

Roma NGOs involvement within Local Action Groups of rural area in the Western region of Romania

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Abstract

The need of involvement of the rural Roma community within Local Action Groups' (LAG) initiatives represents one of the most important measures that the Romanian state has committed to implement based on the European Union Council Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the member states (2013). The Local Action Groups are functioning under the National Program for Rural Development and they should include active measures for Roma social inclusion in the local strategies of development. The present research aims to analyze Roma NGO's/ community involvement in the Local Groups' activity of the rural area in the Western region of Romania based on their relation with the public authorities and the LAG's management teams. In this context, we aim to identify possible active measures for Roma NGO's in order to strengthen the Roma involvement within the LAG's and to analyze possible main obstacles based on actors' perception and experience.

Keywords: roma, rural development, information, Local Action Groups

1 Introduction

The social situation of Roma is still one of the most sensitive challenges that the Romanian state is confronted with (Preoteasa et.al, 2009). Romania is one of the European Union member states with the largest Roma minority. According to the dates provided by the Council of Europe and civil society estimations, there are between 1.800.000 and 2.500.000 Roma, out of which more than 60% are living in rural areas. 80% of the Roma live under the minimum level of poverty and 84% of them have no utilities connection (water, electricity and sewage). According to the European Commission, 55% of the Romanian population live in rural areas and are exposed to poverty and social exclusion; 20% of the entire Romanian population lives in severe poverty. In the case of Roma, the estimation indicates higher numbers. One of the World Bank's recent studies (2014) shows that one out of five people who should enter the labor market in Romania is Roma. This statistic underlines the necessity of strategic investment in the development, inclusion and participation of Roma at all level of the social and economic life of the communities where they are living, as they can assure a healthy demographic growth and a potential social base for economical development.

Several legislative initiatives (for example, Law 430/2001) and public policies have been adopted. Special measures for vulnerable target groups have been implemented (where Roma were directly focused) by European Funds Projects (Human Resources, Civil Society, Rural Development). The discussion on the impact of these measures is sensitive, as no specific or general impact studies in order to achieve a consistent frame of how the situation of Roma has improved have been realized so far.

The present research aims to analyze the Roma NGO's/ community involvement in the Local Action Groups' (LAG) activity of the rural area in the Western region of Romania based on their relation with the public authorities and the LAG's management teams. In this context, we aim to identify possible active measures for Roma NGO's in order to strengthen the Roma involvement within the LAG's and to analyze possible main obstacles based on actors' perception and experience.

In this context, The Rural Development Program plays a consistent role for the sustainable development of Romania in the future. The Rural Development Program has a very important impact in the process of inclusion and increasing participation of Roma as equal citizens at all levels of society, as it starts from the community needs and goes towards top policy decisions, from the local and specific level to actions and political decisions that can hardly affect the community's day to day life.

Taking into consideration the present situation of the Roma civil society within the rural area, there are few Roma NGO's in rural areas and most of the existing Roma NGO's don't have the capacity to manage and implement projects targeting Roma of the rural area.

2 Methodology

The main research that was used was the social investigation by *questionnaire* method. The research instrument will be applied as follows: self-applied after a short training session during LAG's meetings. A standardized questionnaire was applied for each target group: LAG's management representatives and Public Authorities (Ministry representatives, key-experts etc.). The results were analyzed in a comparative manner.

The research sample was randomly selected on a free answer will basis. The sample is consistent in the above mentioned two categories. A next research step will consist in applying the same research investigation method to Roma NGO's and/ or to their community representatives in order to stress the common key-points perspective or to investigate possible causes of the poor and weak points of the relationship, to foresee possible ways of intervention where there are Roma communities.

The research was applied during October 2015 on a sample of N=14 (LAG's management) and N=6 (Public Authorities representatives - PA).

A pilot study was applied in the first stage of the research. The data research was statistically gathered and analyzed on a frequency basis.

3 Results' interpretation

The results are presented on the following indicators/ variables:

1. The general perspective on LAG's impact on community.

Most of the respondents see the existence of a LAG as an advantage for the local community. The general perspective expresses a need of developing the LAG's activities and also their positive impact on the community development. Only one answer from the LAG's management team has been registered that affirmed the lack of impact.

