



Resituating the Local in Cohesion and Territorial Development



Cover Photo: Baia Sprie (Felsőbánya), Maramureş County, Romania (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), Christi)

Case Study Report
Micro-Regional Association Mara-Natur in
Maramures County, Romania

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Abbreviations

EC	European Commission
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EGTC	European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDA BMMA	Intercommunity Development Association Baia Mare Metropolitan Area
LAU	Local Administrative Unit
LDS	Local Development Strategy
LEADER	Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale
MARD	Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development
MRDPA	Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration
NPLD	National Plan for Local Development
NPRD	National Plan for Rural Development
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
RSTD 2035	Romania's Strategy for Territorial Development 2035
PARD	The Payment Agency for Rural Development
NW RDA	North-West Regional Development Agency
SGI	Services of General Interest
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Executive Summary

Background. Mara-Natur is one of the 239 local action groups in Romania that are a part of LEADER, a European Union's initiative destined to improve rural livelihoods at European level. LEADER is measure 19 of Romania's National Program for Rural Development, specifically tailored to match EU funding, particularly the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. The association was formed in 2011 at the initiative of the municipality of Baia Sprie, a small city in the county of Maramureș, North-West Romania. The rest of the 17 territorial administrative units consist of neighboring villages stretched between Baia Mare, the county capital, and another small city, Târgu Lăpuș – neither which are group members. Geographically, the area's relief is relatively diverse, stretching over 1258 km², yet most of it has been influenced both by long-term mining for precious metals and polymetals, as well as by the cessation of mining activities in 2007. The flows of mass emigration increased drastically, although not significantly different compared to other regions. Ecological disasters (spilling of contaminated mining residue into local rivers) occurred repeatedly, affecting wild and human life in and outside the area. As opposed to other larger scale funding opportunities, Mara-Natur can open calls for applications for small scale projects, usually of up to several tens of thousands of Euros. According to the LAG's local development strategy, the objectives regard the conservation and promotion of natural and cultural heritage, increasing the area's economic output, supporting social equity through social services, and developing the area's 'good governance'.

Findings. Mara-Natur manages funding for both private and public applicants, covering a wide range of economic initiatives (e.g. installation of young farmers) and public interest actions (e.g. repairing public roads). For most public stakeholders, LEADER is not a particularly new format, as they are used to adapting to any available funding opportunity for their communities, as well as to the discourse of locally led development. In this regard, the characteristics of the concept of LAG appears as not vastly different than one of the other superimposed bureaucratic structures. However, the way in which the LAG was formed and the shape of its territory are the product of local political intuition and agility because of the restrictive ratio of urban population required for a LAG that puts small urban centers in direct competition for the attraction of surrounding villages. A common concern related to European funding, is overbureaucratization, also when comparing to stories from other UE states. This affects administrations lacking adequate means (e.g. sufficient personnel) and/or experience in dealing with EU funding, more so when application windows are tight. The inflation of development strategies (Regional Development Agency North-West; Maramureș County; Baia Mare Metropolitan Area; Mara-Natur; each territorial administrative unit) makes it difficult to navigate and correlate them productively, particularly when some levels are managed by different political parties. For good or bad - the relevance of political color local and regional development is overlooked by the concept of LAG.

Outlook. As an ongoing project, Mara-Natur provides some welcomed benefits with no major drawbacks, although the decision making process could allegedly be improved. In the larger scheme, however, administrative reform is seen as an impending necessity as the economy and demography of the region vastly changed, while territorial administration has not. Propositions include merging the smallest TAU with the closest cities. This conclusion might be triggered by the occurrence of the LAG as an experiment on territorial development. While most stakeholders agree that there is still a need for investment in infrastructure development and maintenance, the factor that could speed up the reduction of territorial inequalities is economic investment in other areas besides urban centers. Large scale initiatives such as major transport infrastructure projects and the development of mountain resorts would bring the needed economic boost in the region, but the administrative fragmentation of the territory reduces the possibility. Because EU funding is regarded as highly necessary, a lack of ensured access (increased support for applications to larger sums) could breed resentment among the most underfunded areas of Mara-Natur.

1. Introduction

This case study focuses on the perceptions of spatial justice surrounding the constitution, development and workings of Microregional Association Mara-Natur (hereinafter Mara-Natur) operating as a LAG under the LEADER program. Its territory lies in the county of Maramureş in the North-Western part of Romania. As its name suggests, the main directions of activities aim at a socio-economic reconciliation with nature, following an abrupt departure in 2007 from centuries of mining activities. The area is relatively isolated and one of the least developed in the N-W region, although it benefits from a nationally relevant key advantage - proximity to the Western border.

LEADER, as a European Union policy instrument, has been implemented and refined since 1990. Spatial justice represents an inherent pillar of the LEADER program, which aims at the development of rural areas, as opposed to the historically and economically privileged larger urban areas. The main themes of the action depart from the EU level production of a framework designed to entice local actors to gather, assess their areas, and direct some local attention towards the distribution of readily available small scale EU funding for the start, support, and improvement of rural-based economic activity and social life. As a EAFRD program, LEADER cross-cuts most key institutional actors at every administrative level: the national government through the Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and its National Plan for Rural Development (NPRD), County Council, City Halls and/or Town Halls. It is a large-scale highly structured and bureaucratic program. While the oldest EU members are running its fifth iteration, Romania is among the latest states to implement the program. LEADER does not bring a novel approach to Romania's development discourse, as much as it builds over previous directions setup during the pre EU accession period. World Bank¹ and UNDP² funded research aimed at assessing 'social capital' and 'human development' levels and their impact on local development, suggesting their relevance to social change and placing locals at the forefront of the process. With around 45 percent rural population, there are 239 LAGs covering 97 percent of the total eligible territory, up from just 63 percent during the previous EU funding period. A still relatively novel territorial development instrument in Romania, LEADER softly re-traces administrative territorial borders untouched since 1968. It is an ongoing project enthusiastically supported by the MARD.

Mara-Natur was established in 2011, with the city of Baia Sprie leading as the only urban administrative unit. Other members of the association are 16 rural territorial administrative units (TAUs) and private and nongovernmental partners, which form the majority of the members. It covers an area of around 1,250 km² with close to 70,000 inhabitants. Mara-Natur opens calls for projects, that now have in the second national LEADER iteration, an even stronger emphasis on economic development. The main targets for funding are persons and institutions that could either improve the local economic production, or become economic agents who can implicitly contribute to rural development. LAG members can be funding recipients as well, with the LAUs benefiting from a designated funding line.

¹ Sandu, Dumitru (ed). 1999. Social Capital and Entrepreneurship in Romanian Rural Communities.

² Berthin Gerardo (principal author). 2001. National Human Development Report Romania 2000.

