

The qualitative results of the LEADER program in Romania in the view of the LAG representatives

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Abstract

As Strong (1992) states, sustainable development is a complex process that involves profound changes at multiple levels within communities, and these changes are taking place not only economically, politically, but also socially. The LEADER program is one of the instruments of the European Union that aims at achieving this goal through its actions, namely the sustainable development of disadvantaged rural communities by introducing changes, both quantitative (economic) and qualitative (social). Regarding the qualitative changes, the research carried out so far on the LEADER program underline the merit of this tool of being able to contribute to achieving a better governance through the specific bottom-up approach. However, to what extent has LEADER managed to bring these social changes in the Romanian rural area in the 10 years since its introduction in this country? The deep disparities between rural and urban areas and the acute problems generated by the poor governance of rural communities, make Romania a good case study for assessing the qualitative contribution of the LEADER program in sustainable development, this being the purpose of the present paper. Thus, the study addresses this direction by evaluating the perception of the LEADER associations representatives in Romania regarding the qualitative changes brought by the program at the level of the beneficiary communities, this being the main objective pursued. The method approached consisted in a questionnaire structured on the 7 principles of the LEADER program addressed to a number of 150 Romanian LAGs. The results highlight a predominantly positive image of the LEADER program in the vision of the 150 associations surveyed, the main qualitative change generated being the development of collaborative relations between local actors and increasing their level of involvement in community issues, which lead to better local governance. However, the change generated so far is still shallow and LEADER didn't turned out to have enough strength to produce a visible social impact reflected in an increasing level of development of the beneficiary rural communities.

Keywords: rural communities, LEADER program, sustainable development, social impact, LAGs perception

Objective and contribution of the paper

The capacity of the LEADER program to stimulate sustainable development has been confirmed by several authors which have a predominant positive image over the European program (Lopolito et al, 2011; Foronda-Robles, 2018; Esparcia et al., 2015; Bosworth et al, 2016). From the first years of the program's introduction, there was a high interest in evaluating its results and especially in identifying its weaknesses, in the scientific papers being adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods of evaluation. To date, qualitative studies on LEADER have focused mainly on the identification and the separate analysis of the changes brought by the program. Thus, although these studies manage to capture some of the social impact that LEADER can have, do

not provide an overview of all the changes that rural areas can experience as a result of the implementation of the European program. In addition, most of the research conducted so far has focused on the qualitative contribution of LEADER to sustainable development based on the results of case studies or analyzes carried out on a small number of LAGs, which makes it impossible to generalize the stated conclusions. The present study aims to complement the results of previous studies by conducting a broader analysis that will highlight all the qualitative changes manifested in the rural communities of Romania following the implementation of the LEADER program. Also, the high number of associations surveyed regarding the qualitative contribution of the program in the sense of sustainable development, will make the results obtained solid, reliable. Thus, the main objective of this study is to analyze the perception of LEADER associations regarding the qualitative results brought by the European instrument in rural communities, which are assessed by reference to all 7 principles underlying the program.

Methods and data used

In order to assess the perception of the LAGs regarding the qualitative changes brought by the LEADER program in the rural communities, a questionnaire was constructed for the representatives of the LEADER associations. Invented since the 1800s by Sir Francis Galton, the questionnaire is one of the most popular research tools, especially in the case of social studies, qualitative studies. In the case of the present study, the questionnaire was structured on 7 sections and included a number of 21 closed-ended questions and two open-ended ones. Each section addressed issues related to one of the 7 LEADER principles, so that the results obtained could outline a broad perspective on the qualitative achievements of the European financial instrument.

The questionnaire was applied between October and December 2021 on a number of 150 LAGs, chosen at random from the total of 239 LEADER associations in Romania, respecting the weights of the 3 strata resulting from the stratified sampling. Representatives of the sampled LAGs were contacted by e-mail and asked to fill out the questionnaire. For this, the online software Google Forms was used, which facilitated the completion of the questionnaire and the collection of answers. Subsequently, the generated database was processed for easier analysis of the results. Thus, graphs were built to represent in a compact, suggestive way the answers received and to be able to draw a series of conclusions regarding the general perception of the LAG representatives on the qualitative results brought by the LEADER program in the Romanian rural area.