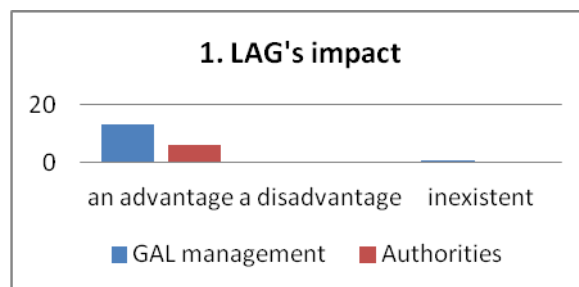


Figure 1. LAGs impact in community

2. The relationship description of the Roma NGO's

By the second group of items, we aimed to identify the type of relationship of the main actors (LAG's management team and PA representatives) that they consider having with Roma NGO's/ Roma representatives. Further on, we analyzed the situation that better suits to theirs. In Fig.2, the results indicate that the relation is characterized by an equality perspective: partners for more than half of the LAG's management. There are also some answers that see the Roma NGO's as beneficiary of the LAG's projects. That answer could indicate a lower level of trust based on the general representation of Roma's lack of professional competency and education. The PA representatives declared in the same percentage that the Roma NGO's are partners, but that they have no relation at all with them. Taking into consideration the small number of the PA representative's sample (N=6), we advice to take into disscussion a deeper qualitative research intrument to find the significance of this particular answer.

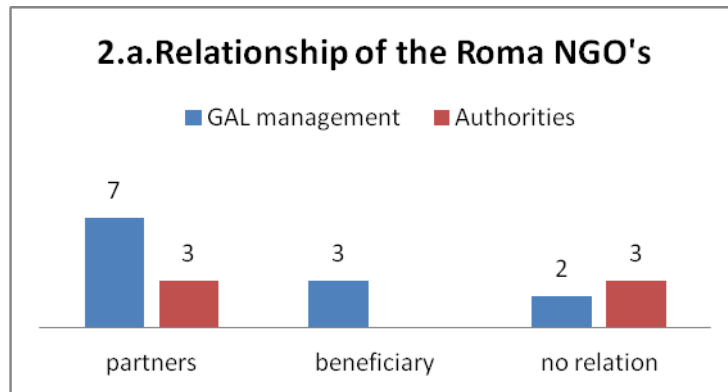


Figure 2. Comparative representation of the Roma NGO's type of relation

The Fig.3 indicates the second perspective based on a menu answer list; we have encountered the most answers on the b. point *less interested in all the activites we have*. If we connect this line of answers with the one of personal perspective on ways to improve the relationship: 8.c. *A contact person to collaborate with* (Fig.7) and the answers of the Fig.2 (*beneficiaries*), we can affirm that one of the major issues is the lack of Roma community organisation within the LAG's.

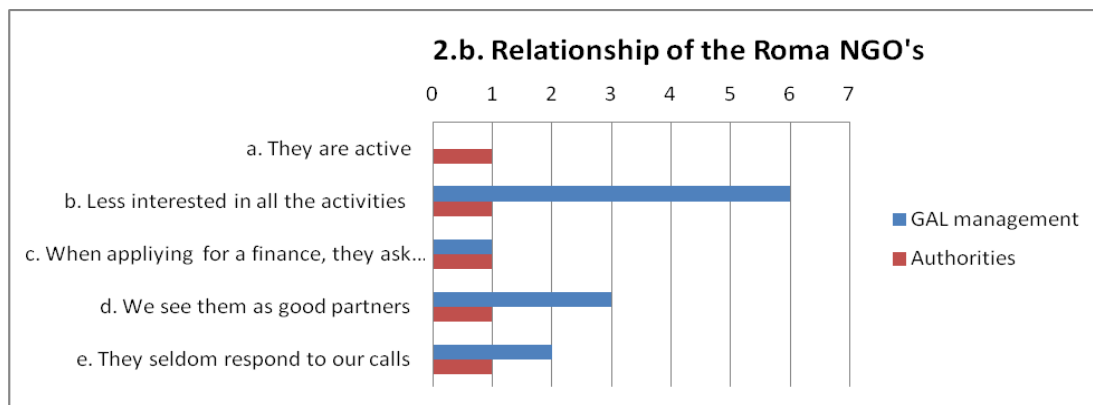


Figure 3. Types of relationship

The general perception of Roma community involvement within the LAG's activity is characterized as a welcoming idea by most of the subjects. Most answers agree on the idea that *in time and with patience there will be seen some results*. The results indicated a non-discriminatory perspective, but a constant effort to be made in order to succeed.