2. Methodological Reflection

Because the territory of Mara-Natur comprises 17 administrative units with an overall surface of 1250 km², choosing interviewees has mainly been a tactical territorial choice in an attempt to map the institutional effects by discussing with people from both the areas closest to the county capital, as well as from the most distant ones, and from the geographical center. Using a targeted approach yielded good results, such as instead of directly asking for interviews with mayors, asking to speak with particular administrative directors. Snowballing proved equally useful. Two key regional level stakeholders have not been open to discussion, as per institutional policy.

While the research topic in itself is deemed attractive by stakeholders, a general uneasiness clouded the first stages of interaction. As the purpose of the research was explained, this atmosphere gradually dissipated during most interviews. Reluctance to unforeseen evaluation is normal. However, it can be interpreted in relation both to the autonomy of the action, as well as to a general anxiety in the public administrative body in relation to the evaluation of external funding management. In one example, a stakeholder felt that criticizing funding flows in general might lead to harsher restrictions. Thus, in some cases, handing over the consent form would have translated into an even higher risk of obtaining a stiffer range of responses. Sometimes we ensured full anonymity in exchange for a relaxed conversation. Just several interviewees declined audio recording.

Most interviewers work in public administration at various levels. As an interviewee put it, Mara-Natur is driven by local authorities, a direction that deserves further reflection. In the LAG, they appear to be the most active.

'Spatial' is indeed an alien term for most of the administrative workers' language, more acquainted terms being 'geography' and 'territory', although it is not an issue. Analysis of official documents: the number of various development strategies, for example, at national, regional, county, and locality level is simply outstanding. However, the sheer amount of information, its repetitiveness and overlapping, represent in fact one key issue in analytical terms - the burden of hyper-bureaucracy that some interviewees mention.

3. The Locality

3.1 Territorial Context and Characteristics of the Locality

Located in the North-Western part of Romania in Maramureş county, the territory of Mara-Natur covers an area of 1258 km², i.e. 20 percent of the county area, and three distinct historical regions: Țara Chioarului (East), Ficulăș/Sătmar (North), Țara Lăpușului (South-South-East). It has a population of 68.926 inhabitants, according to the 2011 Census, with a density of 55 inhabitants/km². Since the last administrative reform of 1968, the 41 counties (NUTS IV) plus the Municipality of Bucharest, represent the *de facto* main sub-national territorial administrative units. The North-West Development Region, to which Maramureş county belongs, is not an administrative unit per se. As the map in Fig. 1 indicates, we find two almost opposing territorial governance instruments – one focusing on urban development, Intercommunity Development Association Baia Mare Metropolitan Area, while the other, Mara-Natur, on rural development – with overlapping territories. Ten out of the 17 TAUs of the LAG are also a part of IDA BMMA, including Baia Sprie³. IDA BMMA develops public transport projects and territorial analyses, yet has been less active than intended and desired, according to stakeholders.

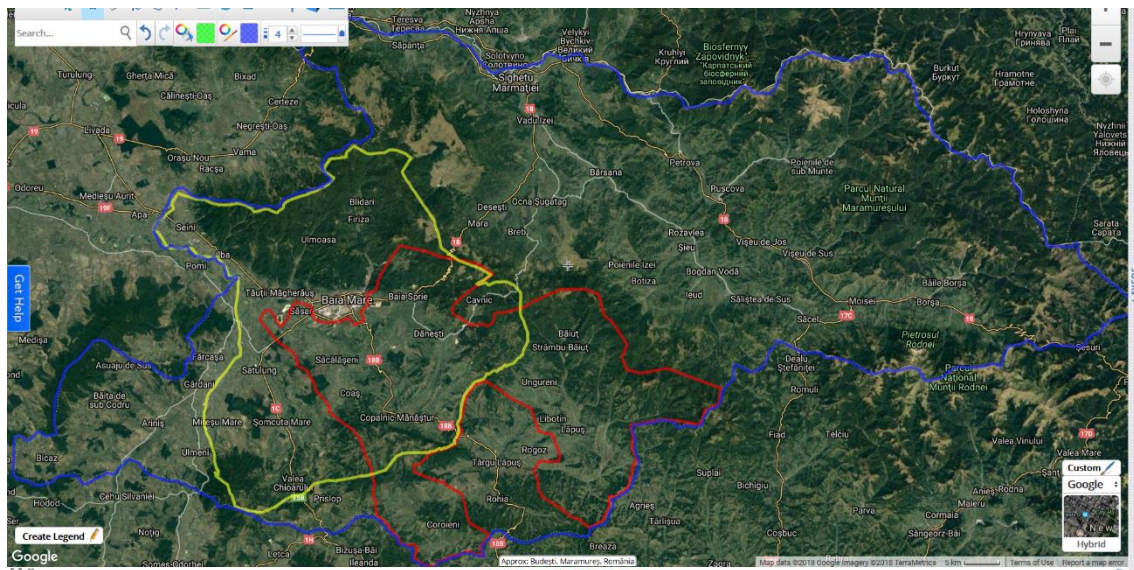


Fig. 1 Three overlapping types of territories of governance in North-Western Romania. Blue – Maramureş County (6304 km²); Yellow – IDA BMMA (1250 km²); Red – Mara-Natur (1258 km²)

The history of mining in the area spans centuries and represents the key defining aspect of the present socio-economic context, particularly because of its intensive turn during the socialist period. REMIN⁴, the state mining operator in the area, employed more than 30.000 workers at its peak before 1990, just 14.000 in 1996⁵ and 3.294 in 2006⁶. The last mines shut down in 2007 in accord with governmental international negotiations. Because

³ Annex 8.4.1

⁴ Mining activities reincorporated as REMIN in 1997 through Government Ordinance 832

⁵ https://www.economica.net/guvernul-sterge-datoriile-rem-in-baia-mare-prin-transformare-in-actiuni_51701.html#n

⁶ Competition Council Decision 112/2006

of the nature of the exploitation (gold, silver, and polymetals), it left deep marks on the environment. Cyanide based reservoir overflows contaminated rivers and affected areas even in Hungary. One of the worst accidents took place in the year 2000, yet minor spills took place even in 2018, with others being expected because of poor maintenance of closed mining facilities.

County capital Baia Mare (population 124.000) is a rank II municipality according to the national classification, and a “development pole”, secondary to “growth poles”⁷. Cluj-Napoca, the economic engine and university center of the NW development region is located at a distance of 150 km and represents a key destination for skilled migration.

While it contains the highest number of cities in the NW development region, Maramureş also has the highest density of rural population⁸. The county stands out because its rural population enjoys a marginally higher life expectancy compared to its urbanites – the probable explanation would be that miners residing in the urban areas commonly have a lower life expectancy. In 2012, compared to the other five counties in the region, Maramureş had the highest number of children whose parents left to work abroad⁹. Emigration is a defining characteristic of the recent demographic changes, impacting virtually every socio-economic indicator and having direct implications to public policy. Yet, in relative terms, it displays roughly similar effects as in the other 40 counties.

