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A COMMUNITY CONTEXT PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNITY-LED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE LEADER PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The support to bottom-up community led developed in rural areas and small urban setting has drawn substantive interest by targeted communities across the European Union, and by the current multi-annual planning cycle of 2021-2027 an approximate 3,500 CLLD/LEADER programme Local Action Groups (LAG) are expected to be operational. This raises the question of how CLLD/LEADER funding of LAG based local development strategies integrate into local economic, social and political conditions. To evaluate the link between CLLD/LEADER programme and local contexts we argue that the non-inclusion of local economic and social conditions related variables among the

CLLD/LEADER scoring indicators is equivalent to assuming that the means of the LAG groups across the LAG territories and populations are all the same. To test this hypothesis, we explore the relationship between LEADER interventions and community economic and social contexts using a set of three proxy variables. The one-way analysis of variance results provides sufficient evidence of a statistically significant difference between local authorities' mean per capita income share in 24 LAG comparisons. This contradicts the assumption of nonsystematic variance of local authorities' per capita own income share by LAGs. This is especially relevant as, according to the regression results, the 2023-2027 funding round is also statistically significantly associated with LAGs level mean per capita own income share of local authorities. The potential role per capita own income share of local authorities plays in CLLD/LEADER funding levels has been overlooked. Therefore, not accounting for the local authority's economic context at the LAGs level results in the 2023 CLLD/LEADER funding in Romania's Centre region being redistributive in nature. More explicitly, local economies that generate lower per capita incomes are rewarded with larger levels of CLLD/LEADER funding. The estimated additional one-EUR LAG level per capita income tax quota allocation, EUR 3.60 per capita less, was awarded in the 2023-2027 funding round.

Keywords: Intergovernmental Relations, Grants, Regional Development Policy, Project Analysis, Public Policy.
JEL Classification: H77, H81, R58, O22, Z18.

1. Introduction

The articulation of local strategies rooted in local economic, social and political conditions is critical to the development pathways of communities from the perspective of well-being, economic prosperity, political stability and sustainability. Exogenous policy frameworks and incentives are central to the context in which the development of local priority setting arises. Therefore, the scope of this paper is to provide a contextual analysis of the development policy setting of the LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Dévelopment de l'Économie Rurale) programme from the perspective of local economic and social support contexts.

The LEADER programme is the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy instrument to provide opportunities for bottom-up locally driven development to raise living standards in rural areas (Dwyer, 2007; Tirado Ballesteros, & Hernández, 2019; Ray, 2020; Tent et al., 2021; Mustakangas, 2024), promote innovation (Micha et al, 2019), enhance democratic practice (Grandberg and Andersson, 2016), reverse population decline (Crunțeanu et al., 2024), the revitalization and social innovation of territories (Müller, 2021; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022; Finta & Horeczki, 2023).

Following the publication of the Future of Rural Society report (COM(88) 501) in 1998, bottom-up, or neo-endogenous, territorial development policies targeting rural areas emerged (Ray, 2000; Biczkowski, 2020). The new policy area, named the LEADER programme, was conceptualised as a unique financial instrument of the EU structural policy aimed at finding new solutions to specific

problems affecting rural areas in the EU. Starting with the 2014 – 2020 multi-annual programming framework the LEADER model was complemented by the “Community-led Local Development” (CLLD) approach. This by encouraging local communities to develop "bottom-up" integrated local capacity to develop social innovations via enhancing the role of local action groups (LAGs) in the design and implementation of local development strategies (Póla et al., 2015; Brezuleanu, 2024).

2. Literature review

The literature on LEADER-related funding of LAGs spans the seven LEADER principles and has a high variability in territorial coverage and methodological approaches. Considering that strategies are bottom-up, there is wide variability in LDS priorities, and thus, LEADER programme outcomes also spam across various rural developmental need areas.

The literature on the cooperation among local actors to articulate local development strategies addresses topics related to local networking capacities of various social actors, strategies and practices, inclusiveness, and external collaboration with other LAGs. The programme is critical as rural areas experienced various degrees of demographic decline (Bock, 2015), low employment (Pollermann, 2014; Hill, 2019; Micha, et al., 2019), remoteness (Van Leeuwen, 2010; Barone et al., 2023; Duglio et al., 2023), limited connectivity (Cowie et al., 2020; Ferrari et al., 2022; Mack et al., 2024), land use related challenges (McDonagh, 2013; Levers et al., 2018; Dax at al., 2021), environmental degradation and resilience (Arroyo et al., 2015; Mahon et al., 2023) etc. Therefore, the second pillar of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is focused on rural development (Dammers & Keiner, 2006; Schmitt & Aubert, 2012) and has been a central instrument in addressing the above challenges. However, persistent disparities between prosperous and marginalised rural areas, both within and across member states, pose questions regarding the effectiveness of CAPS in achieving its objectives evenly across different geographies (Gordon et al., 2009; Cowie et al., 2020; Tent et al., 2021; Dax & Copus, 2020; Kusio, 2022; Perpiña Castillo at al., 2023; Johansson & Holmquist, 2024). In contrast, in the most recent 2022 Audit report, the European Court of Auditors (ECA, 2022) reported that little evidence to suggest that CLLD/LEADER’s additional benefits justify its costs compared to other types of funding.

By adopting an endogenous development approach to support the development of marginalized rural areas the LEADER programme has created opportunities for local action, community networking, and capacity development. For instance, Granberg and Andersson (2016), in an edited volume compiling several European countries, focuses on how LEADER, through delegating development planning to grassroots, is impacting the democratic experience across various

country and community settings in the dimensions of aggregative and integrative democracy. Overall, the authors conclude that the democratic dividend of the bottom-up approach of LEADER is a function of the respective country's existing political traditions and practices (Granberg, Andersson, and Kovách, 2016). Furmankiewicz et al. (2021), in the Polish context, identified that centrally defined scoring criteria to LAGs local funding actions are also interpreted through local unwritten rules of perceived fairness, and thus creating a mixed exogenous – endogenous development effect. Furthermore, Shucksmith et al. (2020) and Lengerer et al (2023) find that while LEADER has the potential to contribute to both distributive and procedural justice, local or higher governmental controls might intervene detrimentally. Chatzichristos & Nagopoulos (2021), when comparing LAGs in Austria, Portugal and Greece, find that national governance frameworks play an important role in fostering or hindering locally based social innovation. Furmankiewicz et Al. (2016) that the active engagement of third sector organisations to enhance inhabitants' involvement in LAGs local development strategy articulation. However, the integration of LEADER into the broader Regional Development Plans (RDPs) (Dax, 2013) has raised concerns about the dilution of these core principles (Navarro, 2016). In addition, LEADER's success depends on LAGs' capacity to mobilise local communities and effectively leverage resources (Bumbalova et al., 2016) while tailoring LAG strategies to respond effectively to the specific development strategies of the communities covered. Despite the widespread adoption of LEADER and CLLD, several challenges and limitations persist. Chatzichristos & Nagopoulos (2022) find that the continuous monitoring and evaluation of the CLLD/LEADER strategy is key to identify the specific social value added at the various stages of the programme. However, there is a structural gap in the literature related to how specific socio-economic conditions inform the priorities formulated in LAGs.

In view to contribute to the existing knowledge on the alignment among local development strategies developed by LAGs and specific socio-economic conditions in LAGs we evaluate the LAGs priorities considering local authorities' own revenue and per capita social expenditures. We argue that the non-inclusion of local economic and social conditions related variables among the CALL scoring indicators is equivalent to assuming that the means of the LAG groups across the LAG territories and populations are all the same. To test this hypothesis, we explore the relationship between LEADER interventions and community economic and social contexts using a set of three proxy variables. This is relevant as LLCD approaches have become a widely adopted and substantively resources tool to achieve locally led inclusive democratic action for development objectives in usually left-behind communities that experience marginalization. This context offers a unique context to further understanding of the ways in which LAG strategy priorities are related to

specific socio-economic conditions of LAG member local communities. In this research, we focus on the assessment of the way in which the 2023-2027 CLLD/LEADER LAG local development strategies funding call (CALL) is contextualized in the local economic and social conditions of the participating local authorities of Romania's NUTS2 region Centre. By this we seek to answer the question of to what extent the programme is tailored to respond to specific economic and social development conditions.

