The Leader Funding of Well-Being in Northeast Region of Romania

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Abstract. *The aim of this article is to analyze the impact of the LEADER approach on the welfare related services in a specific area, the Northeast Region (NE region) of Romania. Promoting the well-being of citizens is a constant goal of the European policy and it is also a constant preoccupation of governments due to the subjectivism of the problem. The social and cultural services are an area that brings to the table mostly long-term benefits. This is the main reason that makes them difficult to analyze under the terms of numeric indices.*

The question that needs to be asked is whether the Social Welfare contributes that much to the rural development that it undertakes the risks and costs of the LEADER approach. Being a bottom-up approach, LEADER, consists of the vision of the Local Action Group's management, guided by the National Rural Program, but fully adapted to the distinct local social, economic and environmental problems. The acronym "LEADER" comes from the French phrase Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale, which translates links between the rural economy and development actions.

The National Rural Development Program (NRDP) is not addressed particularly on social or cultural development; therefore, the Local Action Groups did not allocate a great amount of funds that could create a measurable impact on the indices of socio-economic development. Is the well-being of the citizen significantly improved by the EU fundings through the LAG's by bringing into their villages access to basic education, sportive activity or medical care?

Keywords: LEADER approach, Local Action Group, well-being, basic services, Social Welfare.

Introduction

The NE region is the biggest but poorest region of Romania. Characterized by almost 60% of population located in the rural areas, according to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (tempo online, 2024), the NE region faces issues as great disparities, depopulation, aged population and poor road or sanitation infrastructure.

The National Rural Development Programs are created in order to address the needs identified on a national scale through a top-down approach. The LEADER, a bottom-up approach, gives to the local communities and local players the possibility to associate and create a Local Action Group that writes down the Local Development Strategy based on their needs, expectations and plans. The NE region is covered by 45 LAG's, with individual LDS. This involves extra costs for the functioning of the LAG's, distinctly and various points of view on the impact of each measure materialized in the quality of Local Development Strategies, and other risks generated by the lack of experience or cohesion of the LAG's structure. In Romania the first LAG's operated between 2011 and 2015, defining the first LEADER programing period. Despite their lack of maturity, they have managed to develop into important partnerships actively involved in the area's development.

As the literature reflects one of the areas that mostly contributes to the development of rural areas is the social welfare (Abreu, 2020), therefore the importance of an empirical evidence of the impact of the LEADER funding on this particularly area is critical in order to give to the managing institutions the proof needed for further fundings.

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The main factors that point to this direction of well-being are the access and quality of the health, social and education system. The 20th article of the UE Regulation no. 1305/2013 states the funding of *Basic Services and Village Renewal* that shall contribute to the defined objective of balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities, pursued through the priority of 'promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas' and focused on fostering local development.

The added value of the LEADER approach has been a continuous preoccupation of the EU funding parties, mostly because it's supplementary costs and risks. Despite the additional benefits are still not sufficiently demonstrated (European Court of Auditors, 2022) the current programing period (2014-2020) allocated €706 million (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) for further developments through LAG's. The improvement of the quality of life although it is a goal for the rural development policies it is hardly measurable, making it difficult to demonstrate.

The long-term benefits of improved social services, quality health care system, performant educational act and various leisure and cultural activities are known, in theory, but difficult to extract from the context. Analyzing the types of projects funded in this specific area can offer a view of how the local players have been involved into resolving the problems. This can be obtained by observing the types of structures that developed projects (Public Authorities, NGO's, Private Investors), how the disparities were resolved (the different types of service coverage), and how the different LAG`s responded to identified local needs.

The development of an area shall not be limited to an income-poverty perception, it cannot be isolated to a single program's impact, also not all the measures contribution can be indexed.

Literature review

The LEADER approach has its roots in 1991 as a possibility offered to locals to develop strategies focused on the resources, realities and needs, threats and problems identified in their territory. In order to achieve this goal, public-private partnership took birth as Local Action Groups that empowered quickly. Becoming obvious that this new approach successfully managed to improve the rural development in the areas that was implemented, the concept of "Community-Led Local Development" (CLLD) strategy became more appropriate for these development policies that the LEADER axis is based upon.