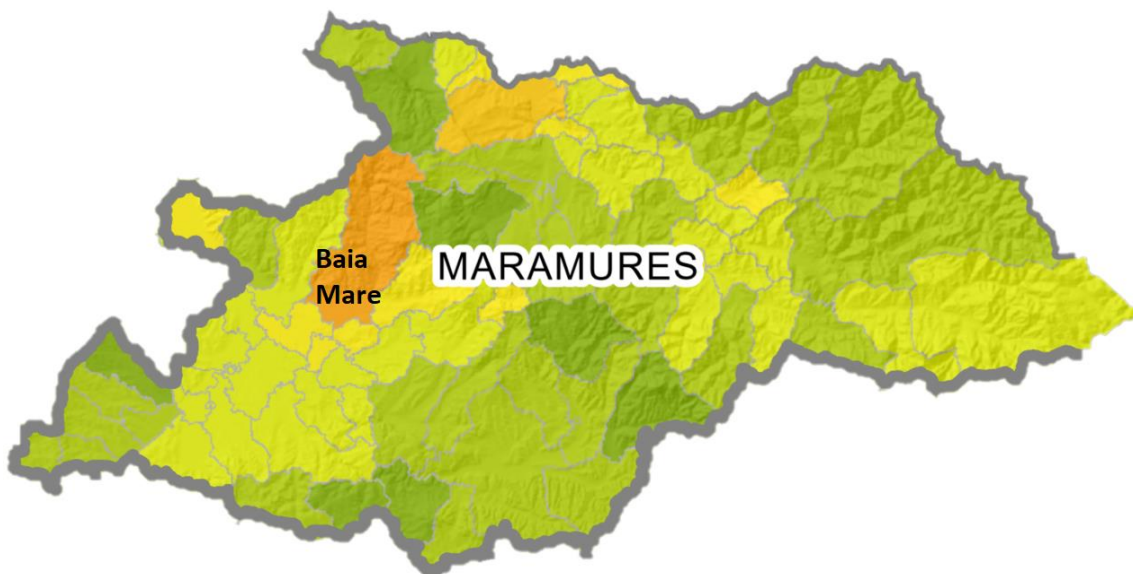


Fig. 2. Maramureş population density map taken from the RSTD 2035. Dark green hues depict lower density. Mara-Natur territory is located South-South East in relation to Baia Mare.

According to a study commissioned by The Autochthonous Investors Union (ro. *Patronatul Investitorilor Autohtoni*), in 2016-2017 Maramureş had, at 65%, the country's highest ratio

⁷ RSTD 2035 studies. Available at: http://sdtr.ro/upload/STUDII/15.%20Sinteza_Reteaua%20de%20localitati%20dupa%20rang%20si%20importanta.pdf

⁸ NW RDA 2014-2020 Development Plan, p. 30

⁹ Idem, p. 46

of employees earning the minimum wage¹⁰. The NW region was ranked in the MRDPA's National Report on the State of the Territory 2017 as the least affected by poverty and social exclusion¹¹. However, the report goes on to point that regions display high internal inequalities between counties. In the case of the NW regions, Cluj county's GDP is significantly higher than that of neighboring counties, including Maramureş¹².

According to the LDS, agricultural activity in the area is mostly at semi-subsistence levels. There are obstacles to promoting agricultural development projects, the key ones being the fact that plots are fragmented; the owners are reluctant to association; processing and distribution facilities are insufficient; some lands are polluted. A local agricultural office representative added that in the area, with few exceptions, lands are not particularly suited for crops. So the owner of plots which are not inscribed in the cadaster have little incentive to start the procedures which would render the land eligible for funding either individually or through association. However, pomiculture, animal husbandry, and refined forestry could be further developed. Areas closer to the cities benefit from some industrial activity.

The analysis integral to the Mara-Natur LDS does not characterize the whole area as being "disadvantaged" or "marginalized", instead pointing out potential beneficiaries as communities or groups of people in that situation. The five TAUs in its compentence that are catalogued poor according to the Local Development Human Index¹³, are located in the southern and south-eastern parts, the farthest from the county capital Baia Mare and from any other major city. The population density of the territory¹⁴ accurately reflects it: the less dense the population, the poorer the respective area. The economic disparity of Mara-Natur's territory is amply documented in its LDS, revealing that most economic activity takes place in the vicinity of Baia Mare. The other city in the region, Târgu Lăpuş (population 12.000) is practically surrounded by villages associated in Mara-Natur, to which it radiates any urban advantages available (medical services, public notaries, etc). Overall, Mara-Natur territory can be characterized as disadvantaged.

3.2 The Locality with regards to Dimensions 1 & 2

Analytical Dimension 1: Perception of spatial (in-)justice within the locality

Discussing **perceptions of spatial justice** in this locality is a challenging task because the LAG is a brand new, as well as large, territorial governance instrument that is just forming its own identity and knowledge. Some stakeholders had reservations in characterizing the situation in other communes, politely declining familiarity with their neighbors' affairs. With no institutional memory and heritage, pointing out spatial problems of an experimental territorial unit is a risky move because of how responsibilities for solutions would

¹⁰ PIAROM, 2018, p. 62. Available at: <https://www.piarom.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/1.Studiu-privind-forta-de-munca-2017-principalele-industrii.pdf?x39362>

¹¹ MRDPA, 2017. The National Report on the State of the Territory, p. 42. Available at: <http://www.mdrap.ro/userfiles/Raport%20privind%20starea%20teritoriului%202017.pdf>

¹² Idem, p. 45.

¹³ Mara-Natur Local Development Strategy

¹⁴ RSTD 2035. Population density map. Available at: <http://sdtr.ro/upload/HARTI/Demografie/Densitatea%20populatiei.pdf>

be traced back. Some nationally famous poor areas in Mara-Natur villages inhabited by Roma have not been mentioned by stakeholders living in different areas. Stakeholders indicate that the proximity to Baia Mare represents the key criteria reflecting the level of development of the communes comprising the LAG. In one of these villages, „the sole lasting request of the people is to reach the same infrastructure level as in the city”, according to its vice mayor. Inside their own TAUs, mentions of territorial inequality, with a notable exception, have been rather scarce. Where that was mentioned it was primarily related to the areas' remoteness to the main roads, such as distant villages or neighborhoods. As one mayor of a commune put it „[t]he fewer the villages, the easier it is to channel more on them, to do investment [...] the objectives right there in those localities”, and a public employee in another commune stressed, „[o]ur commune has an administrative advantage [...] that it has only one locality”.

The lack of private investment is ranked as the major local problem by most stakeholders. As a LAU, having public assets such as land and buildings that can be used to attract investors represents an even more crucial spatial advantage for remote areas.

One stakeholder in the county level administration was particularly adamant on rejecting concepts such as 'marginalization' or 'disadvantaged', arguing that they are artificially imported concepts by foreign NGOs and have no other result than to mystify the real difference between hard working and lazy individuals. In the case of a commune catalogued as poor, the mayor argues that they are more well-off than it seems because, among others, it is traversed by a county road connecting two important county regions over the mountains.