To substantively address the research question, we consider that should LAG strategies selection be limited to the seven principles of the LEADER method, in the case of territorially fragmented contexts, it will underserve the local community that faces more extensive socio-economic marginalisation. Our inquiry seeks to reveal that not including an objective LAG members heterogeneity scoring criteria that capture local socio-economic conditions leads to larger and more prominent communities having a disproportionately larger voice in setting strategic priorities, thus further marginalising already deprived communities within the LAG. The following section presents the theoretical framework. After this we discuss case selection and data analysis, and the section also the subsections of CLLD/LEADER-based LAG local development strategy funding, and the description of local economic and social conditions. In the third section we present our findings, while in the final section we discuss the relevance of the findings and conclusions.

3. The evolution of the LEADER/CLLD programme

The first pilot phase, between 1991 and 1993, focused on setting up and supporting LAGs. Thus, 217 LAGs were set up in geographic areas designated disadvantaged rural regions. Building on the pilot's success, 1994-1999, an expanded LEADER II programme expanded LAGs to 821. Furthermore, because of the EU enlargement with ten new member states in 2004, LEADER+ experienced an expansion to 1,153 LAGs. With the next programming period of 2007-2013, the coverage of the LEADER+ axis was extended to coastal areas, and the number of LAGs grew to 2,200. With the further expansion of coverage area to small urban settings in 2014, the LEADER model was complemented by CLLD, and in the 2014-2020 multiannual programming period, the number of CLLD/LEADER-based LAGs grew to 3,333.

The inclusion of coastal and small urban areas remained optional. However, depending on the structure of the local authority's status in the LAG membership funding could be sources from one or a combination of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the European Social Fund (ESF). Kah et al. (2023) presents a synthesis of the adoption of CLLD by

member states. To further articulate the programme, Articles 31 and 33 of EU Regulation 2021/1060 describe LEADER's seven principles: bottom-up approach, cooperation, innovative elements in the local context, locally initiated strategies, networking, public-private partnership, and subregional areas.

Regarding the evolution of the rolling out of the LEADER programme in Romania the first LAG call was under the 2007-2013 multiannual planning cycle resulted 82 LAGs being created in 2011. In the follow-up call in 2022 an additional 82 LAGs were set-up. As a result, in this planning cycle thew 163 LAGs managed to cover 78% of eligible surface, and 72% of the target population. In the next multi-annual programming cycle (2014-2020) the number of LAGS expanded with an additional 76 lags, thus starting with 2016 reaching a total of 239 LAGS (92% of eligible territory and 86% of population). In the current cycle, in 2023 the number of CLLD /LEADER reached 246, covering almost all eligible territory and populations. Crunțeanu et al. (2023) found that for the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 multi-annual planning periods less developed regions exhibited a larger interest in participating in the programme.

The above finding is also supported by the results in the Polish context by Kiryluk-Dryjska and Wawrzynowicz (2024). In contrast, Olar and Jitea (2021) report the presence of an unequal distribution of LEADER support in favor of the most urbanized and developed areas. This is also linked to the findings of Iancu et al. (2022) underscore the developmental challenges Romanian rural communities face due to the limited number of non-agricultural businesses that could harvest the potential benefits of external investment programmes. Marquardt et al (2012) discuss the challenges in setting up inclusive LEADER partnership structures against the backdrop of local power structures. Opria et al. (2021, 2023) found no relationship between local development levels and LEADER programme implementation effectiveness. Yet, when successfully implemented, Crunțeanu et al. (2024) report positive association between the degree of CLLD/LEADER implementation demographic growth and a reduction in unemployment.

4. Methods

This research analyses the 2023-2027 selected CLLD/LEADER LAG local development strategies in the Romanian Centre NUTS2-regionand builds on a unique dataset that combines three publicly available administrative data on Romanian local authorities. First, we collected settlement-level population data for the year 2023 and were collected from the Ministry of Development, Public Works

and Administration website[1]. Next, we compiled the selection reports of the proposals submitted by LAGs under the CALL and published by the Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development[2]. The data set comprises both single and multiple-fund projects selected in CALL. 37 single-fund proposals and 209 multiple-funds were submitted and selected for funding. This dataset comprises information on the name of the LAG, the county in which registered, the LAG local authority membership, the territory covered by each LAG, the population of LAG covered local authorities, the score obtained by the local development strategy submitted by the LAG, the territory and population based EAFRD funding (EUR), the LDS quality EAFRD funding, the territory and population based ESF+ funding (EUR), the LDS quality ESF+ funding (EUR), and total funding.

Lastly, we compiled the execution of local authority budgets, including revenues and expenditures by local authorities for 2023, and published by the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration[3]. The database comprises twenty revenue-type items, including total revenues, own revenues, various intergovernmental transfers, balancing allocations, and subventions. On the expenditure side, the database includes the value of total annual expenditures, grouped by 15 expenditure types[4] and 13 expenditure chapters[5]. Finally, the rational for choosing Romanian Centre NUTS-2 region is due to its high degree of ethnic diversity and predominantly rural and mountainous character, and less developed status. This study is based on the cross-sectional analysis of the CALL selection results in Romania's Centre NUTS2-region. In this call, 34 LAGs, encompassing This study is based on the cross-sectional analysis of the CALL selection results in Romania's Centre NUTS2-region. In this call, 34 LAGs, encompassing 364 local authorities and their partners.

Several data transformations were conducted that resulted in three proxy measures of local economic and social conditions contextualise the funding under the CALL were generates, which are the per capita income tax quota allocation, local authorities' total social assistance spending, and the intergovernmental fiscal transfer dependence rate.

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[1] Data available at: https://www.dpfbl.mdrap.ro/populatie_uat-uri.html [accessed November 10, 2024].
[2] Data available at https://www.madr.ro/axa-leader/leader-2023-2027.html [accessed November 10, 2024].
[3] Data available at https://www.dpfbl.mdrap.ro/sit_ven_si_chelt_uat.html [accessed November 10, 2024].
[4] The expenditure types are: Personnel expenses; Goods and services; Interest Subsidies; Transfers between public administration units ;Other transfers; Projects financed from non-reimbursable external funds; Social assistance; Projects financed from non-reimbursable external funds related to the 2014-2020 financial framework; Other expenses; Projects financed from the amounts representing the non-reimbursable financial assistance related to the PNRR; Projects financed from the amounts related to the loan component of the PNRR; Capital expenditures; Financial operations; Payments made in previous years and recovered in the current year.
[5] The headings are: General public services; Defense, public order and national security; Education Health Culture; Recreation and religion; Insurance and social assistance; Housing, services and public development; Environmental protection; General economic, commercial and labour actions; Fuels and energy; Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting; Transport, and Other economic actions.

We selected to use per capita income tax quota allocation in local authorities' budgets, over total own revenue as a proxy for the intensity of economic activity, as it is more likely to benchmark local economic activity, representing 63% of local income tax. Total own local government revenues already include inter-municipal balancing allocations and, therefore, produce a biased estimate of the difference across local authorities' size of the local economies. To ensure comparability across local authorities, we normalised the data by dividing the total local authority income tax quota allocation by the local authority's population, and values are expressed in EUR (using the annual official exchange rate of 4.9465). In 2023, the 364 local authorities that participated in the CALL in the Centre region had a combined total per capita income tax quota allocation value of EUR 127.97 million, while all local revenue was EUR 431.56 million. The total revenue – which includes all the intergovernmental balancing allocations, subsidies, and external funding mechanisms – was EUR 876.77 million.

Regarding the social conditions proxy measure, we use local authorities' total social assistance spending line, which for 2023 amounted to EUR 63.09 million, or 7.39% of all local government spending. In the current analysis, we calculated the per capita local government social assistance expenditures, which were also expressed in EUR using the same exchange rate.

