

The inclusion of the Roma community was encouraged and evaluated through a system of indicators developed by the ERGO Network - A story of success

The Republic of Bulgaria started the implementation of the CLLD approach during the 2014-2020 period 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 in the previous period, which means that the number of strategies that are expected to be funded will be two times higher. *

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

1. The planning of local development strategies can be done by municipalities, Local Action Groups (LAGs), unions of LAGs or municipalities, with unions of 2 or 3 municipalities or LAGs receiving extra points during the evaluation of the strategy.
2. For the first time, there is an opportunity to apply for funding from multiple sources, which means measures other than those of the Rural Development Programs may be applied ("Human Resource Development", "Science and Education for Smart Growth and "Environment" operational programmes).
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 is the requirement to describe how the needs of vulnerable groups are reflected in the strategy during the planning of the Local Development Strategy (LDS) itself, which make Roma communities 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 was impossible, discriminatory and wouldn't be allowed by EU regulations.

Thanks to general advocacy activities on the European level by ERGO Network (together with the European Network for Rural Development), 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 regulations 16 and 21 of the governing body of Bulgaria – the Ministry of Agriculture and Foods.

The new changes provided an opportunity for Roma communities to actively participate in the creation of LAGs and the planning of Local Development Strategies. 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 local level participation not being realized was practically huge, because of:

1. Not enough information among the existing LAGs for social inclusion possibilities.
2. In most cases, LAGs are led by municipalities, which means that political figures determine the approach of the LAG.

3. The approach has not yet been applied in most parts of Bulgaria and the LAGs' 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.
5. The populace on the territory of the LAGs is not informed enough of 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 a phenomenon which causes planning to happen from the top to the bottom instead of how it is supposed to be – bottom to 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 the experience from the previous period and our evaluations during this period, as well as on those of ERGO Network and its members, 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 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 for a high score of specific LDS. The goal of the audit was to show 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 about the process and motivate them to participate in the LAG, as well as to plan and implement LDS.

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

We can distinguish several steps in the process of the audit implementation and the stimulation of Roma participation:

1. **Informing** – the first stage of the process is to inform the local community through local NGOs, activities etc. of the existing opportunities within the CLLD approach. During our activities we taught interviewers who, aside from practical work, also received additional information about the CLLD approach, ways of 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 could.
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 local processes etc. An important part of the motivational process is the recognition of **personal interests and community interests** for participation. It is important to recognize the specifics of the local community and 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 in public discussions that every LAG is obliged to conduct in the preparatory phase of planning. Experience shows that a larger part of the participants in public hearings and 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 is important for local activists to actively participate and ask relevant questions; even when in most cases they already know the 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 towards 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 elements of the Local Development Strategy's quality are taking into account local circumstances, reflecting the real needs and planning 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 community participation in 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 specific demands are presented during the meeting with the necessary argumentation, and not only general issues, then it is very likely that intended results will be achieved, as there is a possibility that the experts could have a different view on the methods for solving a specific issue. It is important to explain during the meeting that measures from operative programs not always correspond to the needs of the local Roma community, 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 the one hand, makes the measures correspond more to the needs, but on the other hand makes the strategy more “derived” and unique. It is 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. It usually is a good idea to present them 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, which provides 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 whether 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 is important to have participants from the local community in the LAG, e.g. as members of general assemblies or members of the governing bodies. This provides an opportunity to participate in the discussions of the final draft of the strategy, which every LAG conducts before the LDS is submitted for a review to the managing authority, so it may react if the community's needs are not taken into account or if they are described in the analytic part, but no measures correspond to those needs. Practice from the first program period showed that very often, local communities are told that they require a registered NGO, which can be a part of a general assembly – however, this is not mandatory, as every citizen with a registered address on the territory of the LAG may take part in the general assembly by signing a declaration, in which he or she states that they are a part of the local civil community. It is important to keep in mind that very often, Local Initiative Groups set criteria, such as no one with unpaid taxes to the country and municipality or no one who has been convicted for felonies can be members.

Following these five steps guarantees almost 100% effective Roma participation in the planning of the LDS, will provide a positive effect on the community's status and will contribute towards the social inclusion of Roma on the territory of the LAG during the strategy's implementation phase. A very good 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 and social services.

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November 2016