Another factor that would explain both spatial justice and injustice is that besides the vicinity to Baia Mare, „development can clearly be seen in villages with higher housing density”, according to a vice mayor.

Explanations for spatial injustice fundamentally focus on the lack of economic investment. Exactly why this is lacking ranges from the massive restructuring of the local economy after the mining sector closed, the relative isolation of the area, the inability of both the inhabitants, as well as public administrations to adapt to the new competitive funding landscape. Another reason would be, as the vice mayor of a village next to the county capital explains, previous nearsighted local political quarrel that prevented the attraction of investors at an earlier moment. Insufficiently maintained and developed transportation systems add up to the list of factors. In the case of Baia Sprie, one area of apartment blocks built for miners has been targeted as a disadvantaged area that received funding for rehabilitation.

Analytical Dimension 2: Tools and policies for development and cohesion

The amount of strategic documents covering the area is astounding, which can constitute an indicator that every time a new funding opportunity emerges, it comes with this precondition. Thus, the process of reevaluating the history, the policy attempts, needs, and possibilities has to often start over and each strategy turns into a `pitch` for funding, instead of a thoroughly processed local will. Ultimately, it can be interpreted as a lack of regional autonomy in pursuing spatial justice. „Each strategy should come with funding lines”, as a County Council stakeholder demands, and, consequently, incessant paper production

could be rendered redundant. Moreover, monitoring the implementation of strategies is a main weak point in public policy. Currently, there are development strategies covering Mara-Natur's territory published by: Regional Development Agency Northwest 2014-2020, Maramureş County 2014-2020, Baia Mare Metropolitan Area Territory, 'Nature 2000 Maramureş' Network Development 2016-2020, Mara-Natur GAL territory 2014-2020, and the strategies of the territorial administrative units that are parts of the GAL. We need to stress that some strategies might overlap or even contradict each other, making it even theoretically difficult for the LDS to reach its purpose. According to the Integrated Strategy for Baia Mare Metropolitan Area, formed in 2012, *'[m]etropolitan regions should be aware of the fact that they are responsible for the development of their larger surroundings'* (p. 6, n.d). The surrounding LAGs whose territories overlap with IDA BMMA are included in the strategy as *'Priority Project 14: Establishing the Territorial Pacts for integrated rural-urban development'* (p. 45, n.d). It was foreseen to take place in 2015, but there is no info available on the matter. Most of the funding opportunities identified through this strategy for its priorities come from Regional OP, along with several others available through HORIZON 2020.

Romania's Strategy for Territorial Development 2035, adopted by the government in 2016, mentions Local Action Groups as a solution to consolidate cooperation between public local authorities towards the realization of public attributions when resources are scarce (RSTD 2035, pp. 219-220). Measure 4.3.2.10 of the same strategy targets the strengthening of the communes with role of rural polarization (p. 220), thus supporting the model of an uneven rural territorial development.

During the last 30 years, infrastructure has allegedly improved in most communes through the widest possible array of available funding. EU funding and national funding contributed to the improvement of transport infrastructure and water distribution systems. The National Program for Local Development (NPLD) ran by MRDPA can attract funding to neglected areas. In January 2019, the overall budget NPLD for Maramureş County reached approximately 150 million Euro¹⁵. Almost 18 million Euro went to the TAUs in Mara-Natur, but just four projects swallowed around half of the budget. The spatial dispersion of that funding in Mara-Natur territory is high. Depending on the territorial level of analysis, it is still limited as an instrument for spatial justice because it imposes a ranking system that devalues areas with low economic activity. A public employee explained that if there are no public or private objectives on specific streets, the score drops, making the pavement or reparation of secondary roads an impossible mission. As a direct display of frustration towards administrative incapacity, some villagers in a remote part of one commune ultimately decided to build their own concrete street of one km¹⁶.

A recurrent concern during the interviews came from stakeholders in communes farther from Baia Mare and Baia Sprie. The present development tools are equally alluring and tantalizing: *"[t]here are good intentions, all of them are, but as we don't have persons who*

¹⁵ NPLD II. List of objectives. <http://data.gov.ro/dataset/pndl-ii-2017-2020-lista-obiective-la-14-01-2019/resource/8fa1308d-1ddc-4d49-a633-6c8c65454b72>

¹⁶ <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/social/satui-de-indiferenta-autoritatilor-localnicii-unei-comune-din-maramures-au-betonat-un-drum-de-pest-un-km.html>

can manage the projects and investment like this, you need to offer more support to local communities in developing them and prepare these more in advance". In the same vein, another stakeholder says that "[i]f I would have my money, I would honestly wouldn't get involved with European funding, I would make it from my own money." Even a seasoned vice mayor of a more successful LAU in attracting external funding concludes that "[y]ou need iron patience and will to get a European project to good ending. You need direct experience to understand how to run a European project, regardless of how many university diplomas you have".

To be successful at developing projects, continuity of political leadership in administration for more than one electoral cycle is key to the implementation of development projects, particularly because of long project cycles. On top of that, partial externalization of tasks is key to success for LAUs who do not have the adequate capacity, but also for those who have some capacity: *"they [the municipality] collaborate with several consultancy firms because you can't on your own, without consultancy firms you can't manage".*

Besides EU and national funding, for cases of extreme marginalization there are several social inclusion projects ran for Roma in Coltău¹⁷ and Coroieni¹⁸, both through EEA Grants; unsurprising, given the political-administrative treatment of other similar areas in Romania¹⁹. 'Classical' NGOs are often regarded by policy makers in Romania as the most well-suited and more equipped actor who should directly tackle extreme poverty²⁰ or complement the allegedly unable public authorities, particularly when Roma are involved.

¹⁷ http://www.assoc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PEL103_RO.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.assoc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Educatia-alternativa-la-saracie-rezumat.pdf>

¹⁹ See for example the Pata Cluj Relocal report

²⁰ Zamfir George. 2015. NGOs as postsocialist social services providers and the professionalization of othering.

4. The Action

4.1 Basic Characteristics of the Action

Romania is the EU state with one of the highest ratio of rural population - 9 million rural inhabitants in 2018 out of a total of 19.5 million²¹, making it a key target for EU-led rural interventions. Mara-Natur is one of the 239 local action groups in Romania that are running under the LEADER program, a European Union's initiative destined to improve rural livelihoods at European level. They represent around 9 percent of the total approximately 2600 LAGs in the whole EU territory. LEADER (core value: innovation) is measure 19 of Romania's National Program for Rural Development, specifically tailored to match EU funding, particularly the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. The total EAFRD funding for LEADER in Romania totals 572.364.672,00 Euro for this second iteration, while the previous one had allocated 524.094.639 Euro²². NRDP has six priorities, one of which being "Social inclusion and local development in rural areas". The Payment Agency for Rural Development (PARC) is the institution responsible with the technical and financial implementation of the EAFRD and has eight regional bureaus, as well as county offices. Projects submitted through the call for projects opened by the LAGs are managed by the regional PARC bureaus. LAG Mara-Natur operates under the jurisdiction of the regional bureau called The Regional Center for the Financing of Rural Investment 6 North-West located in Satu Mare, which is located in the homonymous neighboring county. In the first LEADER iteration, each LAG received a fixed sum of 2.8 mil Euros, which was not equitable, as some LAGs had just 8 communes, while others 30. After the MARD changed the allocation system, funding now flows according to the number of inhabitants and the size of the territory. There are LAGs with 0.5 mil Euros per strategy and others with 4 mil Euros, according to the MARD representative.

