

STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR DISPOSAL OF SOCIAL DISEQUILIBRIUM FROM THE RURAL AREA THROUGH GROUPS OF LOCAL ACTION

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Abstract

The paper tackles the concept of local development and establishes methods of strategy development through the LEADER program as main instrument for the GAL Rediu Prăjeni zone in order to eliminate the social disequilibrium of this area in comparison to the urban areas.

The paper brings to foreground the way in which it is implemented a local strategy within LEADER axis, which involves great importance and is also effective, because the local development is community-led, which allows to the local partners (public, private, civil society) to achieve realistic local development strategies, based on the requirements and priorities of rural territory taken into study. The Romanian rural area has numerous shortcomings, these representing also the reason of disparities between urban and rural areas with all their components: rural economy, demographic potential, health, school, culture, etc. To reduce these disparities, one solution is the development and implementation of integrated development strategies by local communities, taking as a starting point the identified needs and endogenous potential of rural areas.

Key words: strategies, LEADER, GAL, social disequilibrium, rural area

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research methods used in the study were structured according to the stages already followed, from the drawing up of the plan in order to draw the conclusions and draft the proposed solutions for this field of activity.

In the preparation of the plan of the research, it was taken into account the level of development of territorial administrative units of the Rediu-Prăjeni LAG, as well as the strategic priorities of the territory taken into study in order to eliminate the social disequilibrium in comparison to the urban areas.

There were consulted databases from our country (eg National Institute of Statistics) and scientific papers or reports of public institutions.

As a technique of gathering information obtained in this work we used the explicative case study, because we wanted a complete and in-depth investigation of Rediu-Prăjeni LAG.

For the preparation of Local Development Strategy for 2014-2020 of the LAG, there was needed a detailed analysis of the existing situation in the territory, the population, environmental conditions, demographic conditions, economic activities, existent environmental, cultural, social and educational infrastructure

The SWOT analysis is the result of collaboration with local stakeholders from public, private and civil society.

We used statistical data, databases of UAT from the area, the strategies of the communes belonging to this territory, statistical data of the County Department of Statistics of Iasi and Botosani.

Based on these data, we can establish corrective measures to the negative findings, and extending the positive ones, to conduct integrated development strategies by local communities, taking as a starting point the needs identified locally and endogenous potential of space areas. (Brezuleanu S., 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Involving all local decision makers in the development of their areas will contribute to the dynamic development supported by a local development strategy developed and implemented locally and administered by the representatives of the Local Action Groups (LAG) who will represent the interests of people in their respective territories to improve strategy and actions that are to be implemented. The fundamental concept behind the LEADER approach is based on the diversity of Europe's rural areas, rural development strategies are more effective and efficient if decided and

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implemented locally by businesses and local decision makers, using clear and transparent procedures and is supported by the relevant public administrations and by the necessary technical assistance in order to transmit the good practices.

The difference between LEADER and other more traditional rural policy measures is that it indicates 'how' to proceed rather than 'what' it needs to be done. The LEADER approach can be summed up in seven essential features. They are described separately, but it is important to address them as a single instrument.

Rediu Prăjeni LAG territory is located in the North East of the country, namely the North East of Iasi county, covering 8.60% of Iasi County and 0.77% of the Botosani County, with a total area of 505.28 km². The Rediu-Prăjeni LAG territory is mostly located in Iasi, at a rate of 93.05% (being part of the following communes - GROPNIȚA, MOVILENI, PLUGARI, REDIU, ROMÂNEȘTI, ȘIPOSE, VLĂDENI and VALEA LUPULUI and the rest of 6.95% in Botosani county (Prăjeni Commune, respectively), as shown in figure 1.



Figure 1 Location of Rediu-Prăjeni LAG

The area of territories belonging to the 9 communes that are included in Rediu- Prăjeni LAG sums 50.528 ha. Rediu-Prăjeni LAG territory is based on the principle of continuity and homogeneity, according to attached maps and descriptions. No locality is included in the territory of another LAG.

The total areas by category of use of each municipality are presented in Table 1 which shows that the largest share of categories of use is represented by 42120 ha of agricultural land, which represents 83.35% of the total Rediu Prăjeni LAG.

