

In its early stages, LEADER I (1991–1993) was experimental in nature, being applied exclusively in rural areas. As a result, 217 LAGs were set up, supported by 0.44 billion EUR in funding, with the aim of testing the functionality of the method and demonstrating the potential of the "bottom-up" approach.

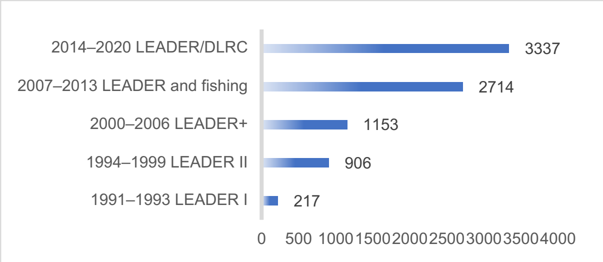

Figure 1 **The evolution of the LEADER program and the number of LAGs**

The LEADER II phase (1994–1999) saw a consolidation of this approach, with the number of LAGs increasing significantly to 906 and funding reaching 1.76 billion EUR. This expansion demonstrated that local community involvement and public-private partnerships are effective mechanisms for integrated rural development.

In the LEADER+ phase (2000–2006), the initiative was further refined, supporting 1,153 LAGs in rural areas with a budget of 2.11 billion EUR, with a focus on innovation, cooperation, and strengthening territorial identity, paving the way for the approach to be included in the common agricultural policy.

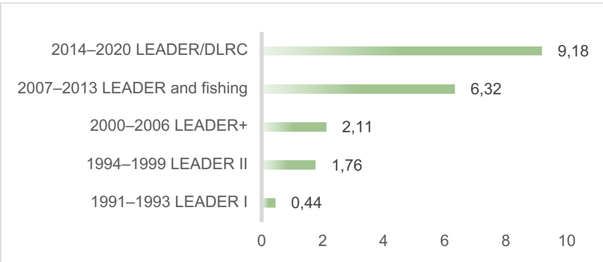

Figure 2 **The evolution of the LEADER program and planned EU funding (billion euros)**

The period 2007–2013 represented a turning point, with the integration of LEADER into all rural development programs. In addition, the initiative was extended to fishing areas through the creation of GALPs (European Commission, 2014). The number of territorial structures increased to 2,714 LAGs, and EU funding rose to 6.32 billion EUR (Opria A.-M. *et al*, 2023).

The 2014–2020 phase introduced the concept of Community-led Local Development (CLLD), whereby the LEADER approach was extended to urban areas, while maintaining its applicability in rural and fishing areas, and the number of LAGs reached 3,337, and funding amounted to 9.18 billion EUR, confirming the mandatory and widespread nature of the method in the European Union's development policy (European Commission, 2021).

The success of LEADER's implementation is based on a clear distribution of responsibilities among the actors involved at European, national, local, and individual levels. This multi-level structure ensures a balance between large-scale strategic coordination and the necessary autonomy at the local level, so that development is tailored to the specific characteristics of each territory (Figure 3).

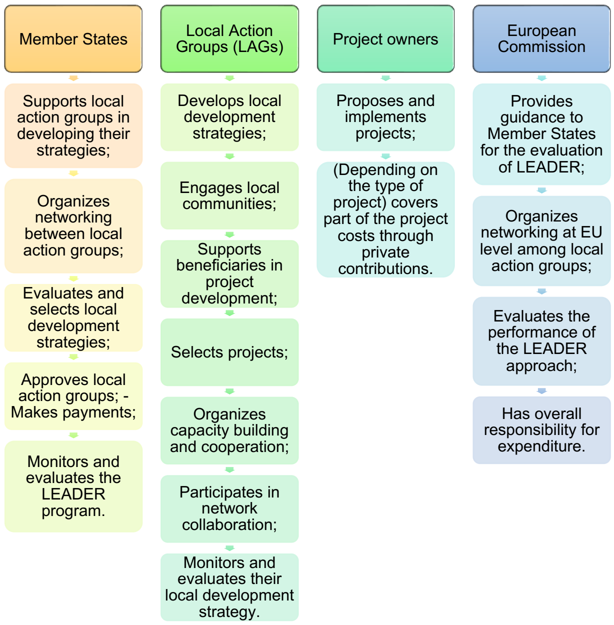

Figure 3 **Actors and responsibilities in the implementation of LEADER**

Within the EAFRD, the main fund financing LEADER, the output indicators focus on the structural dimension (number of LAGs, projects supported, cooperation projects, and types of promoters), while the result indicators are geared towards the impact on the population and employment. The objective was for more than half of the EU's rural population (53.5%) to be covered by local development strategies and for 16.4% to benefit directly from improved services or infrastructure. In addition, the program aimed to create 44,109 jobs, reflecting LEADER's role as a catalyst for local economic development.