During the 2014-2020 programming period, the total budget for the LEADER Programme amounted to nearly €10 billion, corresponding to approximately 5% (a minimum endowment of the regional development program) budget of the overall budget for the EU's agricultural policy (Johansson, Holmquist, 2024)

In Romania, LAG's began to work in 2011, two decades after the LEADER program was founded. By the end of the first programming period, 2007-2013, the LEADER axis became a priority for the rural development policy and gathered a share of 4.1% of the amount allocated for the national program, reaching €386 million. The upward trend has expanded to the actual programing period, 2014-2020, reaching 6.03% of the financial allocation of the national program and covering 92% of the territory (Crunteanu, Comsa, Fintineru, 2024).

The LEADER Program is based on the principles of the LEADER method (inputs), with its approach primarily consisting of project activities (outputs). The work is intended to result in what is referred to as 'added values' in the form of strengthening social capital, improving local governance mechanisms and generating outcomes that, in various ways, enhance the situation in the specific area (renovation of community centers, tourism initiatives, training programs, small scale farming, etc.).

The logic of intervention is based on the idea that these added values contribute to structural changes in the rural area. The intervention theory does not clarify the intended meaning of 'structural changes' in this context. There are no evaluations that, beyond analyzing added values, have carried out the more ambitiously designed analysis of assessing to what extent the noted added values have accomplished structural changes and long-term impacts (Johansson, Holmquist, 2024).

A few research were conducted on the impact of the LEADER funding in Romania, all concluding that it is an important opportunity to develop rural areas, a vital resource for rural tourism and agritourism (Galluzzo, 2021).

There were studies (Crunteanu, Comsa, Fintineru, 2024) that analyze the impact of the LEADER funding and focus on quantifiable effects of the bottom-up approach, resulting that significant improvements have been noticed between the two programming periods of LEADER funding in Romania, 2011-2015 and 2017-2023. It has been proved that localities which highly absorbed this funding have a decreased risk of depopulation and are more attractive to tourists. They also have a slightly smaller rate of unemployment.

Beyond research focused on quantitative indices of overall development, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or economic development, it became necessary a qualitative research on rural development in order to obtain an accurate evaluation of the impact of a policy mostly because of the highlighted role of health care and education on the rural development (Abreu, 2020).

Other studies (Maier, D, et all, 2022) have analyzed the distribution of funds allocated through NRDP 2014-2020 concluding that the absorption was not in correlation with the need for development, but rather in correlation with the degree of development. The Western Romanian regions, which are more closely associated with European developed countries in terms of territory and behavior, possess more sophisticated local institutions that are more efficient in absorbing rural development funds. The LEADER axis appears to be the ideal solution for NE region, responding to the local human development level and compensating for the lack of resources through European funding.

The Well-being

The concept of well-being has no agreed definition, therefore there is no universally method for measuring well-being (Huppert, 2017). The only universally valid fact is that the well-being is made up of objective and subjective factors which influence the individual and community functioning (Barber, 2009).

According to *Every Child Matters* policy - a comprehensive programme of reform for children's services launched by the UK Government in 2003, that aims to more closely integrate educational, health, social and specialist services so that there could be earlier intervention and closer working between professionals- the well-being consists in *being healthy, staying safe*, *enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution* and *economic well-being.* Similarly, according to Chaplitskaya, Heijman, van Ophem, 2024, the well-being can be defined by six variables: health, security, social relationship, education and work, economic well-being, and environment.

Literature (De Neve, Sachs, 2020, Chaplitskaya, Heijman, van Ophem, 2024) links the well-being to the sustainable rural development as the main priorities of the last one, balanced economic, social and environmental aspects, impact on the main determinants of the first one - income, social and health support, freedom and safety.

Preconditions and challenges

The effects of economic development on the quality of life in the context of Romania's integration into the European Union are multiple and complex, having a significant impact on various aspects of the economic, social and cultural life of Romanian citizens. Romania's integration into the European Union since January 1, 2007 has brought many opportunities and challenges.

One of the major challenges for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the formulation of fair and sustainable trade policies, particularly in sectors that have a direct impact on the environment and human well-being, such as agriculture and food production. A fair and transformative agri-food trade policy aligned with the SDGs can contribute significantly to achieving multiple global goals, including poverty reduction, food security, climate action, and sustainable economic growth. The NRDP is based upon SDGs.

Romania has prepared for a good management of European funds through the Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD 2000-2006) and has improved its capacity to manage them by NRDP 2007-2013 and the current 2014-2020 programme.