Table 1

Areas of communes that belong to GAL Rediu-Prăjeni

| Nr. crt. | Commune | Arable | Agricultural of which: | | | | | | Forests | Waters and pools | Constr. uctions | Ways of communic | Degraded |
|----------|---------------|--------|------------------------|---------|--------|------------|---------|----------|---------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------|
| | | | arable | astures | meadow | viney ards | orchard | non-prod | | | | | |
| 1 | Gropnița | 6.020 | 4.091 | 1.488 | 307 | 134 | 0 | 1.862 | 254 | 1.029 | 158 | 124 | 297 |
| 2 | Movileni | 6.667 | 4.200 | 1.975 | 415 | 77 | 0 | 1.379 | 192 | 434 | 160 | 162 | 431 |
| 3 | Plugari | 5.177 | 3.314 | 1.446 | 219 | 36 | 162 | 638 | 52 | 59 | 83 | 92 | 352 |
| 4 | Rediu | 3.883 | 2.066 | 1.108 | 516 | 16 | 26 | 334 | 20 | 12 | 131 | 49 | 122 |
| 5 | Românești | 3.502 | 2.202 | 917 | 329 | 54 | 0 | 538 | 8 | 42 | 94 | 92 | 302 |
| 6 | Șipote | 6.545 | 4.399 | 1.867 | 124 | 111 | 44 | 1.224 | 36 | 281 | 162 | 141 | 604 |
| 7 | Valea Lupului | 667 | 390 | 33 | 50 | 164 | 28 | 363 | 114 | 2 | 243 | 0 | 4 |
| 8 | Vlădeni | 6.445 | 3.823 | 2.172 | 382 | 20 | 48 | 1.774 | 463 | 609 | 155 | 135 | 412 |
| 9 | Prăjeni | 3.214 | 2.338 | 763 | 74 | 35 | 4 | 296 | 86 | 52 | 75 | 54 | 29 |
| | TOTAL | 42.120 | 26.823 | 11.769 | 2416 | 647 | 312 | 8.408 | 1.225 | 2.520 | 1.261 | 849 | 2.553 |

Of the 163 LAGs that were financed by nonrefundable grants in the 2007-2013 financial programming, the Agency for Financing Rural Investment (AFIR), included the LAG Association Rediu-Prăjeni Region ranking second in the country for the quality of the strategy submitted with a score of 98 points. The amount paid for financing was 2,850,000 EUR of which - 300,000

Euro was set for the operation of the Association, and the remaining Euro 2,550,000 was distributed to potential beneficiaries of the measures set out in the strategy.

A LAG should associate public and private partners, and represent the interests of the association, drawn from the different social-economic sectors in the area. At decision-making

level, the private partners and the associations must make up at least 50% of the local partnership. LAGs may be set up ad hoc to access LEADER support, or may be based on previously existing partnerships. Endowed with a team of specialists and decision-making powers, the LAG represents a model of organization that can influence development strategies in rural areas in a positive way.

The experience shows that several types of LAG have been developed starting from these common characteristics, as a result of various

forms of political organization and institutional regional and national varying degrees of autonomy regarding project approval and their financial management.

The local action groups decide the direction and content of the local rural development strategy and make decisions on the different projects to be funded.

At LAG level there were contracted and implemented a number of 54 projects as highlighted in *figure 2*.

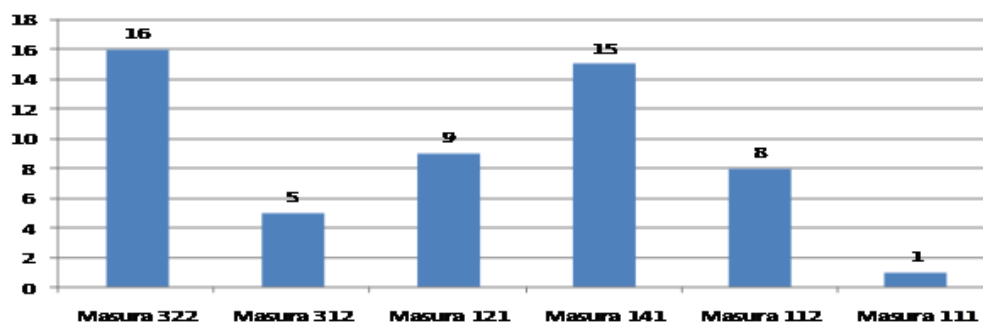


Figure 2 Number of projects contracted by the LAG during the PNDR 2007-2013

Figure 2 shows that the largest number of projects were contracted through Measure 322 “*Village renewal and development, improving basic services for rural economy and population and upgrading of the rural heritage*” especially in the communes Valea Lupului, Reditu, Șipote, Românești, Movileni, Plugari and Groznița from Iași County, and in Prăjeni commune from Botoșani County.