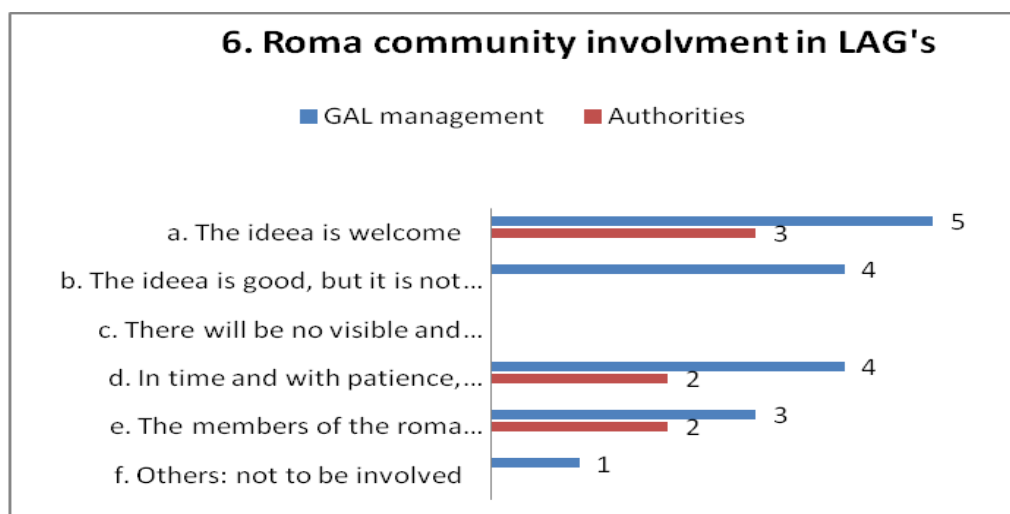


Figure 4. Perception on Roma community involmment in LAG's

3. Scale of Roma NGO's perception of involvement in LAG's

In this order of ideas, we imagined a degree scale of 5 points (where 1 is the lowest mark and 5 is the highest) in order to characterize the level of Roma NGO's and community's representatives within the LAG's activity. As designed in the graphs above, most of the answers indicated the lowest mark (1 for the LAG's management and 2 for the PA representatives). There was no answer registered for the highest score, except one of 4 mark. The results show that Roma involvement is almost inexistent and their actions and activities are very inconsistent and vague (Fig.5)

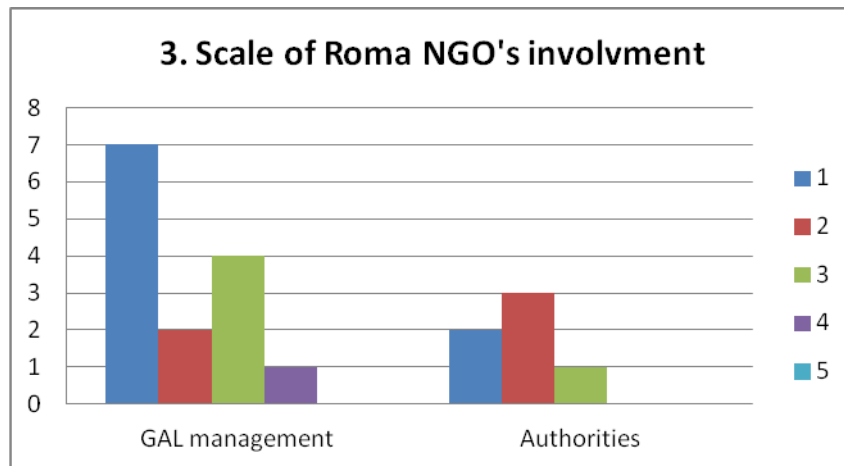


Figure 5. Scale of Roma NGO's involmment

4. On the future perspective (the optimism degree) both LAG management team and the PA representatives agree on the fact that the present situation will improve in the next period of time. The high level of optimism could be seen as a solid base for future actions and a will in order to motivate these future actions.

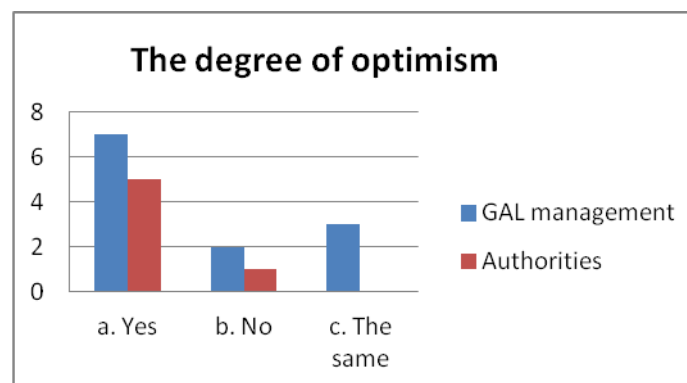


Figure 6. The Optimistic Perspective

As for the examples of needs to improve the cooperation between Roma NGO's and LAG's, the most mentioned was the *contact person* for the LAG's perspective, while the PA representatives mentioned more trainings in order to achieve professional competency. Based on the optimism scale, we investigate the axis where the two groups need to develop. Correlating this answers with those of the Roma NGO's type of relations (Fig.2), we may confirm the open expression of the Roma community to raise a voice, on the one hand; and to capacitate and train in order to become professionalized, on the other hand.