Mara-Natur was formed in 2011 at the initiative of the municipality of Baia Sprie, a small city in the county of Maramureș, North-West Romania. Local Council Decision no 99/June 2011 in Baia Sprie represents the constitutive act and the status. No debates took place during that meeting, according to its official minute. Other 15 LAUs joined and 2 others later on, the County Council becoming de facto partner in 2017. The 39 businesses and 16 civil society organizations complete the list of members, with the overall private partners comprising 75 percent.

Once formed, the LAG's initial objective is to prepare a Local Development Strategy which encompasses both a thorough analysis of the area, as well as the chosen funding lines available to match those needs from the NRDP. As opposed to other larger scale funding opportunities, Mara-Natur (any LEADER LAG for that matter) can open calls for applications for small scale projects usually of up to several tens of thousands of Euros. Applicants can submit nonreimbursable funding requests with a ceiling of 200.000 Euros for projects with a total investment value of no more than 400.000 Euros.

According to the 2016 LDS, the objectives regard the conservation and promotion of natural and cultural heritage, increasing the area's economic output, supporting social equity

²¹ National Institute of Statistics. 2018. Comunicat de presă nr. 215/29 august 2018

²² Ex-post evaluation - National Rural Development Plan 2007-2013, p. 68

through social services, and developing the area's 'good governance'. As the Mara-Natur team representative underlines, "*LEADER is complementary to the large NPRD. Mara-Natur's funding objectives specifically did not include infrastructural projects because town halls can access other designated funding*".

A couple of times a year (e.g. four times in 2017), the management team organizes a tour through every TAU for animation activities: presenting the calls for projects and engaging with interested people. Preparatory meetings for the new LDS took place in each of the 17 TAU in early 2016, followed by four meetings in Baia Sprie between the partners. Simultaneously, it represents a continuous challenge to local stakeholders, who are compelled to place the existence of the LAG on their own agendas.

According to the documentation published on Mara-Natur's webpage, between 25 of April 2012, when the first call for application was launched during the first iteration, and 29 of May 2015, 59 of the applications received funding totaling close to 2 million Euros.

Total no of applications between 25 April 2012- 29 May 2015	No of apps submitted to the county office of payments for rural dev.	No of apps deemed eligible by the county office of payments for rural dev.	No. of signed financing contracts
97	90	60	59

Table 1. Number of funding applications processed by Mara-Natur between 2012-2015

The first 24 applications came from the public administrations and covered domains concerning public space, such as road repairs or the development of sport fields and the rehabilitation of cultural centers. Private applicants asked for funding to setup or improve a wide range of business activities, from semi-subsistence farming, planting orchards, professional training, to buying dental radiology equipment and opening B&Bs.

The following funding session started effectively in June 2017 during the second LEADER iteration. At the end of the year, 10 applications for nonagricultural businesses, 9 applications for tourist, environment, and cultural activities, and 3 projects on education and entrepreneurship were assessed as eligible, with a total value close to 1 million Euros. The overall allocated funding for the opened sessions slightly exceeds 1.3 million Euros.

In 2018, the calls for application yielded one project for the development of a cattle farm, six projects aimed at improving basic tourist, environment, and culture, one for training, four for the development of agricultural enterprises, and four for the development of non-agricultural business. Overall, projects valuing almost 900.000 Euros have been selected for financing by Mara-Natur.

Just a few of the selected funding applications requested around 100.000 Euros, the average being 33.000 Euros for the 2012-2015 period. One could say that this is not an impressive sum, considering the covered territory and population, even by Romanian cost of living. In fact, most interviewees acknowledge that they do not view this source of funding as quintessential for meeting the needs of their communities.

The future of the action essentially depends on the higher level decisions regarding the next EU financial exercise. For Mara-Natur, the 2014-2020 episode will technically extend

until 2023, when the final financial matters should be closed according to the larger framework.

The LEADER program used by Mara Natur so far constitutes an exercise in administrative capacity to attract external funding, develop projects, while interacting at a different and novel scale. Practically, the LAG operates as a localized intermediary management organism in the EU funding distribution chain: it opens calls and selects small-scale projects according to its LDS.

4.2 The Action with regards to Dimensions 3-5

Analytical Dimension 3: Coordination and implementation of the action in the locality under consideration

"We succeeded. We had to. [Q: Why did you have to?] Because it is another easier funding source on European funding" (Commune Mayor). Not everyone was this enthusiastic from the start. Stories depict mayors who were particularly skeptical or not interested – with the explanation that they are either too exhausted or anxious because of extra-responsibilities. In the end, it appears that discovering the opportunities, costs, as well as limits, lead most of them to view the membership to the LAG as a positive. One stakeholder puts it simply that „*there was a strategy creator and an explanation creator towards authorities for why it is good*” and the money stood as bait to overcome reluctance. However, initially, the idea of LAG/LEADER arrived in the area through the presentations prepared by consultancy firms who saw it as an opportunity to access funding.

The LAG is organized as according to the general association legislation, with a tweak specific to the LEADER program. The basic features are: general assembly (76 members), board (5 members: president – economic agent representative, vice president – economic agent representative, public authorities’ representative, economic environment representative, NGO representative. The average attendance at a general assembly is 30.

Mara Natur was coordinated and implemented under the rules of the LEADER program, acting through a specific stakeholder public-private structure serving the LAG territory that crosses the existing administrative boundaries of Romania’s territorial organization. In the technocratic world of LAG – Mara Natur, decision making and managerial procedures are meticulously laid out, as they set the stage for any future cooperation. How high the LAG and its resources are on the members list of priority, combined with the time spent on the road to attend the meetings would often explain who would be more active in decision-making. While LAGs vary considerably in terms of who kick start the association, in the case of Mara-Natur, the city hall of Baia Sprie, the only urban TAU in the territory, is seen as the leading force behind the initiation of the group, which is now lead by one of its former employees. It might seem a bit odd, if the main principle of LEADER is to have private members as a majority of partners in LAGs and have the private sphere directing the activities. However, it reflects the diversity of the LEADER program on the ground, even if not the intended one, according to a representative of a national organization in the field. Private partners, particularly business owners, struggle with a tighter schedule and are less involved in the operations of Mara-Natur, although they find ways of staying in touch, according to LAG team member. An inherent relation between administrative and economic development is acknowledged at every institutional level: strong economic activity

yields public revenues, while public actors must shed the stage for the attraction of economic investors. Public support of the initiative is crucial, as it is also reflected by the direct involvement of the County Council in each of the LAGs in Maramureş County – it pays membership fees that can support them if there are funding gaps.