Intergovernmental fiscal transfer dependence is calculated as the share of total local government revenues that are the source of central or regional government or other forms of funding other than own incomes. For 2023, the total intergovernmental transfer for the 364 local governments is EUR 445.12 million, or 50.24% of all local government revenues.

As discussed in the previous section, the 25 LDS selection criteria exclude social economic and social conditions. Therefore, we propose to test the validity of the explicit assumption in the CALL that local economic and social conditions-related variables need not be considered in project funding selection, which is the hypothesis that there is no systematic structure in their distributions across LAGs.

To control the variation of the three independent variables across LAGs, we calculate the LAG level per capita income tax quota allocation in EUR. This variable was calculated through the following transformations. First, to ensure scale consistency of the comparison across local governments, we divided the share of the local authority's own income tax into its population and converted it into EUR. After this, we computed the mean per capita income tax share by LAG. In addition, we the LAG level per capita local authorities' total social assistance spending in EUR was also calculated by dividing total local authority social spending by population and transforming into EUR. As a next step we use local authority per capita social spending to calculate LAG averages.

Lastly, the LAG level mean intergovernmental transfer dependence rates was calculated as the share of income that was sources from other income than own, and it is expressed mean by LAG.

We used these values to specify a multiple linear regression with LAG LDS funding level and the three indicators as dependent variables.

5. Results and Discussion

These sections are comprised of two parts. In the first one, we discuss the descriptive statistical analysis of the LAGs structures, priorities and funding mechanisms, while the second part is dedicated to the hypothesis testing.

5.1 Statistical analysis of the implementation of LEADER initiative-based LAG strategies in Romania's Centre region

This sub-section presents the evaluation of LAG strategies in Romania from the perspective of LEADER's principles. In 2023, in Romania 246 CLLD/LEADER initiative-based LAG strategies were selected for funding, and the country is among the six EU-27 countries that complemented the rural development and fisheries funds (Common Agriculture Policy) with the European Social Fund (ESF) support (by expanding CLLD LAGs in small urban areas). As a result, in 2023, of the 246 LAGs, 209 are multi-fund implemented, and 37 are traditional mono-fund LAG strategies.

Of the 246 LAGs 34 have their headquarters in the Centre NUTS2-region, and six are implemented in the traditional mono-fund way. The region is comprised of six counties (Alba, Brașov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureș, and Sibiu) and a total of 414 local governments, of which 357 rural (communes), 37 towns (small urban), and 20 municipalities (larger urban). Table 1 below shows that 396 local governments participate in these partnerships. However, three LEADER partnerships also have a total of 30 members from outside of the Centre NUTS2-region. Thus, of the 414 local authorities in the Centre NUTS2-region, 361 participate in LEADER partnerships that have their headquarters in the region, which is 93,84% of rural local authorities (communes), 78,38% of towns, and 10% of municipalities.

Table 1. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs participation of Centre region local authorities

	Communes		Towns		Municipalities		Total	
	LEADER	Total	LEADER	Total	LEADER	Total	LEADER	Total
Alba	67	67	6	7	0	4	73	78
Brașov	48	48	5	6	0	4	53	58
Covasna	40	40	3	3	1	2	44	45
Harghita	54*	58	5	5	1	4	60	67
Mureș	83	91	5	7	0	4	88	102

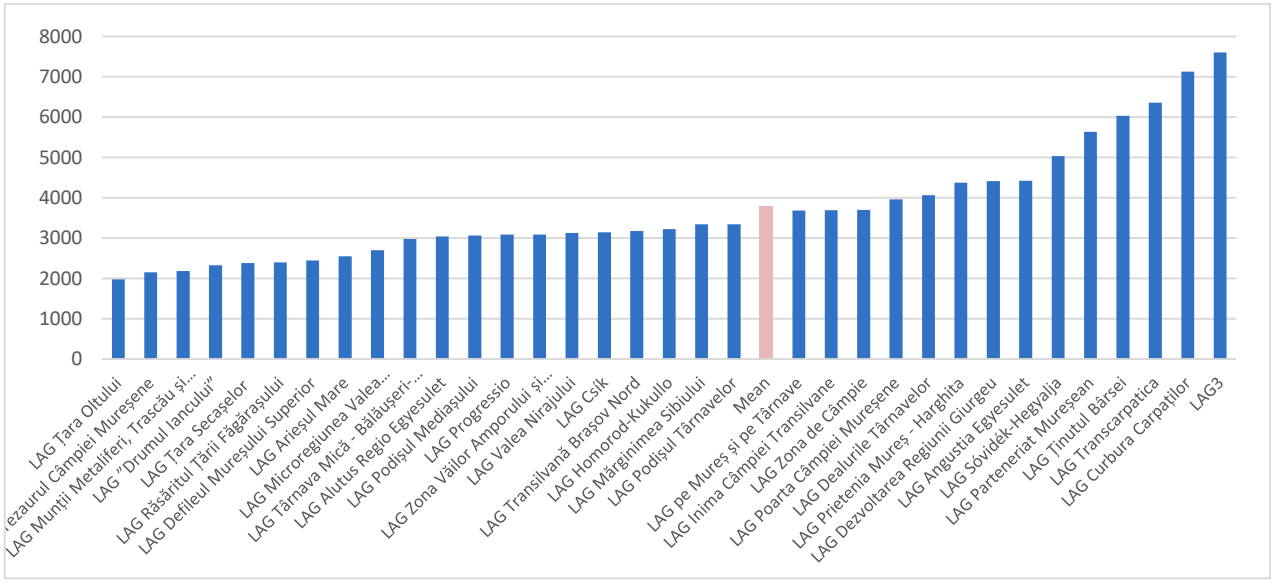
Sibiu	39	53	4	9	0	2	43	64
Vâlcea**	3	-	-	-	-	-	3	-
Total	331	357	28	37	2	20	364	414
*Three local communities, Corbu, Tulghes, and Bilbor excluded from the analysis. **Three local authorities' members of LAG Țara Oltului, which has its headquarters in the Centre region.								

Source: own calculations

Corbu, Tulghes, and Bilbor rural local authorities from Harghita County joined two LAGs (Asociația Grupul de Acțiune Locală Ceahlău and Asociația Grupul De Acțiune Local Bazinul Dornelor) that have their headquarters outside of the Centre region. The rationale for excluding the above local authorities from the analysis is that the LAGs have 17 and 13 local authorities and that their inclusion would have distorted the analysis at the Centre region level. In contrast, three local authorities from Vâlcea county (Boișoara, Câineni and Titești) are included in the analysis as they are members of the LAG Țara Oltului with headquarters in Sibiu County of the Centre region. As a result of these changes, the total number of local authorities under analysis is 364, grouped in 34 LAGs.

The total population of the 34 LAGS for 2023, as presented in Figure 1, was 1,249,414. The mean population across the 364 local authorities was 3,432 inhabitants. The smallest local authority had 229 inhabitants, while the largest had a population of 19,034. The population means by LAGs also show substantial variation, as the smallest means is 1,970 inhabitants (LAG Țara Oltului), while the largest population mean is 7,596 (LAG3).