Another measure of the PNDR which was accessed by local decision makers from the LAG was Measure 141 “*Supporting semi-subsistence agricultural farms*” through which 15 projects were eligible in Reditu, Românești, Movileni, Șipote and Vlădeni communes from Iasi County, and Prăjeni commune from Botosani County.

Also due to Measure 121 “*Modernization of agricultural exploitations*” have been submitted and approved nine projects in the Movileni, Groznița, Șipote and Vlădeni communes from Iasi and Measure 112 “*Settling Young Farmers*” have been completed 8 projects in Valea Lupului, Reditu, Șipote, and Vlădeni communes from Iasi County.

Basically, the development of rural territories covered by the LEADER approach will be scheduled and coordinated by local entrepreneurs who will be the decision makers and who will also bear the responsibility of the long-term evolution. Following the successful implementation of the strategy, the LAG has obtained the performance of ranking itself on the 10th place in the country (out of 163 LAGs) from the payments made by the AFIR to the

beneficiaries, respectively 1,138,459 EUR and number 51 in the country (from 82 LAGs selected for session 2) the outstanding amounts - 86.61% grade absorption of the total value of the Local Development Strategy (SDL).

In order to activate as an association, i. e. GAL, according to the European legislation, there is stipulated that any entity that wants to form a partnership is absolutely necessary to create a group of associates formed from both partners working in the public and private sectors. That is why Reditu-Prăjeni GAL Association conducted this partnership as follows: 29 members of which are 9 ATU's (communes), 5 cooperatives and associations and 15 businesses. In terms of representation, 31% of members are local authorities and the remaining 69% are representatives of the private sector and civil society.

According to the diagnostic, the vast majority of private partners in the association are focused on agriculture, the high interest being towards the investments in terms of modernization of farms and young farmers settling.

The relevant domain in this region is agriculture so within the partnership there are present: „Țiglău Modruz” Agricultural Cooperative, “Ceres” Agricultural Society, SC “Pomicola Recea Plugari” SRL Group of Producers, “Trifoiul Movileni” Association, “Managementul Vieții” Association (these associative forms aimed at representing and promoting the specific professional interests of its members, as well as the economic, technical and legal actions including the cooperative shares of its members).

Also, private entities such as SC VIC START 2003 SRL, SC „LA BUNICI” Farm SRL and SC ROGIPA SRL can be successful representatives of the agricultural sector in the region by developing the production activities, as well as the increase of the machinery park by accessing some specific measures to this sector of activity.

As regards the non-agricultural domain, a new concept that each one speculates to be an innovative one and beneficial to the association level by developing and initiating some projects such as veterinary pharmacies, human drugstores, agricultural services, medical cabinet etc., they all bring value to the association when developing and implementing the strategy. Representatives in the association that can be mentioned: SC MAD SRL, SC CARDIODENT MEDICAL CENTER SRL, SC "LA Haidau" etc.

The public entities aimed at developing small-scale infrastructure on the territory of the Rădăuți-Prăjeni LAG Region, including some social and economic measures, as well as large-scale development of high-speed broadband technology, which sadly lacked in many localities.

In LAG territory there are protected sites that belong to Natura 2000. Among the LAG partners such as Corona Foundation (with working point in Movileni commune), whose purpose is to determine, develop and carry out programs to develop local community in all economic, social, cultural, educational, sports, youth and the environment sectors, including sustainable development, environmental protection and biodiversity through the implementation of programs to determine sustainable management in protected areas.

Corona Foundation and Gloria Romanian Sports Association develop programs to support the interests of young people in society through active involvement in activities that require actions involving young people.

At the same time, Corona Foundation represents the interests of women through a series of projects aimed at preventing gender discrimination on the labor market in Botosani and Iasi counties, ensuring equal access and professional development.

All partner entities involved in the development and modernization of the territory by investing in social, educational, cultural and basic infrastructure.

These types of investments contribute to raising the living standards of the region Rădăuți-Prăjeni LAG Region.

For the preparation of Local Development Strategy for 2014-2020 of the LAG, there was needed a detailed analysis of the existing situation in the territory, regarding the population, environmental conditions, demographic conditions, economic activities, infrastructure, environmental, cultural, social, educational establishments existing in administrative territorial units (ATU commune).