Analytical Dimension 4: Autonomy, participation and engagement

One of the most defining aspect of autonomy in the case of Mara-Natur is the way that the territory has been analyzed and the way the whole association came to life through a combination of skillful negotiation and political agility in a rather restrictive framework. However, LAGs might overemphasize their **autonomy** in relation with the state powers because they invite at the decision-making table not only representatives of the public authorities, but also of the private companies and NGOs. As recounted by public administration stakeholders, the transfer of responsibilities from central to local levels is not properly coupled with the assurance of adequate funds for responding to these obligations; therefore, they all acknowledge the need to apply for alternative financial resources. Yet again, some are more capable of writing competitive projects, others have money for externalizing this work towards private companies. For richer LAUs, Mara-Natur is the cherry on top, just another opportunity for attracting external funding, while for poorer ones it turns into source of frustration: funds are symbolic relative to their needs, and the administrative effort too costly.

Regulation from above - MARD - is not in itself an issue, the project team member feels that they have sufficient autonomy which comes with responsibility, as the following example tells: LAGs establish on their own the points system awarded for selection criteria. However, there was a procedure modification introducing a verification from the MARD. Initially, it was regarded as an intrusion, but upon further discussion, it proved useful, as it could trace potentially problematic applications where criteria might turn invalid during the effective implementation, which would be more troublesome on the long term. Subsequently, the LAG has the option of maintaining its selection decision or assume responsibility in case of failure. Another example of how autonomy can be exerted regards the planning and conception of the LDS.

A key pressing expectancy from Romania's post EU accession governments has been to maximize the rate of EU funding; when reviewing policy implementation, we can thus count on it as a main driver in obtaining quantifiable results. Several stakeholders pointed out that for LAGs, devising the LDS as a mini-NPRD would be the easy way out and actually assessing the local needs and figuring out what measures are best suited to meet them, is the hard, but healthy way. Does this constitute a risk to overstep the basic principles of LEADER? Yes, it does, as it can end up supporting LAG teams that are less determined to shoulder institutional construction through group animation and, ultimately, build autonomy. On the other hand, tightening regulation even more might lead toward a lower rate of EU absorption both at local and national levels.

In terms of **participation**, Mara Natur illustrates that the large area of a territory challenges regular participation of all the stakeholders in decision making, and equal distribution of funds between the local administrations that were part of the GAL was hindered by many impediments, although there are workarounds in terms of communication. No

transport vouchers or any honorarium is available for the participants. In terms of procedural justice, at least one example proves that the matter is open: the management proposed to streamline some decision-making regarding technical issues and welcome the General Assembly just to vote on the more strategic issues – the proposal was voted down, the reasoning being that public partners wanted a more hands-on approach.

At a larger scale, the increased bureaucratic procedures and the need to co-finance the funded initiatives favor by design the public administration and the more experienced private economic agents, while they are discouraging the poor, who have fewer incentives to apply for funds for their plans. At times, Mara-Natur appears as a rural middle class development project, more so because potential beneficiaries are discouraged by the prospect of obtaining just 50 percent funding for a project. Even for LAUs, particularly the poorer ones, a 2 percent mandatory cofunding rule might be an issue. A representative of a local agricultural bureau claims that supporting small farmers would be preferable to supporting larger scale farming.

A stakeholder describes the issue: *„We collaborate with the LAG, we had just one project. You can't do large scale projects with them because they do not have so much funding and they have to distribute them to all the communities in the LAG and then you gain something like the synthetic sports field that we did, but we had to cover more than 50 percent in order to do something [...] You can't start sewer and water and so on through the LAG because that costs money".* While LEADER is not designed to cover infrastructure projects described by the stakeholder, their mention implies this expectance from the LAG.

Sometimes, calls for projects need to be rescheduled because no applications are submitted. While it is not an inherent issue from the management perspective, yet even an indicator of perseverance, others disagree: *"The fact that people do not apply for funding should make us think".* On the other hand, the lack of will of association between inhabitants is considered an important hindrance to local development, written as such in the LDS.

For Mara Natur there is no designed **political accountability** and the development machine is politically colorblind. The institutional structures responsible for the implemented initiatives have at the most (as exemplified) **technical accountability** in what regards project indicators or budget spending.

Analytical Dimension 5: Expression and mobilisation of place-based knowledge and adaptability

Where Mara Natur was required to devote considerable resources is precisely the **production of place-based knowledge** that had to form the basis of its Local Development Strategy (LDS). Public debates and inquiries all over the territory complemented a multitude of statistical data. While the analytical part of the SDL mentions some local impediments to development, such as the locals' reluctance to agricultural association, larger political decisions are not included as explanations. As the participants to the Relocal workshop debated, some LDS developed by LAGs appear to have been written poorly – clearly visible from the number of times that a LAG asks the MARD for an update permission. As a stakeholder argues, that is either because of poor initial conception, or from insufficiently adapted/copied documents produced by other actors. Lack of experience could definitely

constitute another reason. Keeping in mind that fund absorption is a key evaluation indicator, financing projects that ‘just work’ from an administrative point of view is an alluring prospect. From this point of view, autonomy of LAGs is technically guided towards a certain result and community needs found on the ground have to comply with it.

Effectively producing a common understanding of the area through the analysis of its socio-economic history could constitute a key factor to strengthen the identity of the association, as it covers a rather unorthodox territory format by containing parts of three different historical regions.

Considering the tight EU framework of the program, there is, nevertheless, a high degree of **adaptability** at different levels. In terms of procedures, Mara Natur has sufficient space for movements both in what regards decision making and management, as well as in getting approval from the MARD to update its core document, the LDS. However, in some key aspects regarding the type, size, and manner of disbursing funding—crucial factors for beneficiaries—its hands are tied by national and EU regulations. A key issue in what regards adaptability towards spatial justice is engrained in the European regulation: *“we try to do a fund distribution as uniform and homogenous as possible, but we cannot control this because it would be against the equality of chances and transparency [...] if from a commune there are four beneficiaries and from another there is only one, we cannot control that [...] anyway, it is more equitable than it is being done through national measures”* (Mara-Natur team member). At regional level, the four LAGs in the county formed a partnership aimed at identifying local traditional products that could receive certification from the national authority. At national level, the LEADER program underwent a substantial change aimed at addressing territorial equality through the adaptation of funding per LAG for the second iteration. Several stakeholders pointed that if during future iterations LAGs would manage significantly larger funding covering an even wider range of topics, along with some tweaks such as offering direct technical support, it would be highly beneficial to local development.