Figure 1. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs population means



Source: own calculations

The country-level financial allocation under the Call was split between EAFRD support (EUR 500 million) and ESF+ support (EUR 160,736,843). The following four funding criteria were applied to make allocations in eligible areas:

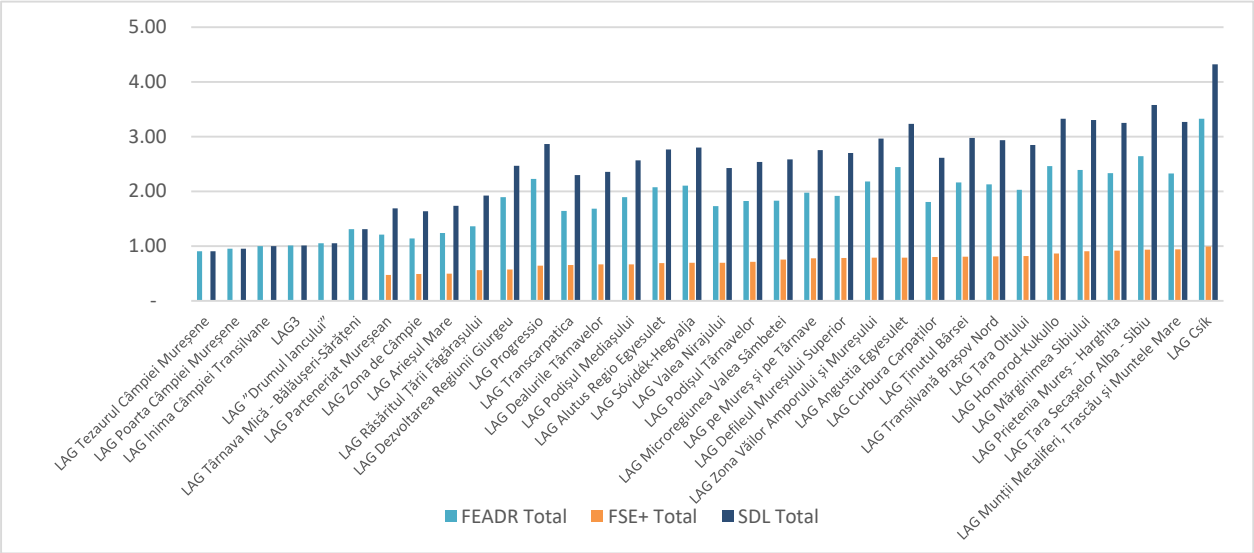
1) Of the total EAFRD funding, 75% is allocated according to the territory (816.06 EUR/km2) and population (16.73 EUR/inhabitant) covered by the LAGS of eligible areas.
2) The remaining 25% of EAFRD funding is allocated according to the quality of the LAG local development strategies.
3) 75% of the ESF+ funding is allocated proportionally to the territory (262.34 EUR/km^2) and population (5.38 EUR/inhabitant) covered by LAGS of eligible areas; and,
4) An additional 25% of the ESF+ funding is distributed according to the quality of the LAG local development strategies.

Figure 2 presents the result of these distributions by the 34 LAGs. Funding under the first EAFRD criteria varies from the lowest of EUR 348 thousand (LAG Tezaurul Câmpiei Mureșene) to EUR 2.76 million (LAG Csík). In contrast, the average funding across the 34 LAGs was EUR 1.27 million. Regarding the funding based on the quality of LAG local development strategies, under the EAFDR, all met the minimum quality criteria and thus received the same amount of funding, i.e., EUR 560 thousand, which means that this is a constant invariant indicator. However, this raised total EAFDR funding to an average of EUR 1.83 million, with the lowest value being EUR 0.91 million and the maximum being EUR 3.33 million.

Six LAG SLDs did not include related priorities and were therefore not eligible for ESF+ funding. The remaining 28 LAGs received an average support of EUR 0.74 million (LAG Parteneriat Mureșean obtained the lowest support of EUR 0.48 million, while LAG Csík secured funding of EUR 1 million).

Overall, the 34 LAGs with headquarters in the Centre region secured a total funding of EUR 83.02 million, of which EUR 62.27 million was from EAFRD, and EUR 20.75 million was from ESF+ funding.

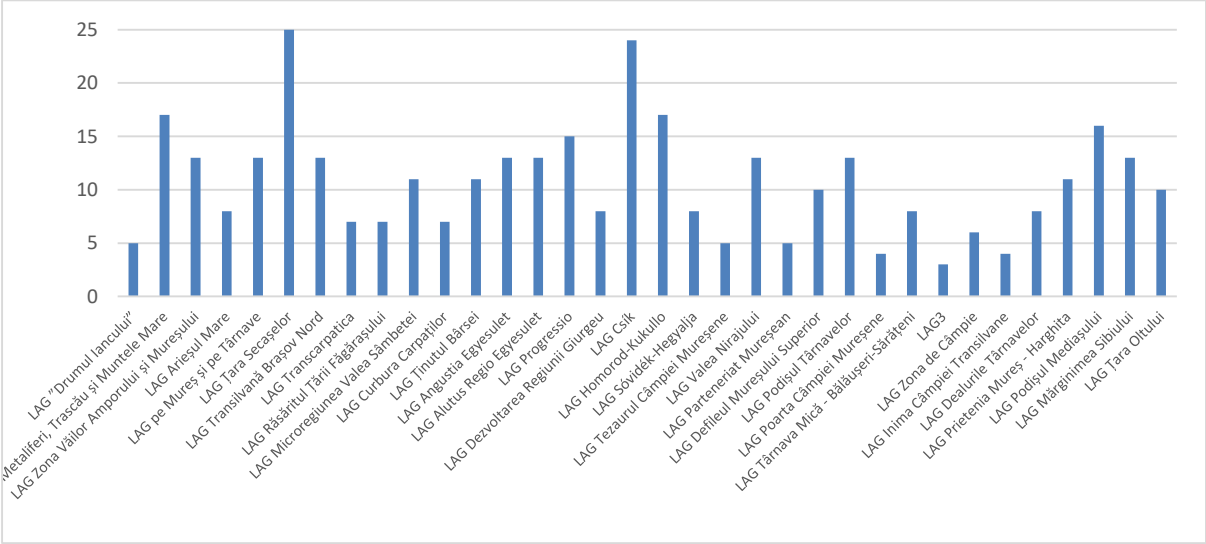
Figure 2. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs Local Development Strategy funding by source, in millions of EUR



Source: own calculations

Regarding the structure, the CALL selection report (Figure 3) indicates membership based on the number of participating local authorities. The mean membership is 11 local authorities; however, the largest one included 25 local authorities (LAG Țara Secașelor), and the smallest with three local authorities (LAG3). The total number of LAG members, including also the private sector and civic sector (including private persons), is not reported but is evaluated under the partnership criteria, and it is described below.

Figure 3. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs local authority membership



Source: own calculations

Besides a set of basic qualifying requirements, each LAG strategy submitted is evaluated according to the extent to which it contributes to the LEADER principles and can obtain a maximum of 100 points. However, the proposal scoring matrix, presented in Table 2, indicates that while evaluation scores are reported as numbers, they eventually report qualitative data. As a result, of the 25 evaluation variables used across five LEADER principles to assess CLLD/LEADER proposals, 18 variables are dichotomous data, and six are ordinal data. Despite these facts, misleadingly, the Managing Authority presents proposal evaluations as numerical aggregates by criteria and as totals, as follows: 1) the quality of partnership (21 points); 2) territorial coverage (12 points); 3) the performance/previous experience of LAGs (6 points); 4) the quality of the Local Development Strategy (28 points); 5) the multi-sectoral nature of the strategy (33 points). As all submitted LAG strategies comply with formal selection criteria, we will not describe them here. Instead, we would focus on the dimensions of the LEADER principles that the LAG strategies prioritised.