The SWOT analysis is the result of collaboration with local stakeholders from public, private and civil society.

We used statistical data, databases of ATU from the area, the strategies of the communes from the territory, statistical data of the Department of Statistics Iasi and Botosani Counties (*tables 2, 3, 4*).

Table 2

| SWOT Analysis (territory – infrastructure – environment) | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TERRITORY – INFRASTRUCTURE – ENVIRONMENT | |
| STRENGTHS | WEAKNESSES |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homogeneous territory, located 2 km from Iasi; • Large areas of land with lakes and ponds; • High quality of the soil (fertility); • Good soil fertility; • Area has a rich natural and biological material - flora and fauna; • Existence of Natura 2000 sites. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of degraded forests, deforested; • Rural and county roads, (DJ 282) inadequate; • Insufficient leisure and cultural services; • Poorly equipped local public services; • Poor equipment of local public services; • Inadequate educational and cultural infrastructure |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of modernized road infrastructure: DJ282 (road connecting the county of Botosani and Iasi County passes through Vlădeni Șipote, Plugari and Prăjeni localities); • Existence of heritage buildings and historic monuments. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Damaged heritage buildings; • Lack of awareness by children, youth and adults of the importance of natural heritage; • The gap to urban areas; |
| OPPORTUNITIES | THREATS |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest of the European Union for projects aimed at rural areas; • Geographical situation on the eastern border of the European Union; • Development of rural tourism; • Existence of infrastructure projects (sewer, asphalt roads, gas and water); • Easy access to county of residence; • Quality of the agricultural land; • Accessing European funds; • Accessing funds for road infrastructure / social / educational / health development. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of infrastructure services and utilities; • Changes in the social, economic and natural environment; • Environmental pollution; • Destruction of water quality; • Risk of flooding. |

Table 3

SOWT Analysis (economic activities)

| ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| STRENGTHS | WEAKNESSES |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of associative farming; • Existence of markets around the villages located close to the city; • Existence of categories of diversified land use (vineyards, orchards, pasture, grains); • Operation of small size farms; • Activities performed by merging agricultural land; • Potential for production of organic products; • Satisfactory supply of the population with food and non-food products; • Agricultural sector, particularly crop and cereals (maize, sunflower, wheat), along with crop production (sugar beet); • Sector important in livestock (sheep, cattle, pigs, horses and poultry); • Existence of the agricultural products processing units | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low entrepreneurship; • Limited number of alternative employment, as well as additional income sources from non-agricultural labor force to focus mainly on agricultural activities; • Low number of enterprises carrying out production activities; • Labour migration abroad; • Lack of organized form of farming; • Aging of orchards and vineyards; • Non-agricultural activities developed in a low weight; • Activities crafted with great potential in a low weight; • Lack of interest in the preservation and development of traditional activities in the area; |
| OPPORTUNITIES | THREATS |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financing in the U.A.T. for non-agricultural activities; • Development of tourism and agro-tourism by setting up centers for rest, leisure, a.s.o.; • Funds for setting up farms specialized in raising sheep, cattle, centers of collection, recovery and primary processing of animal products (milk, meat, wool, hides, etc.). • Accessing investments in vegetable crops by setting specific glass houses, • Funds for buying modern technologies for fruit tree growing and viticulture; • Interest in the young generations to practice farming; | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of natural and traditional element; • Develop unsustainable agriculture; • Loss of access to financing; • Unsustainable businesses; • Decrease in added value and competitiveness locally |

Table4

SWOT Analysis (social, institutional, cultural and educational organization)

| STRENGTHS | WEAKNESSES |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening of ATU towards partnerships; • Existence of associations: „Managementul Vietii” Association, „Trifoiul Movileni” Association; „Gloria Românești” Sport Association, „Corona” Foundation. • The existence of producer groups and agricultural cooperatives: SC „Pomicola Recea-Plugari” SRL, Cooperativa Agricolă „Țiglău Modruz”. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited number of producer groups; • Limited number of cooperative that sell products; • Reduced number of organizations and strong local NGOs that are involved in preservation of cultural identity; • Heritage buildings are in an advanced state of decay; • Poor educational and cultural infrastructure; • The gap to urban areas; • Lack of social centers (social integration and / or for the benefit of underprivileged people). |
| OPPORTUNITIES | THREATS |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation and promotion LAG; • Organization of GAL level in various professional associations; • Exchanges of experience, fellowship between communes; • Creation of NGOs and fundraising; • Financing programs to rehabilitate cultural centers; • Protecting nature reserves via PNDR and Natura 2000; • Recovery of cultural traditions in the area by accessing European funding programs; • Proximity to a major academic center in Europe; • Proximity to advanced medical centers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discontinuation of social programs; • Loss of traditions, customs and traditional handicraft activities; • Decreased number of pupils; • Decreased interest for cultural, recreational and sport activities; • Difficulty in accessing grants because of lack of knowledge in the field. |