5. Final Assessment: Capacities for Change

Synthesising Dimension A: Assessment of promoters and inhibitors (in regards to the action: dimensions 3 to 5)

For Mara Natur, the **inhibitors** encountered so far regard the disproportionate and demoralizing relation between the detailed production of place-based knowledge regarding the assessment of problems and needs, and the limited availability of instruments to tackle spatial inequalities required on top of already limited local resources. Extreme poverty is not an issue that can be efficiently tackled directly through LEADER. In this regard, the economic model financially supported by the program is incapable of reaching directly those in the direst need, because setting up a business, managing the funding and paperwork, ensuring cofounding – all that suite is prepared for actors who already possess some forms of capital. Ultimately, the recipe could work toward reducing spatial inequality as much as trickle-down economics is a reliable guiding principle.

In terms of procedural justice, the large area of the territory can impede regular participation in planning and decision making. At a larger scale, both the national, and the EU framework on the matter throttles activity because of overbureaucratization. Moreover, the dense and strict regulation, accompanied by a pressure to absorb EU funding, creates less space and time needed to tackle some issues that are not covered by the available funding lines. As the Development pedagogy saying goes, 'local needs have to match funding streams'.

The key **promoter** of the action is the opportunity for easier access to EU funding in areas with lower access capacity and less experience, as well as the availability of needed instruments, albeit with considerable costs (financial, when it comes to cofounding or hiring external consultants; personnel resources; management risks, etc.). The existence of some funding lines ensuring equal funding distribution of a significant funding slice between the local administrations part of the LAG acts as a stimulant for local involvement. Ultimately, the full support of the national government for LEADER represents a key motivator for LAG management teams to carry on their institutional construction and territorial development plans.

Synthesising Dimension B: Competences and capacities of stakeholders

Mara-Natur demonstrates that no local and political knowledge is useful without the capability of being an active part of the bureaucratic world. In a model technocratic by design (where political color is formally irrelevant) those with the institutional and/or personal resources and capacities to juggle applications and projects are advantaged in the competitive funding arena. Consultancy firms play a key role in both attracting funding, and developing projects, including for applicants who already possess some competency in the area. Ingrained in EU policy design, the input of private consultants appears on the ground as nearly obligatory in order to access development funding at local level. As such, it reflects the EU's relentless political pursuit of competitiveness as a redeeming quality of its political subjects, be they communities, administrations, individuals, or others. Thus, EU fund-

ing management rests, to a significant extent, in private hands with limited political accountability at best. In return, public administrations have to assume accountability, even when they do not even possess the adequate capacity to technically approve the documentation submitted by external consultants. When applying to external funding, this is the puzzle faced by public sector actors with fewer resources.

Using LEADER as a specific instrument of development, Mara-Natur tried to animate and, in this sense, to empower bottom-up initiatives, but it hardly managed so far to put its resources on the benefit of the most disadvantaged areas or people and neither was this the main scope of the action.

Synthesising Dimension C: Connecting the action to procedural and distributive justice

The Mara-Natur initiative manages funding for both private and public applicants, covering a wide range of economic initiatives (e.g., installation of young farmers) and public interest interventions (e.g., repairing public roads). For most public stakeholders, LEADER is nothing special in the sense that they are used to adapting to any available funding opportunity to their communities. Currently, they got increasingly accustomed with another term, that of community-led local development, which continues the LEADER approach and even extends it from the rural to urban environment. In this regard, the characteristics of the concept of LAG appear to be not vastly different from the other superimposed bureaucratic structures. However, the way in which the LAG was formed and the shape of its territory are the product of local political intuition and agility, because of the restrictive ratio of the urban population of a LAG that puts small urban centers in direct competition for the attraction of surrounding villages.

In terms of procedural justice, a common concern related to European funding, including LEADER, is over-bureaucratization, which also arises when comparing to stories heard from experiences in other EU states. This affects administrations that lack adequate means (e.g., sufficient personnel) and/or experience in dealing with EU funding, more so when application windows are tight. The inflation of development strategies makes it difficult to navigate and correlate them productively, particularly when some levels are managed by different political parties. Whether positive or negative, the relevance of political color for local and regional development is overlooked in the concept of LAG.

As they are, the LAG and the LEADER program on an overall are an exercise in administrative capacity to attract external funding and to develop projects, while interacting at a different and novel scale. Its real promised benefit is not in what it currently is, but in what it could be. Procedural justice is what it aims to offer first in order to pave the road. However, the bar for funding is set so high (required initial resources and knowledge), that some of the most disadvantaged areas and populations do not seem to be able to enter the European project world.

6. Conclusions

Mara-Natur territory, circumscribed in Maramureş county (Northwest Development Region) – includes the small town of **Baia Sprie and 17 villages**, while Baia Sprie also belongs to Baia Mare Growth Pole and Metropolitan Area. This is a former mining zone that socially and territorially was deprived of resources after closing down the mines, and was affected by environmental pollution. As a result, people lost their jobs and the area's economic activity perished. However, the LAG territory as a whole displays an internal unevenness from the point of view of economic development, the vast majority of the job-creating new companies being located in Baia Sprie and other three nearby localities, while five of the component LAUs are classified as poor areas. Altogether, nowadays, this territory is a pole of transnational emigration, while the resources for the economic development of the area remain highly difficult to attract or generate.

Mara Natur was conceived to contribute to **the sustainable development of a geographical area marked out in Maramureş county, aiming at economic growth, social equity and healthy environment**. One of the four LAGs operating in the county, Mara-Natur covers to a significant extent former mining, and, consequently, disadvantaged territories, however its stakeholders emphasize that the area as a whole knows an unbalanced economic development, therefore it also has better-off spaces. This LAG was created in 2011 as an association on the basis of the Romanian legislation of associations and foundations, and it was authorized by the MARD to absorb funds from the EAFRD through the LEADER program targeting rural areas. This case reflects how people involved into such initiatives foresee the need for an administrative reform across the whole country as the economy and demography of the region vastly changed, while the territorial administration has not. Moreover, the lack of adequate resources (e.g. permanent personnel on the attraction of external funding and project development) leaves them without the necessary tools to compete on the project market.

The institutional structures created for the absorption of the EU (LEADER) Funds called **Local Action Groups** became possible at the crossroads of two legislative measures. One is the **legislation regarding associations and foundations**, and the other is **Law 492/2006** that defined the rules of administering the EU Funds in compliance with the Common Agricultural Policy. GALs are constituted as associations based on the voluntary alliance of the founding members including public institutions, private companies and civil society organizations acting on the circumscribed rural area. After it signed the Treaty of Accession to the EU in 2005, Romania introduced LEADER as a special axe in its Rural Development Program. These regulations started having effects after the country began its first round of EU funded projects (2007-2013), when—according to the changes of the EU regulations on this domain—Romania also had to include the activities under the LEADER approach into the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development among the rest of the measures from this domain. In the front of all these novelties, between 2007-2009 the country prioritized the formation of LAGs across its national territory, who were supposed to elaborate the local strategies for local rural development (a condition of LEADER). Mara Natur is a promising tool in what regards contribution to the micro-region's economic

growth, but it cannot really tackle the unevenness of the whole territory it is supposed to cover since it distributes funds on a competitive base.