With regard to the EMFF, the focus was on the selection of local strategies, training, and cooperation between local action groups in the fisheries sector, without defining additional indicators at European level (European Court of Auditors, 2013).

For the ERDF and ESF, the approach was more integrative, with CLLD being incorporated into the general objectives of the funds. While the

ERDF did not set specific indicators, the ESF explicitly targeted job creation and maintenance, linking project implementation to social inclusion and employment objectives (European Court of Auditors, 2020).

During the 2014–2020 programming period, Member States had the flexibility to choose between two funding models to support LAGs: the single fund approach and the multi-fund approach (Table 1).

Table 1

Funding approaches to support LAGs (2014–2020)

Type of approach	Main features	Member States that have applied	Funds used	Types of LAGs supported
Single fund	- EU funding channelled through a single fund - One fund designated as the "main fund" for administrative costs	Belgium, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, France, Croatia, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Finland	EAFRD, EMFF, ERDF, ESF (separately)	Rural LAGs (EAFRD), Fisheries FLAGs (EMFF), Urban LAGs (ERDF), Urban LAGs (ESF)
Multiple funds	- EU funding combined from several funds - Aim: better coordination between rural, urban, and fisheries areas - Main fund designated for administrative costs	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Austria (pilot in 2 regions), Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden, United Kingdom	Combinations: EAFRD + EMFF / EAFRD + ERDF / EAFRD + ERDF + ESF / EAFRD + EMFF + ERDF + ESF	Rural-fisheries LAGs, Rural-urban LAGs

For the period 2014–2020, the European Union allocated approximately 9.1 billion EUR to LEADER and CLLD, most of which (over 75%) came from the EAFRD. This confirms that rural development has remained the central pillar of the program, with rural LAGs being the main beneficiaries of the funding (Figure 4).

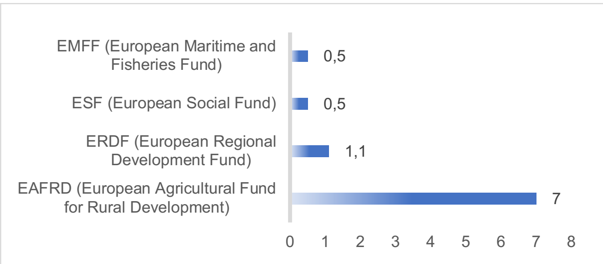

Figure 4 **EU funding for LEADER/DLRC (2014–2020) (billion EUR)**

In addition, the ERDF (1.1 billion EUR) and the ESF (0.5 billion EUR) contributed to extending the approach to urban areas and supporting projects with a social impact, particularly in the field of employment and inclusion. The EMFF (0.5 billion EUR) specifically supported fishing areas, demonstrating the applicability of the LEADER method in territories with distinct needs.

Expenditure focused on three main areas: preparatory support (for training and mobilizing communities), LAG management (covering operating costs and animation activities), and project implementation and cooperation. This structure reflects the fact that LEADER is not just a mechanism for financing investments, but also a complex process of building social capital and strengthening local governance capacity.

During the 2014–2020 programming period, the total allocation planned for the LEADER initiative at EU and UK level was 9.93 billion EUR, of which 4.26 billion EUR (approximately 43% of the total) had actually been spent by the end of 2020. This discrepancy can be explained by the duration of project implementation and administrative delays associated with the transition periods between two financial frameworks (Table 2).

Table 2

LEADER expenditure by type of cost (2014–2020, million euros)

Member State/Region	Training costs	Administrative costs	Cooperation activities	Project-related costs	Total
Czech Republic	–	–*	0,2	64,5	64,7
Germany (Saxony)	–	19,4	2,5	200,5	222,4
Estonia	1,6	12,5	2,3	48,8	65,2
Ireland	1,3	44,3	0,8	77,6	124,0
greece	3,2	43,1	0,2	46,4	92,9
Austria	–	33,8	8,0	68,7	110,5
Portugal (mainland)	1,4	36,0	0,5	36,0	73,9
Romania	2,0	77,3	0,1	268,4	347,8
Slovakia	1,1	0,4	0	0	1,5
Sweden	3,4	28,3	3,2	63,0	97,9
Total (selected countries)	14,0	295,1	17,8	873,9	1 200,8
Total ME	67,4	1 038,0	98,6	3 054,4	4 258,4

Romania reported total expenditure of 347.8 million EUR, ranking first among the selected countries and regions. Of this amount, 268.4 million EUR (77%) went to its own and beneficiaries' projects; 77.3 million EUR (22%) went to administrative and operating costs; preparation costs were relatively low (2.0 million EUR), and cooperation was marginal (0.1 million EUR). This shows that Romania focused its efforts on direct project funding, but with a significant administrative component and very low participation in cooperation.