The 2014-2020 programming period was strongly affected by the effects of COVID-19. Restrictions imposed during the pandemic have led to a global economic crisis. At the same time, social and economic inequalities were highlighted, the disparities between urban and rural areas were accentuated highlighting the need for investments to increase access to technology and education, as well as, the vulnerability of health systems highlighted the need for substantial investments in the health system, including its consolidation in the rural areas where it is manifestly deficient.

The crisis has highlighted disparities in access to technology, this affected education (by going to school online) and access to remote jobs for those who did not have quality equipment or internet. Unlike previous economic crises, the COVID 19 crisis, it is characterized by a profound social impact. The solidarity of the population has been tested and also the socio-medical services in the rural area have proven unable to assist the at-risk population. The urban environment has been more adaptable to COVID-19 restrictions than the rural environment.

The pandemic has accelerated the transition to digitalization, particularly in areas such as education, trade and remote work. However, this transition has raised significant challenges. Not all citizens had access to digital devices or high-speed internet, which contributed to educational and economic disparities.

The pandemic had a devastating impact, but it also led to the development of sophisticated home delivery services, shared mobility services, and other services. However, these post-pandemic services have proven to be a great success in major cities and in the urban environment in general. In large cities, there is an increased awareness of environmental and traffic issues, and many residents are more willing to adopt shared mobility services as environmentally friendly and convenient alternatives. In rural areas, public transport infrastructure is often more limited or non-existent, operating costs are higher due to long distances and fewer users. In addition, logistics and maintenance costs may become unfeasible in communities with a small population.

It is important to note that the rural population in the NE region is aging and has a hard time adapting to new services because they are only accessible through internet-operated applications.

Study Area

Romania has the highest share of EU rural areas which generates and maintains a long series of regional disparities. Because of these disparities, the economy faces a number of issues that undermine the quality of human and social capital and reduce the growth potential: precarious social and economic infrastructure, reduced access to markets and thus to goods, a low level of (Mosora, Mosora, 2012) both economic cohesion and living standards and a difficult access to education and training. From this perspective, the local action groups can contribute to the revival and development of urban areas, through the promotion of economic activities in adjacent rural areas.

The European Semester – Country Report 2024 shows that both the poverty and the social exclusion rate in rural areas of Romania are the highest in EU. In fact, Romania has one of the highest shares of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU (35.8% in 2020 vs an EU average of 21.6%). Most deprived groups are undeclared workers, the self-employed in agriculture, Roma, persons with disabilities, older people and the homeless. Also, regional disparities are high, real GDP growth between 2013 and 2022 diverged substantially between the regions, the Nord-Est region even having negative growth (-0.3%), this contrasts with growth of 7.4% in the capital region. Human capital is considerably limited in rural areas. In 2022, in all less developed regions, fewer than 25% of the population had a tertiary degree (ranging from 17% to 23% depending on the region) while in București-Ilfov this share was 54.2%, (above the EU average of 43%), also the rate of early leavers from education and training was 24.5% in rural areas, compared with 3.9% in cities, reflecting persistent rural-urban disparities in education. Also, pre-primary (breed) and preschool (kindergarten) education are facing a major deficit regarding infrastructure. Only 1% of the nurseries (breed) and 7% of kindergarten were in rural areas in 2013 (NRDP 2014-2020).

According to NRDP 2014-2020 the infrastructure of road and sanitation infrastructure has an major impact on the economic development and quality of life. The funds absorbed through the 2007-2010 programing period were insufficient in this field, the rural areas are still affected by the lack or by the deficitary basic infrasture mostly because of the complexity of the integrated projects (sanitation and road infrastructure), the costs and terms of this projects, high costs and long execution deadlines, the lack of experience of local authorities and the large number of authorizations issued by various authorities.

Cultural identity has an important potential of development but the access of the inhabitants to culture is limited. Promoting the cultural potential of rural areas can be done by local action groups, which have the potential to contribute to the revival and development of rural areas.

Productivity growth has been significantly impacted by strong investment, which has been driven by net public investment in recent years and supported by EU funds. (European Commission, European Semester - 2024 Country Report - Romania, 2024).

The National Rural Development Programme of well-being

The policies for rural development are established by every member country of the European Union. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR) has the main attribution when it comes to defining objectives and managing financing processes for rural development. Romania uses two axes to fund agriculture and rural development, which are established by the Common Agricultural Policy (Maier, D, et all, 2022).

The Agricultural Payments and Intervention Agency (APIA) manages the activities related to the first axis, especially the direct payments from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF).

