

“The inclusion of the Roma community was encouraged and evaluated through a system of indicators developed by the ERGO Network”^{*} - a story of success...

In Bulgaria the implementation of the CLLD in the 2014-2020 programming period started within the Rural Development Program 2014-2020, which is the successor of the LEADER approach that was applied in Bulgaria for the first time in the previous programming period. During this period, the budget for implementation of local development strategies is significantly increased - it is almost two times larger than the previous period's, which means that the strategies that are expected to be funded will be two times more. *

Besides the change in the name of the program, in this period introduced new elements including:

1. The planning of local development strategies can be done by municipalities, LAG's, unions of LAG's or municipalities, with unions of 2 or 3 municipalities or LAG's bringing extra points during the evaluation of the strategy.
2. For the first time, there is an opportunity to apply funding from multiple sources, which means measures other than the Rural Development Program's may be applied (“Human Resource Development” OP, “Science and Education for Smart Growth” OP and “Environment” OP).
3. Villages from the 28 regional cities in Bulgaria may also be included in the territory of a LAG or a union of LAGs.

One significant change that was introduced during this period was the requirement to describe how the needs of vulnerable groups are reflected in the strategy during the planning of the LDS itself, which puts Roma communities in the position of a specific target group. At the end of the previous programming period, when we suggested that the integration of the Roma community should be one of the priorities of the LEADER approach, we often received replies from institutions that this is impossible, discriminatory and isn't allowed by the EU's regulations.

Thanks to general advocacy activities on a European level from the ERGO network (together with the ENRD), the idea that social inclusion for Roma may and should be among the priorities of the Local Initiative Groups^{*} was promoted. The idea subsequently found its place in regulation 16 and 21 of the governing body of Bulgaria – the Ministry of Agriculture and Foods.

The new changes provided an opportunity for the Roma communities to actively participate in the creation of LAGs and the planning of Local Development Strategies. It's a fact that the conditions were set, but the hardships were yet to come as this is a new element of the CLLD approach and the likelihood of the local level participation not being realized was practically huge. Reasons for that were the facts that:

1. Information among the existing LAGs for the social inclusion possibilities was not enough.
2. In most cases, LAG leaders are municipalities which mostly means that political figures will determine the work approach of the LAG and act as leaders.
3. The approach has not yet been applied in most parts of Bulgaria and the LAG's governing bodies will have difficulties when evaluating the opportunities of the social inclusion approach.
4. In most cases, the approach is considered an instrument for supporting agricultural producers, small businesses and municipalities from the viewpoint of creating a small-scale level of infrastructure.

1. Citation from the Local Community-led Development Strategy of LAG-Isperih
2. 35 Local Development Strategies were funded during the 2007-2014 program period.
3. Please see fact sheet “Social inclusion of Roma using LEADER and CLLD”

5. The populace on the territory of the LAG is not well-informed enough for the opportunities for participation and does not realize its role for creating the LAG and planning the LDS.
6. Well-informed consultant firms are deceiving municipalities and LAGs en masse by claiming that, if they were to make use of their skills during the LDS planning phase, their strategies would be funded. This led to the phenomenon which causes planning to happen from the top to the bottom instead of how it's supposed to be – bottom to the top. There was a process during which strategies filled out beforehand were being popularized among local communities, which is considered a violation of the approach's regulations.

By basing ourselves on experience from the previous period and our evaluations during this period, as well as on the ERGO Network and member organizations of the Network, we decided to develop an audit mechanism for measuring the quality of the participation of local Roma communities in the creation of LAG and planning of LDS processes.

The measurement of the quality of participation took place thanks to a tool developed specifically for the task which aimed at studying the view of the communities based on a self-evaluation of their own participation.

The results of this measurement were in no way focused on influencing the evaluation committee or advocating the LDS with a high score so it may be funded. The goal of the audit was mostly tasked with two things – showing the local LAG governing bodies that the process is being observed by the local community and they must take them into account, as well as to inform local NGOs/activists and motivate them to participate in the LAG, as well as the planning and implementation of the LDS, by applying the audit.

More information about CLLD Quality Audit - Strategy Planning phase, can be found on: <http://integrobg.org/?p=1425>

We can distinguish a few steps in the process of the audit's implementation and the stimulation of participation from Roma:

1. **Informing** – the first stage of the process is to inform the local community through local NGOs, activities and etc. of the existing opportunities within the CLLD approach. During our activities we made use of the opportunity we had to teach interviewers which, aside from practical work, also received additional information about the CLLD approach, the ways for participation and the eventual possibilities offered by solving the community's issues. By applying the audit, the interviewers managed to inform the local communities. Additionally, we used every opportunity we had to inform as many people as we can.
2. **Motivating** – A significant part of the work is motivating activists from the community or representatives of NGOs to participate in the process. Usually, the motivation of local activists to participate in such processes is not very great because of a lack of self-confidence, apathy toward the local level processes and etc. An important part of the motivational process is the recognition of **personal interest and community interest** for participation. It's important to recognize the specifics of the local community, the present issues and to make connections between the issues and their eventual solutions from the CLLD approach.
3. **Inclusion** – The next stage of the process passes through the involvement of local activists. Early on, involvement happens through the participation of local activists on the public discussions that every LAG is obliged to conduct in the preparatory phase of planning.