Analysis of the implementation of the LEADER approach shows that most Member States have established relevant procedures for the approval of LAGs, but in some cases there were no minimum quality requirements at the time of selection of local development strategies. From this perspective, the role of Member States is essential, as they are responsible for supporting LAGs both through preparatory funding and by establishing clear quality guidelines and criteria. Subsequently, the process of evaluating and approving strategies must be transparent, fair, and carried out within the established deadlines to ensure that only viable and well-founded strategies receive funding (Nardone G. *et al*, 2010).

On the other hand, LAGs had the task of involving local communities in the development of strategies through a series of participatory methods, such as training sessions, workshops, and seminars, capitalizing on local knowledge and experience (Thuesen A.A., 2010). While shortcomings in community involvement were reported in previous periods, the current programming phase has seen a significant improvement, with all selected LAGs conducting consultation activities and developing strategies based on the bottom-up principle.

The approval process involved defining clear criteria at Member State level, launching calls for selection, evaluating and, where necessary, revising strategies. According to the European framework, the selection of LAGs had to be completed by the end of 2017, i.e. two years after the start of spending in other areas of the Common Agricultural Policy. Most Member States managed to complete this process in 2016, but Ireland and the Czech Republic experienced delays, and Slovakia only completed the approval process in March 2018 (Figure 5).

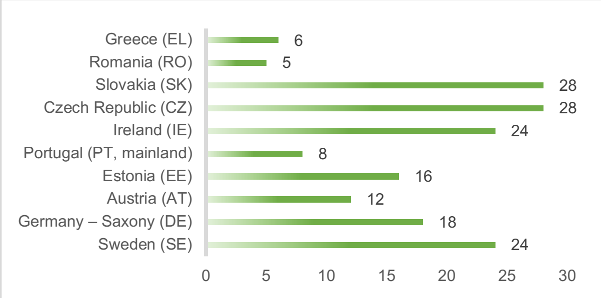

Figure 5 **Duration of the LAG approval process (in months)**

Compared to other Member States, Romania stands out for its extremely rapid LAG approval process, which was completed in just five months. This performance is all the more remarkable given that the European average for the duration of the process exceeded one year, and in some countries (such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic) approval took over 28 months. This efficiency can be explained by several factors specific to the Romanian institutional and administrative framework. First, Romania already had experience gained during the 2007–2013 programming period, when LAGs were first established at national level. This experience enabled the managing authorities to have clearer procedures, models of good practice, and a consolidated regulatory framework, which significantly reduced the time needed to evaluate and approve strategies. Secondly, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, together with the Agency for Rural Investment Financing, organized information sessions, workshops, and methodological guidelines from the preliminary stages onwards to support LAGs in developing local development strategies. These preparatory measures contributed to improving the quality of the documentation submitted, reducing the need for subsequent revisions and speeding up the approval process.

In Romania, the implementation of the LEADER approach through LAGs played a key role in mobilizing rural communities and directing European resources towards the specific needs of each area. However, a comparison of the indicators set at European level with the reported results highlights a number of national specificities:

1. Coverage of the rural population Romania has exceeded the European target for the coverage of the rural population targeted by local development strategies. This shows that the process of setting up and approving LAGs was effective, managing to include a significant part of the rural territory in the LEADER funding mechanisms. In fact, Romania stood out for the speed of the LAG approval process (only 5 months), which favored

the expansion of the network and the strengthening of institutional capacities.

2. Benefits in terms of services and infrastructure: although the coverage rate of the population is high, the indicator for the rural population actually benefiting from improved services and infrastructure remained below the target (13.54% compared to 16.4%). This discrepancy can be explained by the complexity of infrastructure projects and delays in implementation.

3. Job creation: one of the largest gaps is in the number of jobs created: only 13,337 reported compared to the target of 44,109. In Romania, many projects financed through LAGs focused on modernizing infrastructure or community services, having an indirect impact on employment, but less on the immediate creation of new jobs. Also, small-scale economic projects and the focus on micro-enterprises limited the potential for short-term employment.