The Agency for Financing Rural Investments (AFIR) manages the activities corresponding to the second axis. AFIR has the primary responsibility of administering the NRDP and implementing the financial implementation of the European Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development (EAFRD).

Romania adopted The National Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (NRDP 2014-2020) on 26 May 2015. According to the latest modification, nearly €12.7 billion of public funds, including €112.3 million transferred from direct payments, EURI funds, and €1.7 billion of national co-funding, will be consumed by December 2026. (European Commission, Factsheet on 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme for Romania, april 2024). The period 2014-2026 includes the programming period 2014-2020, three years for implementation according to the N+3 principle, and the transition period.

The main focus of the NRDP is to promote competitiveness and restructuring in Romania's agricultural sector by modernization and restructuring of farms; protect the environment and climate changes by promoting environmentally-friendly farming practices; stimulate economic development, job creation, and higher quality of life in Romanian villages.

This aims are translated into measures that are defined by *Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005.*

The corresponded of the 20th Article EU Regulation 1305/2013 in the rural policy of Romania is measure 7 - Basic services and village renewal in rural areas, through which two sub-measures were financed: 7.2 - Road infrastructure and water supply/sanitation infrastructure; preschool educational infrastructure projects and secondary education infrastructure or professional schools in the agricultural field;7.6 - Investments associated with the protection of cultural heritage. The amont allocated is almost €1.3 billion.

In addition to the contribution made by public authorities and NGOs through the improvement of basic services, the business environment contributes to improving living conditions and increasing incomes. Funds have been allocated for agricultural and non-agricultural business development.

Unlike NRDP, the LAGs financed a much wider range of businesses, creating a significant number of jobs. It was observed that certain investors are frequently individuals who have left their homeland and worked abroad, and the chance to get European funds to start sustainable businesses led them to return home. They contribute to the development of the business environment both with the financial capital and with the good practices they have acquired abroad.

NRDP provides funding for the LEADER axis through measure 19, which includes sub-measure 19.2 - Support for implementation of actions within SDL, which funds the projects developed by beneficiaries in compliance with the measures established by the LAGs.

Methodology

The basis of the research consists of the publicly available database of projects financed by the LAGs in the specific area of Northeast Romania. The database was accessed during September-October 2024. The database consists of the information published by LAGs in the project selection reports. The specificity of the projects included in the research is defined by the services financed under the 20th article of EU Regulation no. 1305/2013, focusing on social, health care, educational system, leisure and cultural activities.

As defined in the DLRC, every LAG (45) in the studied area funded projects defined by the 20th article of EU Regulation no. 1305/2013, reaching the total amount of non-refundable funds of €67 million, of which almost €17 million (amount contracted) funded projects in the social, health, education, cultural and leisure area. Although the programming period defined by the NRDP is

2014-2020, the LEADER implementing period is 2017-2025, from the date of the first approved project until the completion date established by the program, including the transition period 2021-2022 and the N+3 rule. A final analysis of the LEADER impact will be completed starting from 2026.

An overview of the characteristics of the projects funded under the 20th article of EU Regulation No. 1305/2013 by the LAGs situated on the NE of Romania shows that the major part of the investments were made by public authorities (1165 projects worth €63,5 million), followed by associations and foundations (52 projects worth €2,3 million - the LAG's themselves developed 6 projects) and few by monachal institutions (8 projects worth €0,7 million) and by companies (5 projects worth almost thousand €0,3 million).

Unlike NRDP, through LEADER, there is overwhelming access to projects to improve communal public services by equipping them with various equipment for communal management services (bulldozers, dump trucks, tractors, etc.), emergency services (firefighting equipment, interventions in case of disasters, etc.) included in the category *others*, according to *figure no. 1.*

At the same time, social services were not financed through NRDP, nor were the leisure services, while the LAG`s allocated important values both for social and health services and for playgrounds and parks.

Several types of projects with an impact on the social welfare dimension were identified. In terms of improving basic services, investments were made primarily in leisure, sports, and cultural infrastructure, followed by social and medical infrastructure, and less in educational infrastructure.

The other type of projects financed by LAGs focused on the quality of communal management, mainly through the purchase of equipment for household services offered by local authorities, IT equipment for the development of an E-government service.