The SWOT analysis presents in detail each aspect of the territory, therefore, being in accordance with diagnosis analysis. Thus all the elements that are found in Part I (presentation of territory - diagnosis analysis) are made within the SWOT matrix and allow the correct identification of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats aimed at the territory of Rediu Prăjeni LAG Region.

The needs arising from this analysis are:

a) Promoting economic development in rural areas by improving the services to the public, encouraging efforts to protect the environment, encourage improvements in road, social, educational infrastructure, encouraging and promoting innovative actions, encouraging measures to improve ICT infrastructure, supporting

non-agricultural economic activities, modernizing businesses, conserving cultural and architectural heritage.

b) Increasing farm viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture in all regions and promoting innovative agricultural technologies and sustainable forest management through: increasing productivity in agriculture, mechanized agriculture, increasing the quality of agricultural and non agricultural products, encouraging and promoting innovative actions , support for semi-subsistence farms, raising agricultural training, rejuvenation of farm managers.

c) Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas by: encouraging and promoting innovative actions,

encouraging cooperation, fostering knowledge transfer and exchange of information.

When preparing the Local Development Strategy consultations were held between all relevant partners (public, private, NGOs) of the LAG territory, resulting in nine animation activities, one for each UAT and three meetings of the partners in a relevant Territorial Administrative Unit.

The methodology for animation in order to develop a LEADER application in the PNDR 2014 - 2020 was conducted in two stages: the technical-administrative organization and project management and field trips to gather information to develop the Local Development Strategy by involving local communities of the 9 communes.

The results of the involvement of local communities in developing the strategy were represented by: attracting new relevant partnerships for the implementation of Local Development Strategies; a number of 9 mayors informed and prepared for the LEADER - RDP 2014-2020 approach; identifying the needs of the LAG territory and transpose them into financing measures; developing a Local Development Strategy (SDL) for the territory covered by the Rediu-Prăjeni LAG region and its validation, in terms of objectives, priorities and areas of intervention.

So, all the local key members were involved in establishing the priorities and objectives of the group. Therefore, the development strategy of Rediu - Prăjeni LAG Region meets the objectives and priorities arising from identifying the main problems and opportunities of the LEADER region.

CONCLUSIONS

In drafting the local development strategy interested entities have continuously been involved, both public and private and NGOs, from the territorial area of Rediu - Prăjeni LAG Region.

This strategy helps to increase the economic, cultural and tourist point of view of the region and the most significant opportunities for area which can be found in the following objectives:

- Increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of the Rediu - Prăjeni area by reducing migration of population, especially young people;
- Improvement of social infrastructure, protection and conservation of natural and cultural heritage in rural areas;
- Encouraging the initiatives for the local development with a high degree of territorial socio-economic integration;
- The contribution to branching non-agricultural economic activities and encourage small entrepreneurs from the LAG territory on accessing European funds;

For the new PNDR 2014-2020 programming, Rediu – Prăjeni LAG Region Association comes with fresh forces, tackling the LEADER topic from several perspectives, which contributes to creating a strong strategy, with high marks for evaluation.

Implementation of LEADER strategy led to the identification of those framework objectives which played a beneficial role among the communities belonging to the association by increasing the economic growth of the area, creating jobs, disappearing gender, ethnicity, religion discrimination.

The strategy focused on the strong analysis of all factors that have been found and all the opportunities and threats that led to the development of the framework for action, for which it got a score of 77.5 points out of 100. This score resulted from summing up the priorities that led to the creation of the selection criteria.

Finally, we believe that this strategy will lead to a new more efficient 2014-2020 PNDR programming and with results well above the previous ones by financing a double number of projects under the measures proposed by the Rediu Prăjeni LAG region in the strategy that was finished and submitted for approval.

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