Table 2. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs strategies scoring matrix

	Sub-criteria						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The quality of partnership (CS1)	0; 2; 3	0; 3	0; 3	0; 3	0; 3	0; 3	0; 3
Territorial coverage (CS2)	0; 3	0; 3; 6	0; 3				
The performance/ previous experience of LAGs (CS3)	0; 2	0; 2	0; 2				
the quality of the Local Development Strategy (CS4)	0; 4	0; 4	0; 4	0; 4	0; 4	0; 4	0; 4
the multi-sectoral nature of the strategy (CS5)	0; 3	0; 3; 5; 7	0; 3; 5; 7	0; 3; 5; 7; 9	0; 3; 5; 7		

Source: own calculations

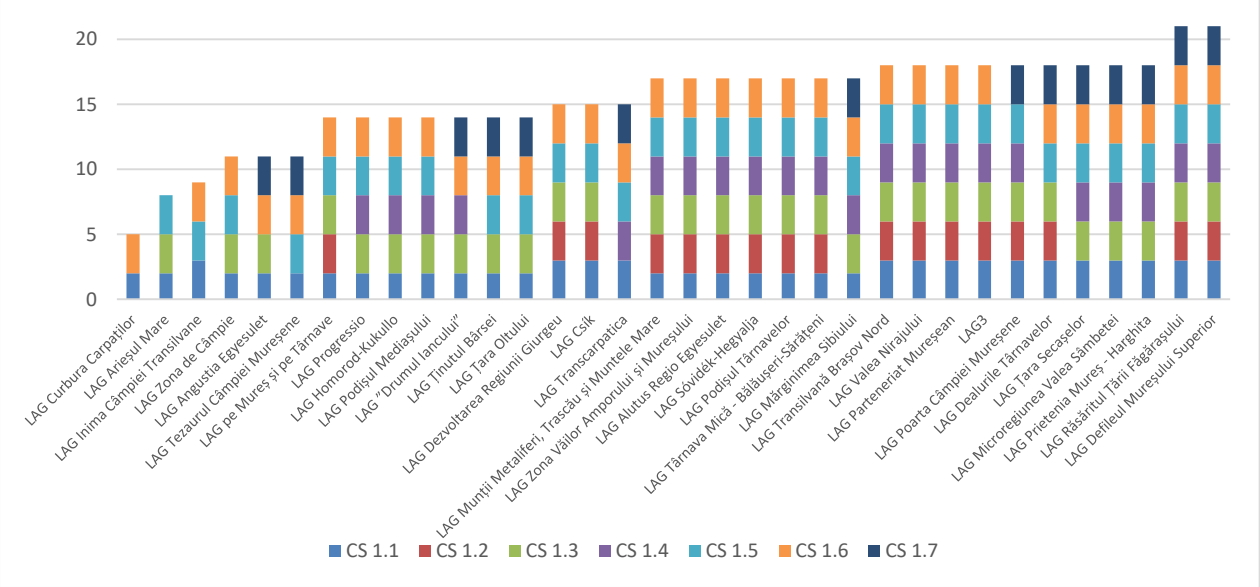
To avoid the fallacy of making numerosity assumptions about ordinal data, we treat all scores as qualitative data through this analysis. We will only report LAGs strategy scoring at the individual and proper ordinal categorisation at the LEADER principle level. Due to its misleading nature, we will avoid using aggregate scoring.

Figure 4 discusses the specific values of the seven sub-criteria to assess the LAG partnership structure. The degree of representation of the private sector and civil society (SC-1.1) sub-criteria is attributed zero if the share of the private sector and civic sector (including private persons) is below 60% of all membership, a value of 2 if the share is between 60% and 75%, or 3 should the two categories exceed 75% of all members. In effect, 15 LAG partnerships, or 44%, score 3, as the

representation of the private sector and civil society exceeds 75% of all members. In contrast, 19 LAGs have a score of 2 as the share is between 60% and 75%. No LAG scored 0, meaning all LAGs partnerships met the basic criterion of a minimum 60% representation of the private sector and civic sector (including private persons). Fifty per cent of LAGs in the Centre region do not include civil society associations representing the interests of a minority (except for the Roma minority) (SC-1.2). In contrast, 88%, or 30, of the LAGs include at least two associative forms representing the interests of women, youth, children, the elderly, and those who support environmental protection and human rights (SC-1.3).

A total of 64.70% of LAGs have in the composition at least one associative form that represents the interests of the Roma minority (SC-1.4), while 35.3%, or 12 LAGs, do not. Except for three LAGs, all the other 31 include at least one associative form representing vulnerable groups' interests (SC-1.5). Two LAG partnerships do not include at least two associative forms with economic purpose or representing the economic sector with their headquarters in the LAG territory (SC-1.6). In contrast, 58.82%, or 20 LAG partnerships, do not include young and/or female representatives (SC-1.7). Despite these limitations, compared to the national average of 14.54 points, the region's score is 15.32, which indicates that in terms of the partnership principal, LAG structures perform at a 69.26% national level and 72.97% regional level.

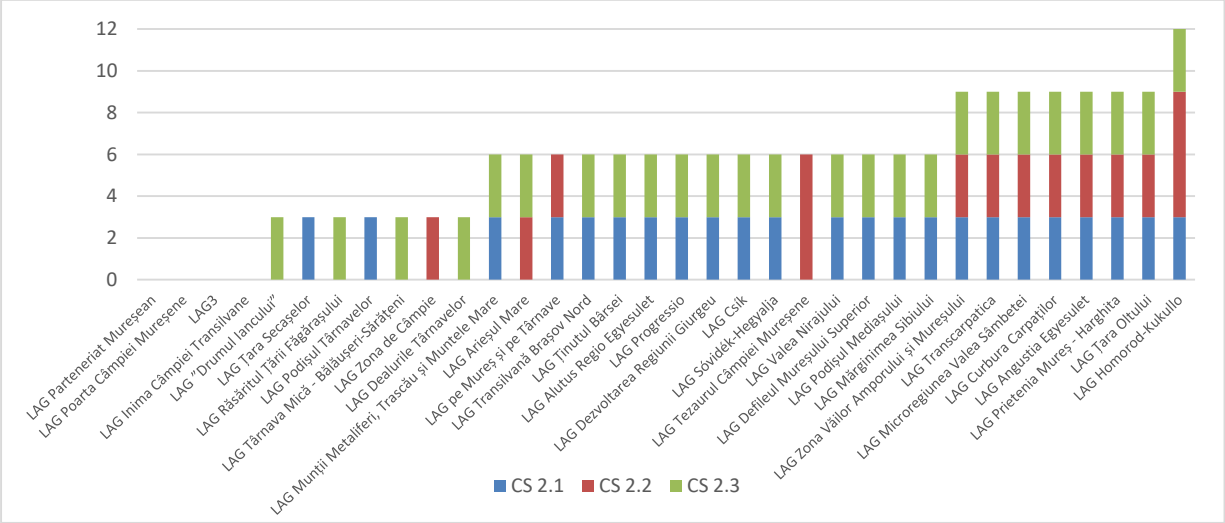
Figure 4. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs partnership scores by sub-criteria



Source: own calculations

Regarding **the second LEADER principle of territorial coverage**, Figure 5 indicates that 67%, or 23, LAGs cover a territory that meets the minimum size of 30,000 inhabitants or 10 ATUs. In comparison, 33%, or 11 LAGs, did not fit these standards. In addition, 35%, or 12, LAG partnerships include eligible territories not covered by LAGs in 2014-2020 and territories related to LAGs whose operating authorisations were withdrawn in 2014-2020. Finally, nearly 75% (25) of LAGs have at least one Territorial Administrative Unit in the Mountain Area.

Figure 5. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs partnership scores by sub-criteria



Source: own calculations

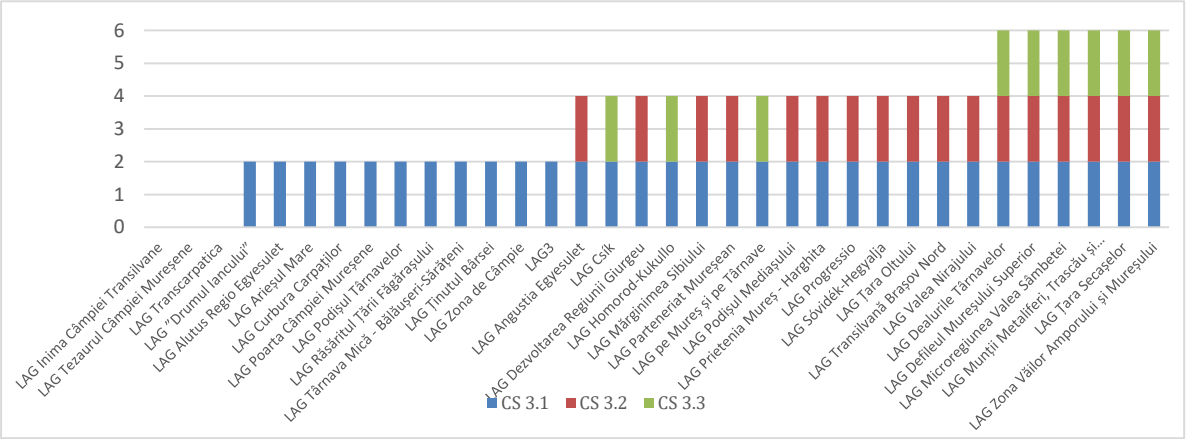
Overall, four LAGs (LAG Parteneriat Mureșean; LAG Poarta Câmpiei Mureșene; LAG3; and LAG Inima Câmpiei Transilvane) obtained a score of zero across the territorial coverage principles, while only one LAG (LAG Homorod-Kukullo) obtained the maximum possible score. Two LAGs include at least two local authorities without prior LEADER experience (LAG Tezaurul Câmpiei Mureșene and LAG Homorod-Kukullo).