Mara Natur was designed as to allow an extra funding stream to flow to a less developed micro-region, but those who did not have resources to juggle applications and projects remained disadvantaged in the competition for financial support, therefore it could not really work against the ongoing uneven economic development within its territory. In terms of territorial policy, LEADER can be viewed as an attempt of Gerrymandering – an EU policy of dispersing policy responsibility for disadvantaged areas by retracing territories of responsibilities in an attempt to forgo local histories of disinvestment.

As an ongoing initiative, GAL – Mara Natur provides some welcomed benefits with no major drawbacks. In additions, it experiments with actions that transcend the boundaries of Romania's formal administrative-territorial units. It is foremost a pedagogical tool that attempts to open up a new plane of thinking while offering some concrete benefits in the form of small-scale projects to serve as examples. However, it displays a disproportionate and demoralizing relation between the detailed production of place-based knowledge regarding problems and needs assessment, and the available instruments to tackle spatial inequalities. Because EU funding is regarded as highly necessary, a lack of ensured access (increased support for applications to larger sums) could breed resentment among the most underfunded areas of GAL – Mara Natur.

What is needed?

In the larger scheme, administrative reform is regarded as necessary, as the economy and demography of the region vastly changed, while territorial administration has not. Propositions for such reform include merging the smallest LAU with the closest cities. Perhaps this conclusion is triggered by the occurrence of the GAL as an experiment on territorial development. Along with administrative reform, necessary funding flows must be ensured.

Capacity of local public administrations must be increased through permanent budgeting for employees who will handle just external projects. Simultaneously, bureaucratic processes for EU and national funding must be reduced and funding should be more substantive and need-based oriented instead of competitive.

As an antidote to surplus strategic documents, a mandatory correlation between them and funding streams is deemed necessary.

While most stakeholders agree that there is still a need for investment in infrastructure development and maintenance, the factor that could speed up the reduction of territorial inequalities is the presence of solid economic investors in other areas besides urban centers.

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8. Annexes

8.1 List of Interviewed Experts (List of interviews)

1	Project team member (2 meetings)
2	City hall employee
3	Local territorial organization
4	Commune 1 vicemayor
5	County Council councilor
6	County Council department director (2 meetings)
7	Commune 2 vicemayor
8	Executive director local development
9	Local Agricultural Bureau
10	Highschool Principal
11	MARD representative (2 meetings)
12	Commune 3 public employee
13	Commune 4 public employee
14	Commune 5 mayor
15	Commune 6 mayor
16	City vicemayor
17	Local Agricultural Office
18	National Level NGO representative 1 (2 meetings)
19	National Level NGO representative 2
20	Regional Development Agency former representative

8.2 Stakeholder Interaction Table

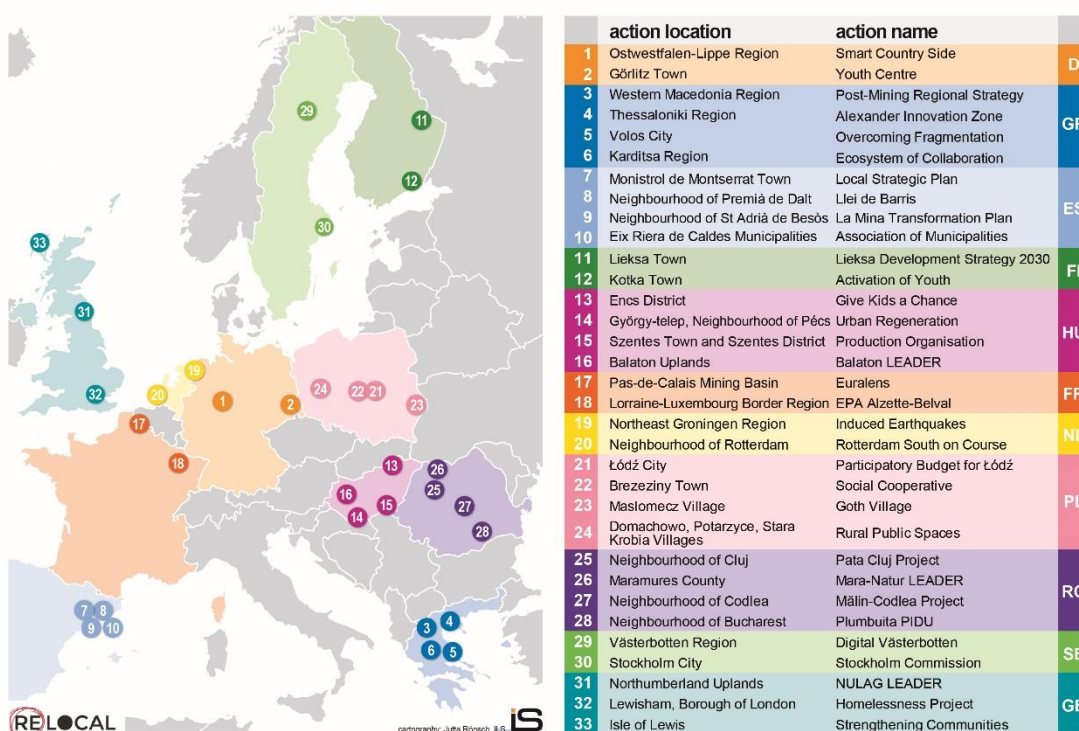
Type of Stakeholders	Most relevant 'territorial' level they operate at	Stakeholders' ways of involvement in the project (What do we gain, what do they gain)
Local politicians	5	Interview
Local administration	7	Interview
Associations representing private businesses		
Local development companies/agencies		
Municipal associations		
Non-profit/civil society organizations representing vulnerable groups	4	Interview
Other local community stakeholders		
Local state offices/representations	2	Interview
Regional state offices/representations	2	Interview
Ministries involved in (national or EU) cohesion policy deployment	1	Interview
Cohesion Policy think tanks (national/EU-level)		
Primary and secondary educational institutions	1	Interview
Colleges and universities		
Social and health care institutions		
Cultural institutions and associations		
Media		

The RELOCAL Project

EU Horizon 2020 research project ‘**Resituating the local in cohesion and territorial development**’ –RELOCAL aims to identify factors that condition local accessibility of European policies, local abilities to articulate needs and equality claims and local capacities for exploiting European opportunity structures.

In the past, especially since the economic and financial crisis, the European Social Model has proven to be challenged by the emergence of spatially unjust results. The RELOCAL hypothesis is that **processes of localisation and place-based public policy** can make a positive contribution to spatial justice and democratic empowerment.

The research is based on **33 case studies** in **13 different European** countries that exemplify development challenges in terms of spatial justice. The cases were chosen to allow for a balanced representation of different institutional contexts. Based on case study findings, project partners will draw out the factors that influence the impact of place-based approaches or actions from a comparative perspective. The results are intended to facilitate a greater local orientation of cohesion, territorial development and other EU policies.



The RELOCAL project runs from October 2016 until September 2020.

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