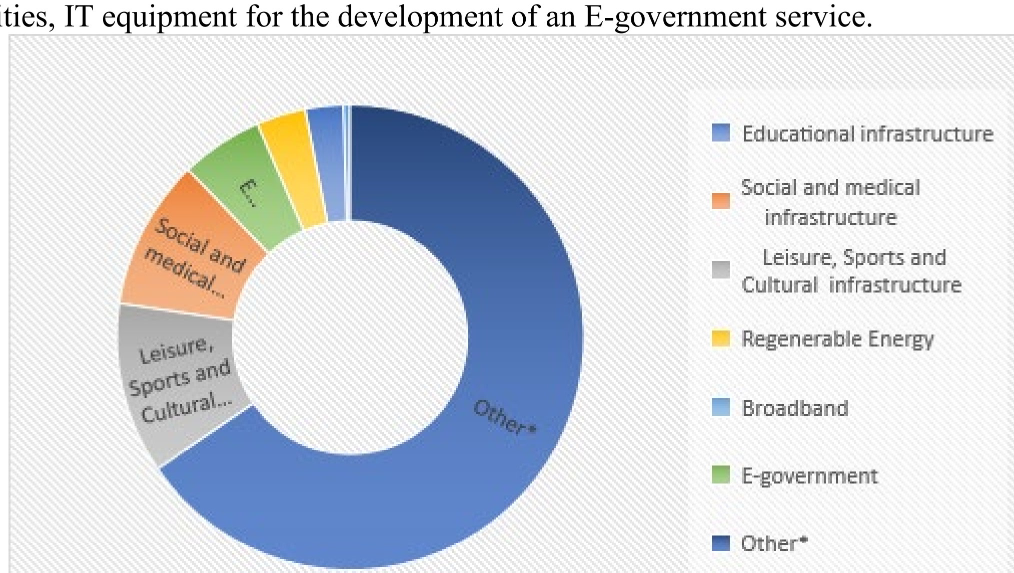

Figure 1. The LEADER funding under the 20th article of EU Reg 1305/2013

Source: Authors' own research.

As shown by the literature, a greater proportion of the population with higher education means lower risk of poverty. Also, the accessibility and the quality of education has impact on the depopulation and age renewal of rural areas.

Almost €1,5 million have been contracted for the renewal of general schools, and almost a quarter million for kindergartens. Continuing education for adults presents significant challenges primarily because they typically discontinue formal schooling early in their educational journey. They also face age-related barriers that hinder their ability to enroll in the formal education system today, ultimately limiting their access to qualification courses. (Stefanescu et al., 2023).

As expected, the Highschool or Professional schools are definitory in rural areas, so are the fundings of them. In addition, only one library was funded. This shows that higher education can be reached only by accessing urban areas.

Although educational infrastructure projects also benefited from PNDR financing, through sub-measure 7.2, several problems continue to hinder the quality of education and equal access to education in rural areas. Add a lack of jobs to the lack of well-trained staff, poor road infrastructure and high early school leaving rates, especially for Roma population, and we have found the formula for perpetuating high rates of poverty and inequality.

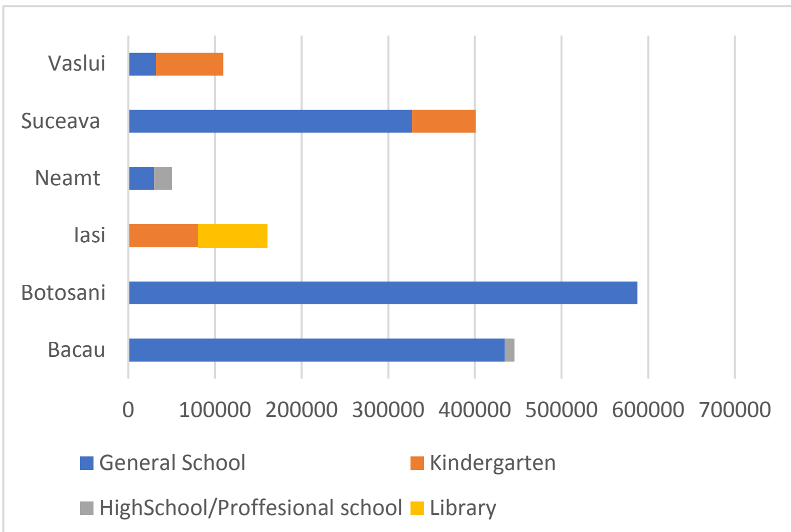

Figure 2. The LEADER funding of Educational Infrastructure by counties of the North East region

Source: Authors' own research.