The integration of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) into local development financing was one of the main challenges of the 2014-2020 programming period. The five funding streams are governed by distinct rules, which has increased the complexity of the coordination and management process at Member State level. In this context, European legislation (Regulation No 1303/2013) explicitly emphasized the need for effective institutional cooperation to avoid overlaps and generate synergies between programs and projects.

The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy after 2020 provides for the integration of the two main CAP funds – the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund and the EAFRD – through the CAP strategic plans. However, this approach risks reducing the direct links between rural development and the other three major funds (ERDF, ESF+, EMFF), which could diminish the integrated nature of the funding.

According to the Commission, the use of multiple funds within LAGs should have had positive effects, such as diversifying the sectors involved, attracting a wider range of stakeholders, and strengthening local cooperation. In addition, by combining financial resources, local action groups would have been able to respond more comprehensively to the complex needs of their communities.

However, the available data show that only 813 of the 3,337 LAGs approved at European level in the 2014-2020 period (approximately 24%) actually used multi-fund financing. Most combined EAFRD, ERDF, and ESF, but only nine LAGs across the Union (eight in Sweden and one in Poland) managed to access all four available funds (Table 3).

Table 3

LAGs financed through a single fund and through multiple funds (2014–2020)

Type of funding	Number of LAGs	Observations
Single fund – EAFRD	**2.206**	Represents the largest part of European LAGs; exclusively rural development funding.
Single fund – EMFF	**265**	Targeted at fisheries areas and coastal communities.
Other single funds	**53**	LAGs supported exclusively by other, less common funds.
Multiple funds – EAFRD + ERDF + ESF	**≈ 450**	The most common combination of multiple funding, for integrated projects (infrastructure, economic development and social inclusion).
Multiple funds – EAFRD + ERDF	**≈ 220**	Targeted at infrastructure projects and the modernisation of rural territories.
Multiple funds – ERDF + ESF	**≈ 90**	Combination intended to link economic investments with social interventions.
Multiple funds – EAFRD + EMFF	**≈ 50**	Targeting mixed rural and coastal territories.
Other combinations (all four funds available)	**9**	Exceptional cases: 8 in Sweden and 1 in Poland.

The vast majority of LAGs (66% of the total) operated with a single fund (EAFRD), reflecting the predominantly rural nature of the LEADER program. The 265 LAGs funded exclusively from the EMFF demonstrate the openness of the approach to fishing areas, but their number is small compared to rural areas. Approximately 24% of LAGs (813 of the total) used a combination of funds, better responding to complex needs.

The EAFRD-ERDF-ESF combination was the most widely used, as it allows for a balanced approach: investment in infrastructure (ERDF), social support and employment (ESF), and rural development (EAFRD).

The single fund model remained predominant, but the multi-fund model opened up important opportunities for LAGs that wanted to address local development in a more comprehensive way. Romania, choosing to implement this model (in the EAFRD–ERDF–ESF combination), was among the countries that tried to maximize local impact, despite administrative challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study highlight the essential role of the Leader approach and LAGs in the dynamics of rural development in Romania, in line with European trends. First, the analysis shows that Leader has evolved from an experimental tool into an integrated mechanism of the Common Agricultural Policy, with a structural and social impact on rural communities. Thus, the evolution of LAGs reflects their ability to mobilize local resources, stimulate public-private partnerships, and promote participatory governance that responds to the specificities of each territory.

Secondly, Romania's experience shows particular speed and efficiency in the process of approving LAGs, which has allowed the network to expand and include a significant percentage of the rural population in local development strategies. However, the discrepancies between European objectives and national results, especially in terms of jobs created and the degree of infrastructure improvement, show that, beyond institutional success, the implementation challenges remain considerable.

Another relevant aspect is the choice of the multi-fund financing model, which, although more complex from an administrative point of view, has given Romania the opportunity to link infrastructure investments with social and economic measures. However, the low level of cooperation and participation in transnational joint projects points to an area for improvement in the future.

Currently, in the 2021–2027 programming period, LAGs continue to be supported as key instruments in the transition to sustainable and resilient agriculture. They are not just fund management structures, but true hubs of local governance, capable of transforming European policies into solutions adapted to rural realities. Therefore, strengthening administrative capacity, diversifying the rural economy, and integrating environmental and innovation objectives remain strategic priorities for maximizing the impact of the Leader approach in Romania.

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