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Experience shows that a larger part of the participants on the public hearings and public events related to the planning of the LDS do not understand the approach well and generally do not know the Rural Development Program. This is why it's important for local activists to actively participate and ask relevant questions, even when in most cases they already know their answers. The goal of this participation is to demonstrate the interest and readiness for participation of Roma in the planning process as equal stakeholders on a local level. An essential element of this stage is the demonstration of empathy to the work of the LAG or the municipality, which leads to the planning process in order to get a good end product that can be competitive. The most important element of the Local Development Strategy's quality is for it to take account of local circumstances, reflect the real needs and plan measures that would meet those needs. Demonstrating empathy is usually very well-received by the experts that develop the corresponding strategy and they become more open for collaborative work. The final step of this phase is to offer help to the team developing the LDS, which can consist of: conducting a special meeting with representatives of the Roma community; conducting a survey with the community; collecting information that is not in official statistics and more.

4. **Contribution** – This is the most crucial stage of the participation of the community the Local Development Strategy's planning phase. During this stage, the specific issues of the Roma community are defined, as well as the areas for action and the needs of the local community. Preparations are necessary before conducting a meeting between the experts developing the LDS and the Roma community, such as a serious analysis of the **existing issues in the community and their reasons. Specific solutions** must then be based on this analysis and presented during the meeting with the experts. If the specific demands are not presented during the meeting with the necessary argumentation and instead more general issues are presented, then it's very likely that the wished results will be achieved as there's a possibility that the experts could have a much more different view on the methods of solving a specific issue. It's important to bring up the issue that not always measures from operative programs correspond to the needs of the local Roma community during the meeting, which is why such fitting measures need to be looked for in Regulation (EU) Number 1305/2013 or outside the same regulation, but ones that fit its goals. This, on one hand, makes the measures correspond more to the needs, but on the other hand makes the strategy more "derived" and unique. It's important that one stays within the ordinary strategies that only copy the measures from operative programs. The last step of this stage is for all suggestions to be submitted to the LAG or the municipality in a form, with it usually being a good idea to present them written down as an in-depth analysis of the community's issues, as well as the request that Roma be included in the evaluation criteria and be specifically mentioned as targets that provide additional points. This will guarantee the implementation of the measures specifically made to solve the community's issues.
5. **Observation** – observation is the last stage of the process, during which the NGO/group/community observes if their needs were adequately set within the LDS. Practice shows that LAGs usually don't publish their Local Development Strategies before they receive a confirmation for funding. In this case, it's important to have participants from the local community in LAG such as members of general assemblies or members of the governing bodies. This provides an opportunity to participate on the discussions of the final draft of the strategy, which every LAG does before it is submitted for a review to

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managing authority, so it may react if the community's needs are not taken into account or are described in the analytic part, but correspond to no measures that can deal with those needs. Practice from the first program period showed that very often, local communities are told they require a registered NGO which can be a part of a general assembly – however, that is not mandatory, as every citizen that has an address registration on the territory of the LAG may take part on the general assembly by signing a declaration, in which he states he is a part of the local civil community. It's important to keep in mind that very often, Local Initiative Groups set criteria such as the members not having any unpaid fees to the country and municipality or have been convicted for felonies for their members.

Following these five steps guarantees almost 100% the effective participation of Roma communities in the planning of the LDS, as well as the fact it will provide a positive effect on the community's status and will contribute toward the social inclusion of Roma on the territory of the LAG during the strategy's implementation phase. A very great example of this is the LDS of the LAG in Ispernih /leaderisperih.eu /. The Local Development Strategy of LAG– Ispernih has been approved for funding in this program period. The strategy has multiple funding sources and includes measures from the Rural Development Program, Human Resource Development Program and the Competitiveness and Innovation Program, whilst its approved budget is 5 232 000 lv /2 683 077 euro/. The strategy includes target measures for the integration of the Roma community, as well as many master measures that have the potential to also have an effect on the Roma community evaluated at around 2 000 000 lv /1 025 641 euro/. In the field of community growth, social inclusion, education, employment, social services and etc.

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