The LEADER funding of Social and medical services in the eligible area consists of almost 7 million EUR as below: 86% are daycare centers for children (delivering services such as after-school, meals and education support, counseling and support for parents and children, day centers for children at risk of separation from their parents and day centers for children with disabilities); 14% are investments in the health care system.

In this particular field, it can be observed how the LEADER approach works from the point of view of community involvement. Unlike the other basic services, the interest in improving social services was also shown by NGOs. The local public authorities accessed 74% of the funding, while associations, foundations and monastic institutions accessed 26% of the LEADER funding in this area. Social services funded are mostly daycare centers for elderly or disadvantaged people and multidisciplinary centers for children, offering hot meals and afterschool support.

An important aspect of LEADER funding is its ability to innovate. In this sense, a Respiro Center financed by the LAG was identified, through which innovative care services for disabled people will be financed, as well as two home care services.

Closely related to health, although not naturally linked to the health system, is the impact of sports and leisure on quality of life. Beyond their physical influence, sports contribute significantly to the general health of citizens. Based on this point of view, we analyzed the fundings accorded by LAG`s and found that LEADER funding of sports, leisure and cultural projects in the NE Romania was close to €7 million, of which 43% financed sports infrastructure, 25% parks and green areas, 11% playgrounds for children and 20% cultural infrastructure.

Regarding the investments made by the local authorities for the actions aimed at preserving the cultural heritage, the weight of the projects is small, an aspect found in all the sub-measures that have a counterpart in NRDP 2014-202 (in this case sub-measure 7.6). Internet access slowly becomes an indicator of well-being influencing the social relationships, job availability, education, and information. Only €0,3 million were allocated to broadband infrastructure.

It should be noted in this regard that although a precarious situation of coverage with internet services and connection was identified, this type of project was no longer financed through the National Rural Development Program (NRDP). However, according to the National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications, Annual Report 2023, the penetration rate of service coverage per 100 households reached 71% in the rural environment at the end of 2023, compared to 42%, as identified at the time of the analysis of realization of the needs that were the basis of the foundation of the 2014-2020 PNDR. This aspect could mean that other programs finance these investments.

Some aspects of social welfare include environmental factors such as security at night and degree of environmental pollution. Most of the Green Energy projects financed by LEADER consist of improved lighting systems, accessed by local authorities, with a cost of over €2 million.

The road infrastructure is an area that is difficult to be financed by LEADER, mostly because of the costs involved and secondly because the road infrastructure succeeds the sanitation infrastructure. Since the Large Infrastructure Operational Program finances water and sanitation systems in the rural area, and sub-measure 7.2 also finances this type of projects, given the principle of avoiding double financing, the financing of road infrastructure through LEADER reached only €6 million. This does not reflect the need or importance of road or sanitary infrastructure on the quality of life, but rather shows that the LEADER program and the role of the LAGs is to identify and respond to those needs for which other programs fail to find solutions.

In this sense, analyzing the financed projects, it was observed an important share of the projects related to the purchase of various machinery and equipment aimed at improving the public services offered by the local authorities. These purchases serve to significantly reduce the time of interventions in case of emergency, reduce the costs of renting equipment or contracting specialized services, create jobs, help maintain a clean and well-kept environment and improve local governance. All these aspects influence the quality of life of citizens.