Results

The first section of the applied questionnaire aimed at assessing the LAGs' perception regarding the effectiveness of the new bottom-up approach implemented by the LEADER program in the rural communities. According to the results, 93% of the LAGs surveyed consider the consultation with local actors, specific to the bottom-up approach, as auspicious, this contributing to a large or very large extent to the identification of more efficient solutions (see fig.1) . As for the effectiveness of decisions, the percentage remains at the same high level, with 97% of respondents

considering that the involvement and consultation of local actors has led to more efficient or much more effective decisions.

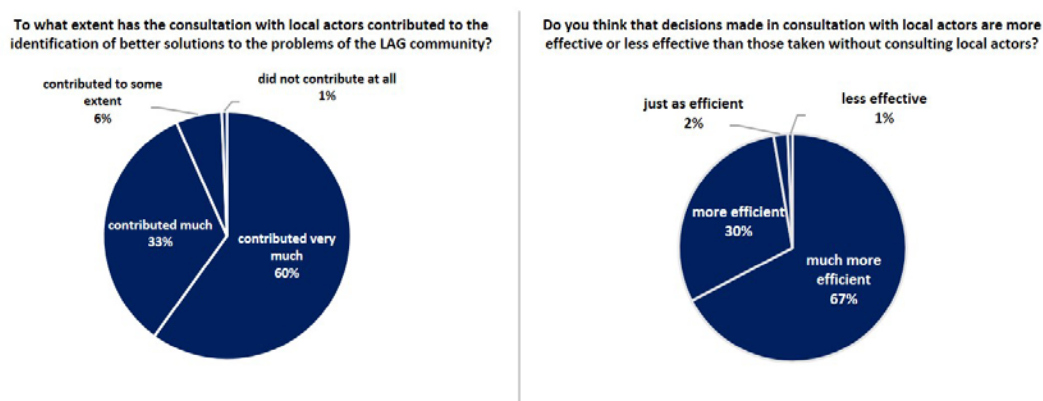


Fig. 1 The LAGs' perception regarding the changes brought by the bottom-up approach

The second principle of the LEADER program refers to the introduction of an area-based approach, the second section of the questionnaire focusing on the appreciation of the LAGs' perception regarding this aspect. According to the answers, the changes brought consist in the implementation of more community development projects, the identification of more efficient solutions and the creation of more united local communities (see fig. 2).

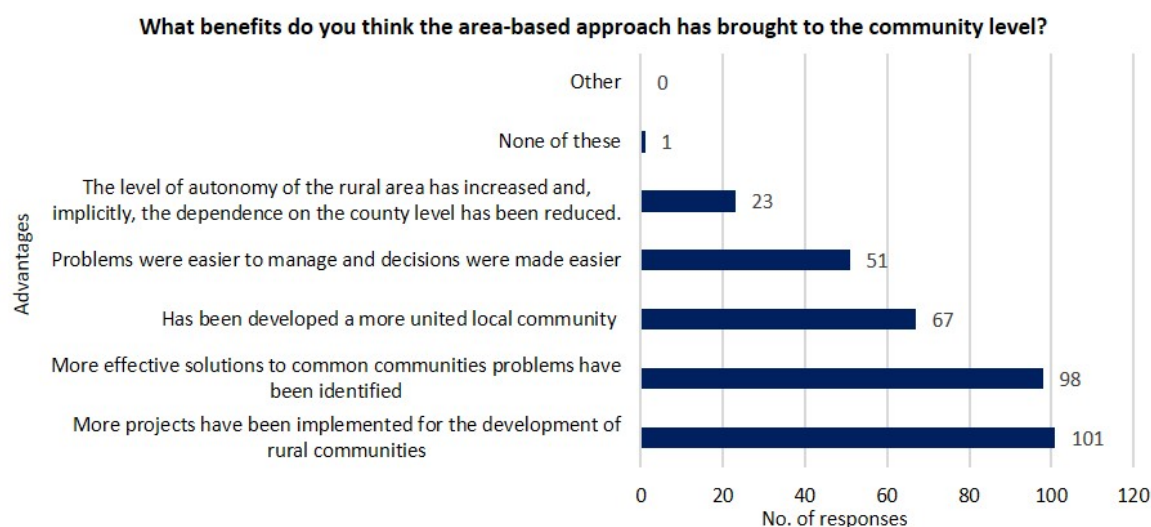


Fig. 2 Perceptions of LAGs regarding the changes generated by the area-based approach