Three sub-criteria were evaluated in the case of the performance or previous experience of the LAG principle. The results are presented in Figure 6 below. The first sub-criterion is whether the LAGs had experience implementing LEADER 2014-2020 (CS-32). Under this criteria, three LAGs have no such experience (LAG Transcarpatica, LAG Tezaurul Câmpiei Mureșene, and LAG Inima Câmpiei Transilvane), while 31 LAGs have such experience. The second evaluation criteria under the experience performance is whether the LAGs were beneficiaries under the measures of their own SDL 2014-2020 (as direct beneficiaries or in partnership) or implemented cooperation projects under sub-measure 19.3. In this case, 50%, or 17 LAGs, met this creation. Finally, 25 LAGs have no experience accessing other funds or have been beneficiaries of projects implemented through the

PNDR 2014-2020 (as direct beneficiaries or in partnership) other than those in their own SDL or cooperation projects.

Figure 3 shows that while six LAGs had prior experience in all three dimensions of the performance indicators, three LAGs had no experience whatsoever. 14 LAGs had experience in at least two sub-criteria, while 11 had experience only in implementing LEADER 2014-2020.

Figure 6. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs performance/ previous experience by sub-criteria



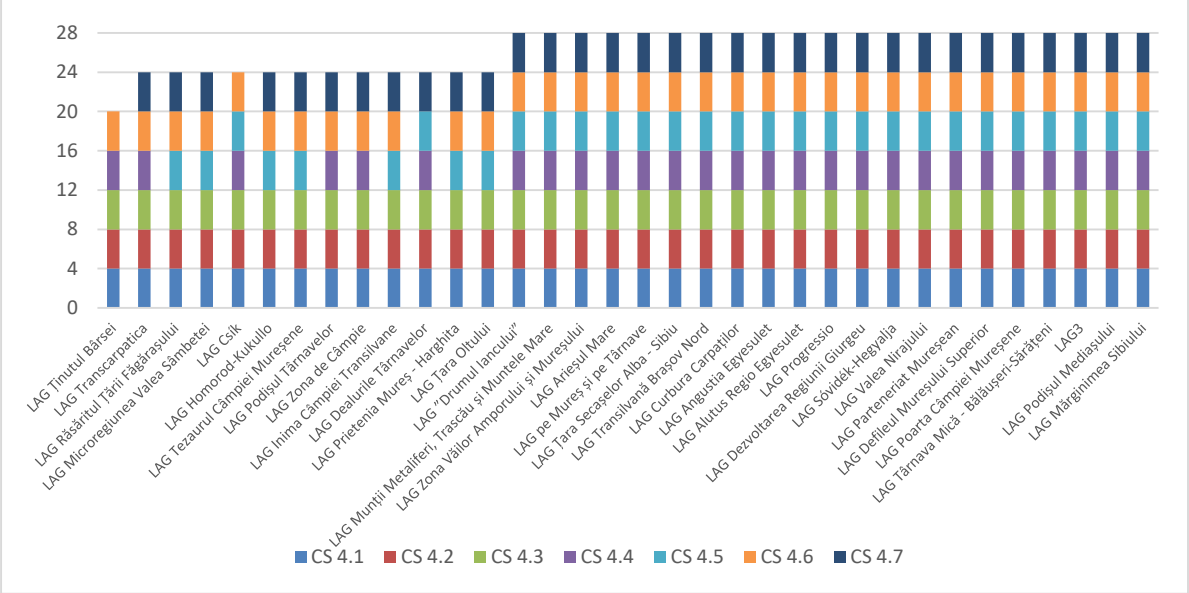
Source: own calculations

Overall, the 34 partnerships achieved a 55.88% performance or previous experience score, slightly below the 56.5% national score.

Seven sub-criteria are used to assess **the principle of Local Development Strategy quality**, which altogether measures the added value of the LDS to the development of the territory. Under this criterion, each subheading is measured as a dichotomous variable with values of zero or four. This criterion is assessed using seven items (Figure 7), which are: 1) the prioritising interventions in relation to the development needs of the territory (SC-4.1); 2) the capacity of the LAG to implement the strategy (SC-4.2); 3) the added value of the strategy in the territory (SC-4.3); 4) the inclusion of the Smart Village approach (social, digital innovation, green economy, etc.) or interventions financing projects targeting environmental and climate action - with an allocation of a minimum of 10% of the EAFRD allocation intended for all interventions in the SDL for each type of intervention (SC-4.4); 5) the inclusion of interventions that finance projects aimed at promoting and preserving local tangible and intangible heritage or interventions that finance projects with community benefits in the social or health field - with an allocation of at least 10% of the EAFRD allocation intended for all interventions in the SDL for each type of intervention (SC-4.5); 6) the inclusion of interventions that finance projects with an economic purpose whose direct beneficiaries are women and/or young

people (between 18 and 30 years old) (SC-4.6); and 7) the inclusion of the result indicator on job creation (SC-4.7).

Figure 7. CLLD and Leader-based LAGs Local Development Strategy quality assessment



Source: own calculations

Overall, 21 LAGs (60%) obtained maximum scores on all seven sub-criteria, 12 (35%) obtained scores of four on six out of the seven criteria, and one LDS obtains scores of four for five criteria.

In addition, LAG LDSs were assessed to determine how much they cover the three domains of local development, i.e., social, economic, and environmental (SC-5.1). The evaluation reports indicate that only nine strategies (LAG Munții Metaliferi, Trascău și Muntele Mare; LAG Zona Văilor Amporului și Mureșului; LAG Arieșul Mare; LAG pe Mureș și pe Târnave; LAG Transilvană Brașov Nord; LAG Răsăritul Țării Făgărașului; LAG Alutus Regio Egyesulet; LAG3; LAG Podișul Mediașului), or 26%, cover all three domains, while 25 strategies cover only one or two of the three dimensions.

Finally, the principle of **the multi-sectoral nature of the LAG strategy** is implemented by 28 LAGs of the 34 with headquarters in the Centre region. The CLLD component of the 28 LAGs LDSs was conducted along the following four sub-categories: 1) "EECO01 Total number of participants" and "ESCO01 Total number of participants in ESF+ actions" respectively (CS-5.2.1); 2) EECO06 Children under 18 years of age" and "ESCO02 Number of children under 18 years of age" respectively (CS-5.2.2); 3) "EECO01.1 Total number of participants (Roma)" (CS-5.2.3); and, 4) The estimated budget amount of actions of type c) as defined by the Social Inclusion and Dignity