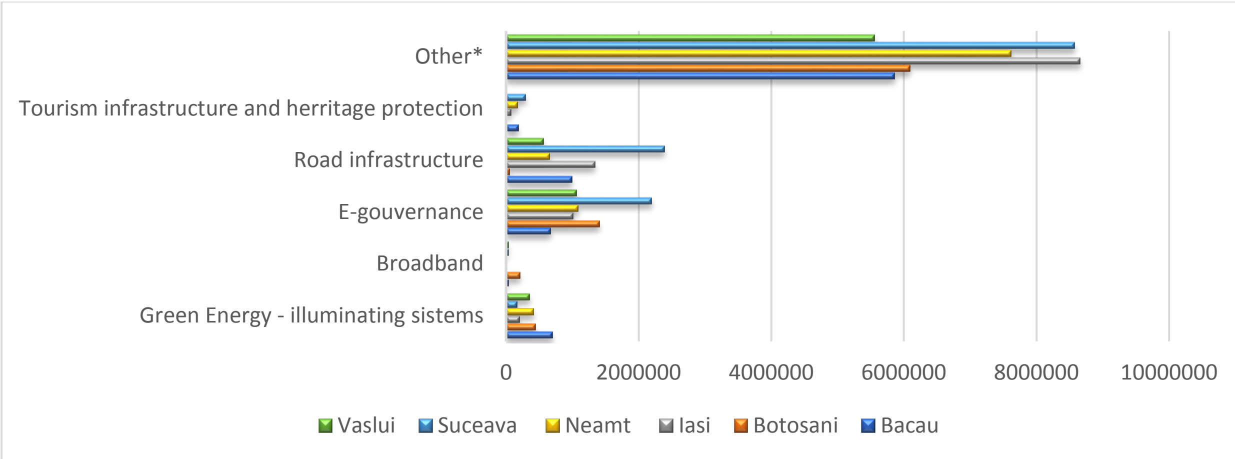

Figure 3. The LEADER funding of other well-being related projects

Source: Authors' own research.

Results and discussions

Analyzing the LEADER funding under the 20th article of the EU Regulation Number 1305/2013 the following can be observed:

Firstly, unlike the National Rural Development Program, the LEADER axis funded a much more diverse types of projects, showing the flexibility of the approach. The ability of the LEADER approach to respond to various characteristics of the communities defined by each Local Action Groups makes it very important for the development of rural areas.

Also, we observe that, even if both the NRDP and the LEADER axis funded projects under the 20th article of the EU Regulation Number 1305/2013, few funding measures promoted by LAG`s were similar to the 7.2 and 7.4 sub-measures included by the national policy. The complementarity of the two types of approaches was assured as the communities developed as pointed by the DLRC.

The NE region is characterized by the fact that a significant proportion of the population left the country to seek higher incomes. Therefore, there is a consistent depopulation of the rural environment. Naturally, what followed was an ageing population and a significant number of children whose social, educational and psychological needs were significant due to the lack of one or both parents. The support provided by the LAGs in improving the living conditions of these segments of population is significant.

The performance indicator defined by the rural policy for the evaluation of projects financed under this article is the number of beneficiaries of the basic services improved by the fundings. As the basic services are defined, they address mostly to the total number of inhabitants of a community. As expected, the performance indicator defined by LAG`s, most of the times, is the number of inhabitants of an administrative unit within the funding beneficiaries are located. Unlike the performance indicators of other investment measures (number of jobs created, number of businesses established, forested areas, etc.) that offer real data for an analysis, this indicator does not provide a clear view of the performance degree of invested funds.

Although the basic services in Romania were, until 35 years ago, the responsibility of the national authorities exclusively, lately the involvement of private actors become stronger. The LEADER approach facilitates the active public-private partnership and society involvement to the development of an area as shown by the projects developed by associations, foundations and monastic institutions.

Despite the flexibility of the approach, the innovative perspective specific to LEADER projects has not been identified to an important extent. Moreover, the measures funded by LAGs support the development of local services that usually are funded from the national or local budget.

The amount of total financing in relation to the number of inhabitants is not reflected in a considerable increase in the macroeconomic performance indicators of the region. However, their contribution to the development of the rural environment in the NE region is obvious and the net population that directly or indirectly benefits from the improvement of the rural environment is an indicator realized.

Conclusion

The objective of the research was to understand if the LEADER approach is more efficient and sufficiently developed so that the partnerships created, LAGs, bring real benefits on the social plane.

The interventions related to social, educational and other basic services through LEADER axis is an important instrument for rural development and overcoming disparities that define the NE Region of Romania.

The NE Region is economically and socially poorly developed therefore, in comparison to other regions, the needs of rural areas are incomparably higher. Even so, due to their limited skills and experience in accessing European funds, public and private actors in this area are limited in their ability to compete with applicants from more developed regions, resulting in reduced accessibility to the NRDP funds. Rural financing through LAG remains one of the few feasible ways to enhance the rural economic and social environment in this context.

As the National Rural Development Program consists mainly of measures meant to improve agricultural and environmental potential, the human potential can be improved through the LEADER approach. The `well-being` of population influence the development of an area, being closely linked to the human potential, and often considered as the most relevant factor regarding rural development (Spellerberg et al., 2007).

This present analysis of the LEADER funding provides an overview of the structure of contracted funds. A more accurate analysis shall be completed starting from 2026, the final date of the LEADER period. Also, in order to separate from other fundings and underline the impact of the EU funding on the socio-economic well-being through the LEADER approach, a questionnaire should be applied.

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