The LAGs formed through the LEADER program are based on the partnership between local actors, public and private ones, and the civil society. Partnership is, in fact, the third principle of the European program. Asked about the existence of these public-private partnerships before the implementation of the European program, 52% of the LAGs stated that these forms of partnership did not exist at the local level before the establishment of LEADER associations (see fig. 3). Only 21% gave an affirmative answer, the small percentage indicating that this practice was not a

widespread one in the Romanian rural area before 2007 and that LEADER can be considered the starting point in the formation of public-private partnerships.

Were there local projects / partnerships between public authorities, private enterprises and civil society before the establishment of the LAG?



Fig. 3 The LAGs' perception regarding the changes generated by the local partnership introduced by LEADER

Integrated and multi-sectoral strategies are the fourth principle of the LEADER program. In order to assess the success of these strategies, the question addressed in the fourth section of the questionnaire aimed at assessing the extent to which the projects implemented through LAGs have

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you think the LAG's projects have contributed to the development of the 3 economic sectors?

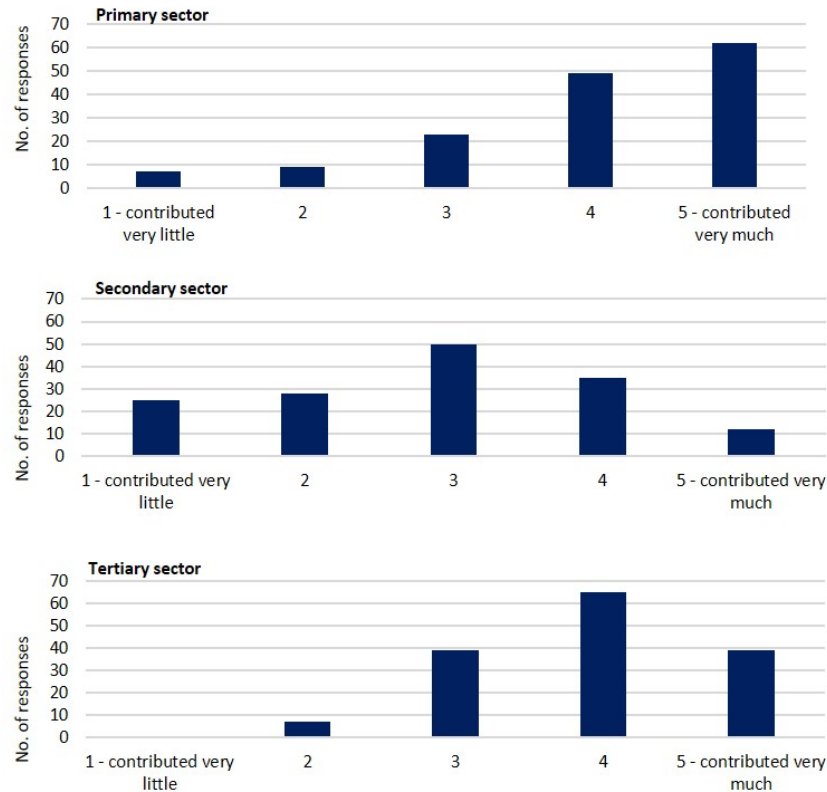


Fig. 4 The LAGs' perception regarding the changes brought by the integrated and multi-sectoral strategies

led to the development of the three economic sectors. According to the respondents, the largest contribution of LEADER projects was at the level of the primary sector, 74% considering that the projects contributed more or very much to its development (see fig. 4). Also, a significant contribution, of medium to high level, was registered in the tertiary sector, on a scale of 1 (very low contribution) to 5 (very high contribution), with 69% of respondents giving grades 3 and 4. As for the secondary sector, LEADER projects seem to have contributed the least to its development, with 68% of respondents giving grades between 1 and 3.