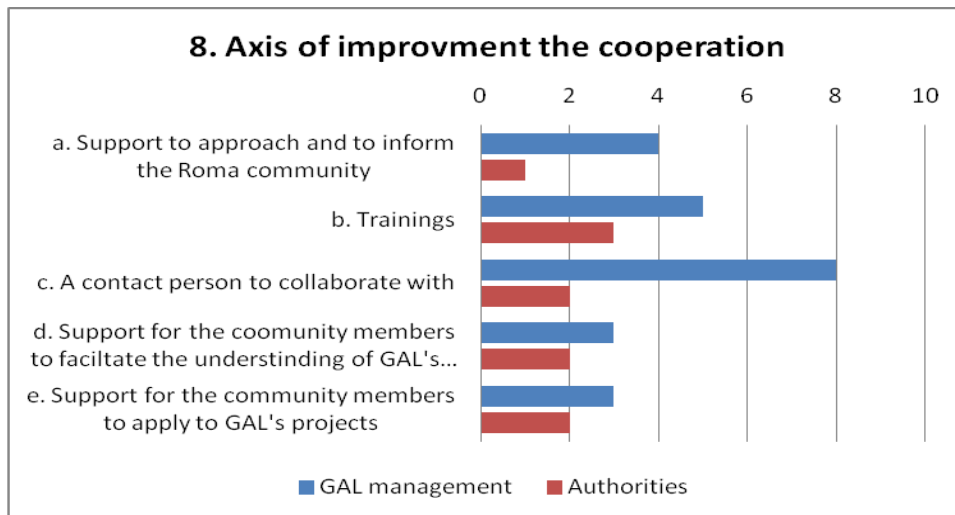


Figure 7. Future directions

5. On the item describing the self – perception of the most frequent obstacles that they meet in their activities, the most mentioned was the lack of financial funding, seconded by the lack of resources and lack of professional skills (Fig.8). No xenophobic or discriminatory answers were recorded.

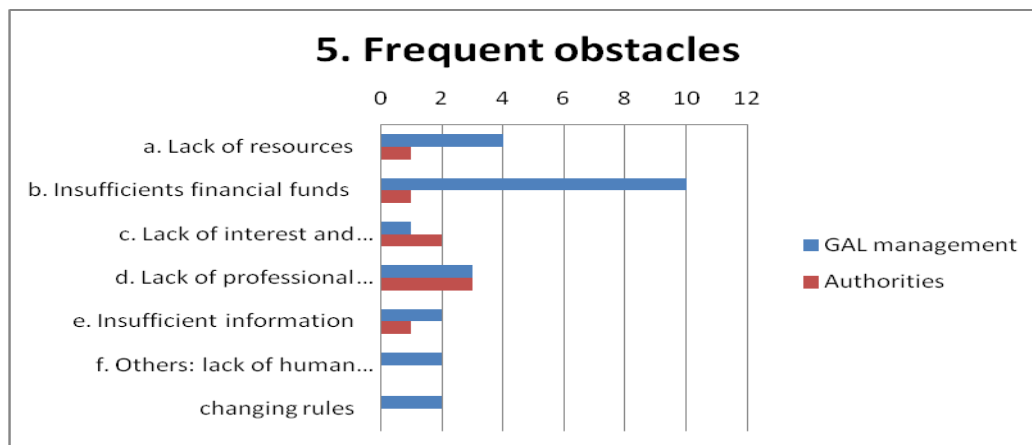


Figure 8. Obstacles

4 General conclusions

The study was locally applied on 25 LAG representatives of the West and Nord/West Regions of Romania, so these conclusions cannot afford to be generalized for the entire Romanian territory. These LAGs are developing their activities in multi-ethnic communities and have embedded specific features due to the cultural, social and economical level.

Based on these general remarks we conclude that:

1. There is a recognized need of Roma NGOs and Roma representatives' involvement within the LAG's activity. This need is urgent as the idea of Roma involvement is perceived as welcome.
2. There is a strong issue referring to help for the Roma community to get/ to be organized in order to become a more active partner within the LAGs. According to this aspect, the problem of professional skills and training is recognised (for both Roma and non-Roma members).
3. The relationship between Roma NGO's within the LAGs (management) and with the Public Management Authorities is an open one, based on dialogue. A need for more active involvement from both parts is recognized, as they are considered to have partnership basis.

4. The future steps/ measures to be done refer to active support for the Roma community by more financial support and with more informational and professional support.

The situation of Roma has embedded specific issues and needs measures to be taken accordingly. By the new type of strategy that deals with social problems from bottom-up, we consider that the Roma community could have a better chance of improvement (social and economical). The rural area and its social dimensions need a special attention and further research on both qualitative and quantitative based methodologies.

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