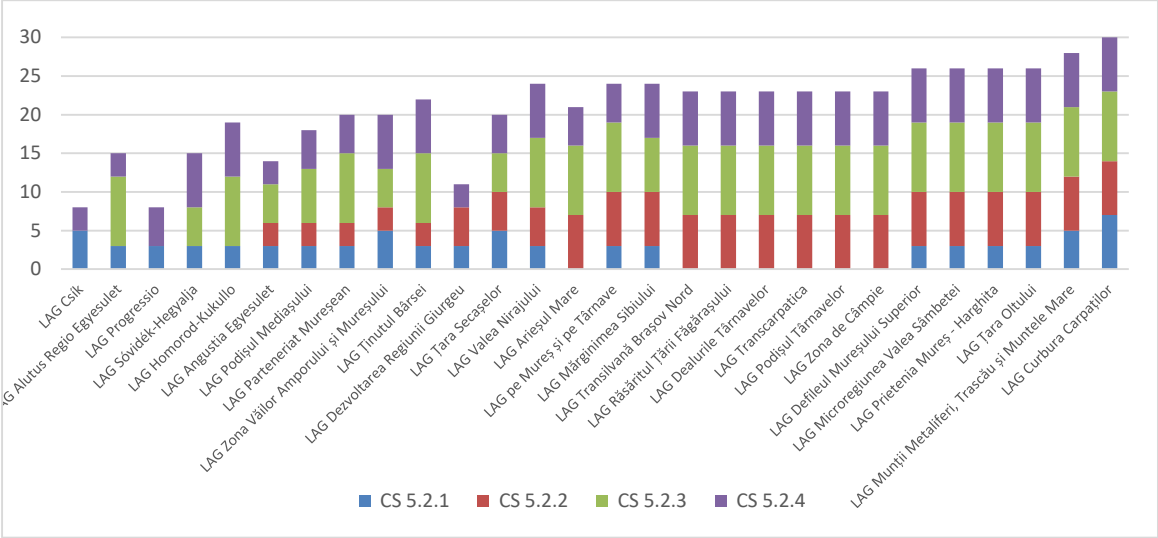
Programme "access for vulnerable children to excursions, visits, camps (for example creativity, sports, various themes), cultural and educational events, rural-urban experience exchanges, other similar actions, etc." (CS-5.2.4).

Scores under the first, second and fourth criteria are reported as multi-criteria ordinal variable values of 0, 3, 5, and 7, while the third criteria additionally include a value of 9. Figure 8 presents the LAG score and indicates that under the first criteria, seven LAGs obtained a score of zero, which means that those LAGs had committed in the LDSs to include less than 200 persons in ESF+ actions, while 16 LAG LDSs, with a score of three, committed to engage between 200 and 450 persons, and four LAGS, with a score of five assumed the involvement between 451 and 700 persons, and, last but not least, one LAG, with a commitment to involve over 700 persons in ESF+ action, scored 7.

The “ESCO02 Number of children under 18 years of age” indicator is a per cent of the "ESCO01 Total number of participants in ESF+ actions" indicator. The five LAG strategies with less than 90% of people identified under CS-5.2.1 as children under age 18 received a score of zero. A share of under 18 ranging between 90,00% and 92.50%, which is the case of five LAGs, received a score of 3. There are three LAGS with a score of 5 for those under 18, being between 92.51% and 95.00% of a total number of participants in ESF+ actions. Lastly, 15 LAGS under 18 represent over 95.00% of ESF+ action participants.

Indicator "EECO01.1 Total number of participants (Roma)" (CS-5.2.3) is expressed as a share of Roma under 18 years old from the value of “ESCO02 Number of children under 18 years of age”. Three LAGS assumed a share below 17% and obtained a score of zero. No LAGS were recorded in the range of 17.00% and 20%; thus, there was no score of three. There were four LAGS with commitments ranging between 20.01% and 23.00% and scores of 5, and two LAGS had a share between 23.01% and 26.00% and a score of 7. Most LAGS identified over 26% of Roma under the 18-year-old target groups, for which they were given a score of nine.

Figure 8. Multi-fund approach by LAGs Local Development Strategies



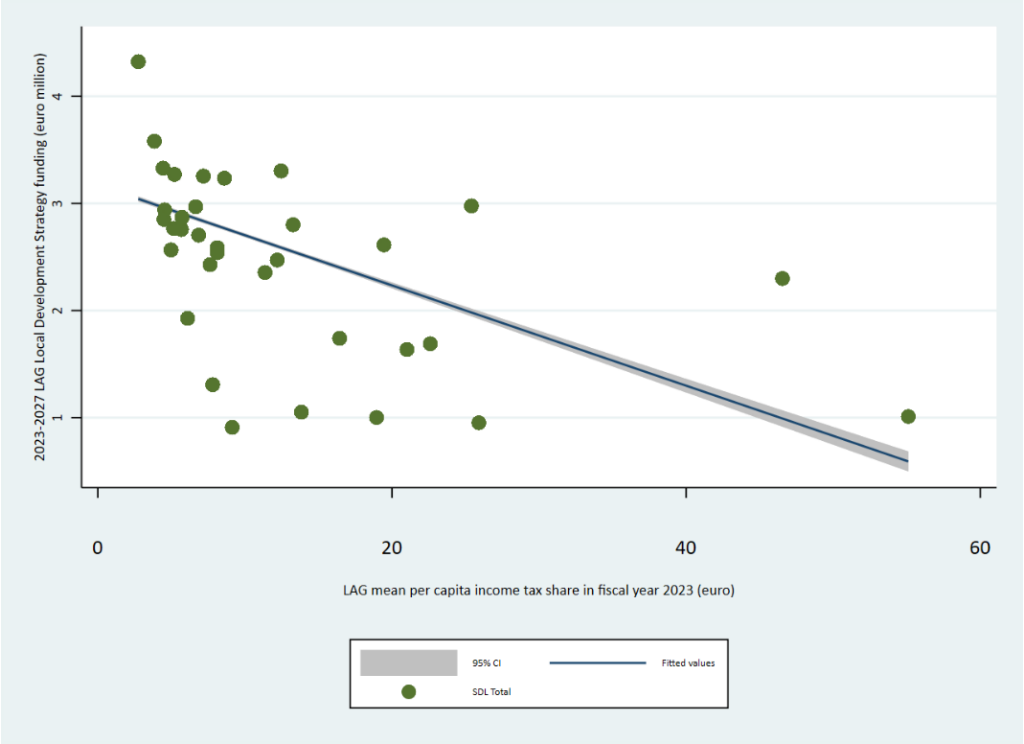
Source: own calculations

Finally, the "access for vulnerable children to excursions, visits, camps, cultural and educational events, rural-urban experience exchanges, other similar actions, etc." (CS-5.2.4) indicator under the Social Inclusion and Dignity Programme was scored zero if over 40% of allocation from the ESF+ in the LDS. No LAG LSD was in this category. However, four LAGs with LDS commitments between 30.01% and 40.00% obtained a score of 3. Six LDSs had ESF+ allocations between 20.01% and 30.00%. A total of 18 LDSs allocated below 20.00% of ESF+ budgets for this indicator and were assigned a score of 7.

5.2 Econometric analysis

The scatterplot in Figure 9 shows the negative correlation between per capita income tax quota allocation and CALL funding across the 34 LAGS in the Centre region. The linear regression established that LAG level per capita income tax quota allocation could statistically significantly predict LAG CLLD/LEADER funding ($F(1, 32) = 10.44$, $p= .0029$) LAG level per capita income tax quota allocation accounted for 24.60% of the explained variability in CLLD/LEADER funding. Thus, for every additional EUR LAG level per capita income tax quota allocation, EUR 3.60 per capita less was awarded through the CALL. In the case of the other two context proxy variables, we did not obtain statistically significant results.