Another principle of the LEADER program is networking. The question addressed to the LAGs in the section dedicated to the 5th LEADER principle focused on appreciating the contribution made by LEADER to the development of relations between local actors and those at higher levels. Thus, on a scale of 1 (contributed very little) to 5 (contributed very much), 77% gave marks in the upper extremity, which underlines that the new territorial bodies formed by LEADER have an important role in creating and maintaining connections between the local level and the national or international level (see fig. 5).

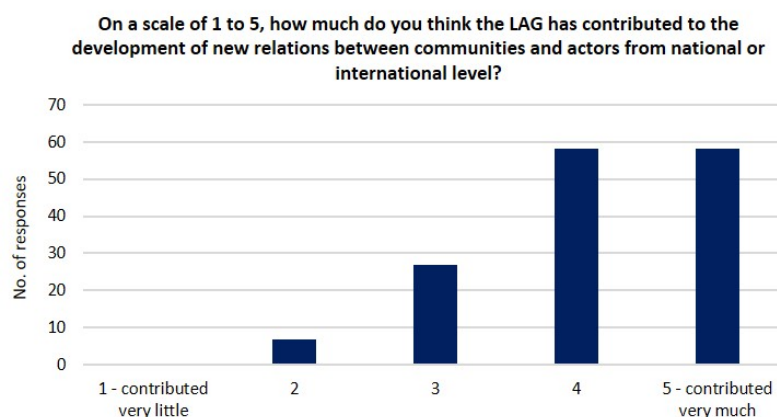


Fig. 5 LAGs' perception regarding the changes generated by the networking between actors

LEADER aims to bring innovation in rural areas, with innovation being another principle behind the program. 54% of respondents consider that much or very many of the implemented projects were innovative (see fig. 6). However, analyzing the results, it can be observed that, in general,

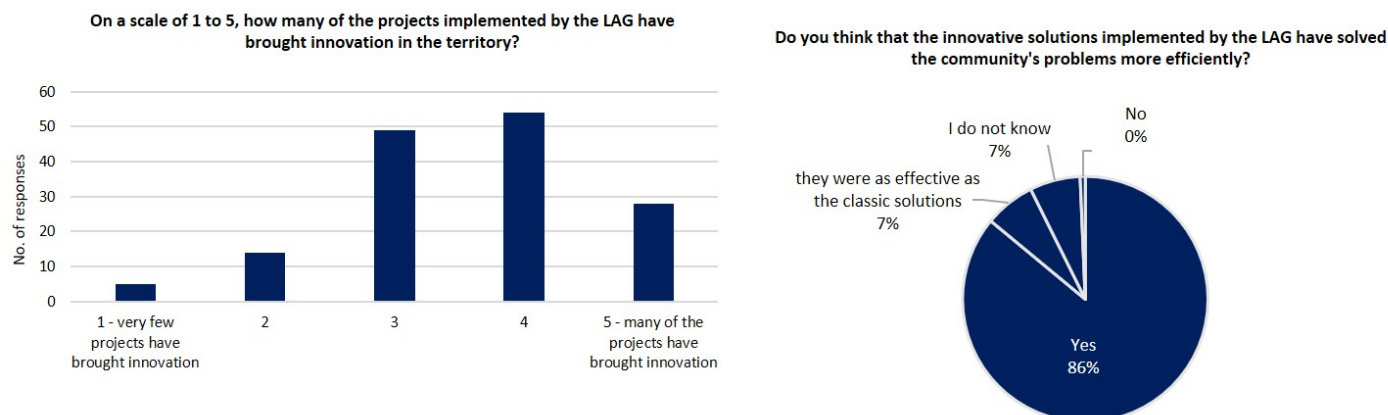


Fig. 6 The LAGs' perception regarding the changes generated by supporting innovation

the tendency of the respondents was to give average grades, which suggests that the degree of innovation of LEADER projects is not the highest. In contrast, innovative solutions adopted by LAGs are seen as more effective in solving community problems as opposed to classic ones, with 86% of respondents stating this (see fig. 6).

A good incentive for innovation is cooperation, the last principle of the LEADER program. The answers outline a predominantly positive perception, 86% of the LAGs considering that the new associations formed by LEADER have contributed much and very much to the improvement of the collaboration relations between the local authorities, the private actors, the civil society and the locals (see fig. 7). Also, 70% of the respondents stated that the LAGs have led to a large and very large extent to the increase of the frequency of cooperation projects between local actors. However, there are also some LAGs that have a less positive view, with 30% of respondents stating that LEADER associations have only contributed to a small, very little or to some extent to the stimulation of cooperation projects.

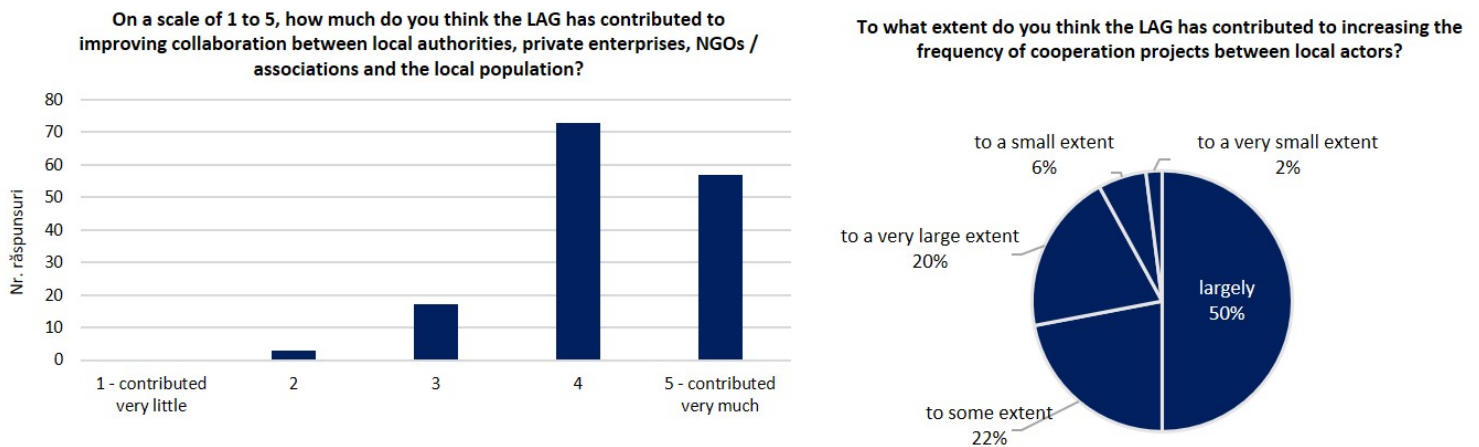


Fig. 7 The LAGs' perception regarding the changes generated by supporting cooperation between actors

Conclusions

The general perception of the LAGs surveyed regarding the social impact of the LEADER program is a predominantly positive one, the qualitative changes brought by the LAGs at the level of the Romanian rural area being numerous in their vision. From the perspective of the 7 LEADER program principles, the changes consist in: increasing the capacity of communities to manage their own problems, creating more united rural communities, stimulating partnership between local actors, developing more effective and better adapted strategies to local needs, developing connections between rural communities, developing social capital, improving collaborative relationships between actors and increasing openness to innovation. All this brings rural communities closer to achieving their goal insofar as, together, these changes create favorable conditions and underpin sustainable development. Thus, the social impact of the LEADER

program is high in the perception of LAG representatives, who have a predominantly positive view of the qualitative changes brought in the rural communities. The results highlighted the LAGs' contribution in developing collaborative relationships between local actors and increasing their involvement in community issues, which leads to better local governance. However, the change generated so far is still shallow and LEADER didn't turned out to have enough strength to produce a visible social impact reflected in an increasing level of development of the beneficiary rural communities.