Figure 9. LAGs mean per capita income tax share in fiscal year 2023 by CALL



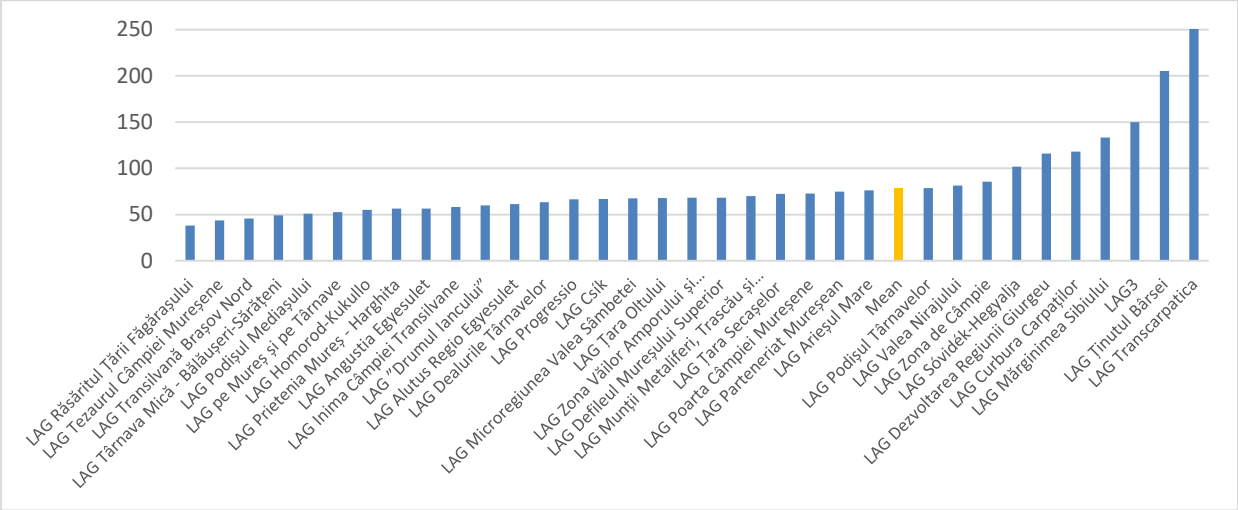
LAG-funding = 2.908761 - 0.036289*LAGINCOME [$F(1, 32) = 10.44$, $R^2 = 0.2460$, $p = 0.0029$]

Source: own calculations

As a next step, a one-way (between-groups) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the relationship between the 34 LAG level mean per capita income tax quota allocation of the 346 local authorities. The ANOVA assumption of independent groups is met as each local authority can belong to only one LAG, while Figure 13 indicates that data are normally distributed (with some outliers) with relatively equal variance.

The means and standard deviations are presented in Figure 10. This indicates that local authorities allocate the mean per capita income tax quota by EUR 78.35 EUR, and the standard deviation is 107.75. The minimum value was EUR 10.84 (in Mogoș comune, Alba county), and the maximum value was EUR 1,219.42 (Ghimbav, LAG Ținutul Bârsei), while the mean value was EUR 51.04, the variance was 11,609.54. The skewness of the mean per capita income tax quota allocation variable was found to be 7.23, which indicates an asymmetric distribution. In contrast, the kurtosis of 70.47 indicates that the distribution is more heavy-tailed than the normal distribution.

Figure 10. Per capita income tax quota allocation means by LAGs (EUR)



Source: own calculations

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if per capita own income share of local authorities in the Centre NUTS2-region was different for groups with LAGs. Data is mean ± standard error. The 364 local authorities were classified according to their LAG membership. There was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA (F (33,330) = 1.76, p = .0076).

Table 3. Mean per capita income tax quota allocation of the 346 local authorities by LAGS

	SS	df	MS	F	Prob > F
Between groups	630688.163	33	19111.7625	1.76	0.0076
Within groups	3583573.59	330	10859.3139		
Total	4214261.75	363	11609.5365		

Bartlett's equal-variances test: chi2(33) = 417.0993 Prob>chi2 = 0.000

Source: own calculations

A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that per capita own income share of local authorities was statistically significantly higher in the LAG Transcarpatica group compared to LAG Munții Metaliferi control group (205.34 ± 46.79 per capita own income share of local authorities, p = .007), LAG Transcarpatica vs LAG Zona Văilor Amporului și Mureșului (207.11 ± 48.85, p = .012), LAG Transcarpatica vs LAG Arieșul Mare (199.21 ± 53.93, p = .0081), LAG Transcarpatica vs LAG pe Mureș și pe Târnave (222.65 ± 48.85, p == .002), LAG Transcarpatica vs LAG Țara Secașelor (203.04 ± 44.56, p = .0003), LAG Transcarpatica vs LAG Transilvană Brașov Nord (229.66 ± 48.85, p = .0002), LAG Ținutul Bârsei vs LAG Transilvană Brașov Nord (159.45 ± 42.69, p == .007). In the

case of an additional 17 comparisons per capita, the income share of local authorities was statistically significantly lower. Overall, we have found that in the case of 24 LAG comparisons, out of 561, there was a statistically significant difference in local authorities' per capita own income share. However, there were no statistically significant differences between the other groups.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed to test the validity of the CALL assumption that local economic and social conditions-related variables do not have a systematic distribution structure across LAGs. Therefore, their exclusion from funding decisions is not relevant from the perspective of funding allocations.

We have found that the 25 evaluation categories of LAGs that submitted local development strategies were not to be treated as actual evaluation criteria but as methods to assess the presence and/or the intensity of LAG principles. Following the compliance of LAGs with minimum quality standards, allocating the CLLD/LEADER programme funds happened based on the criteria of LAGs' surface and population, except for the ESF+. Thus, of the total EUR 83.01 million awarded to the 34 LAGs in the Centre region, EUR 62.27 million was awarded under the EAFDR funding. However, while 30.60% (EUR 19.05 million) were awarded under the EAFRD for the quality of LAG local development strategies these amounts were equally allocated among all 34 LAGs (i.e. EUR 560,333), implying that all LDSs meet the minimum requirements, and assuming larger outputs and results were not considered as being relevant to differentiate funding levels. Regarding ESF+ funding, 62.52% (EUR 12.97 m) were allocated under the territory and population criteria, while 37.48% was under the LSD quality criteria. This means that of the total EUR 83.02 million allocated to the 34 LAGs with headquarters in the Centre region, 9.37%, or EUR 7,78 million, were attributed according to LDS performance criteria. All this implies that beyond meeting the threshold of funding criteria, LAGs Local development strategies play a marginal role in funds allocation.

The one-way analysis of variance results provides sufficient evidence of a statistically significant difference between local authorities' mean per capita income share in 24 LAG comparisons. This contradicts the assumption of nonsystematic variance of local authorities' per capita own income share by LAGs. This is especially relevant as, according to the regression results, the CALL funding is also statistically significantly associated with LAGs' level mean per capita own income share of local authorities. The potential role per capita own income share of local authorities play in CLLD/LEADER funding levels has been overlooked in the funding assessment process. Therefore, not accounting for the local authority's economic context at the LAGs level results in the 2023 CLLD/LEADER funding in Romania's Centre region being redistributive in nature. More explicitly, local economies that generate lower per capita incomes are rewarded with larger levels of

CLLD/LEADER funding. The estimated additional one-EUR LAG level per capita income tax quota allocation, EUR 3.60 per capita less, was awarded through the CALL.

These findings have three principal policy-relevant implications. Firstly, LAGs territorial partnerships do not cancel out the variance of local economic heterogeneity. This means that not accounting for this structural difference, in the long run, could lead to CLLD/LEADER funding, which could result in territorial disparity across local authorities by LAG partnership memberships. Secondly, the CALL funding criteria based on meeting minimum standards in a non-competitive setting could, in the long run, lead to a race to the bottom in achieving the LEADER principles. Finally, the lack of provisions in the CALL related to the LAG level territorial allocation of funding disregards the identified substantive disparities across local authorities members of the same LAGs, which could result in power politics across more prominent and less endowed local authorities in funds allocation decisions.

The principal limitations of the research include the focus on a small set of LAGs (34), and thus generalising across the nearly 3,500 LAGs across the European Union 27 member states would require a more substantive sample of LAGs. In addition, the cross-sectional research approach limits extrapolation over time. Thus, further research would be required to construct a panel structure to ensure that results are robust beyond one single point in time. Finally, further research would be beneficial on the actual spending of CLLD/LEADER funding to estimate the distribution of resources according to LAG members. This is a substantial aspect thatrequires further analysis as LAGs exhibit a significant variance in the number of local authorities constituting, i.e., while the mean LAG has nearly 11 members, the smallest LAG in the Centre region comprises three local authority members. In contrast, the largest one brings together 25 local authorities.

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