This paper aims at outlining a successful implementation of a project within LEADER framework, which is a local development method which allows local actors to develop an area by using its endogenous development potential. After a brief presentation of the characteristics of regional development strategies in Romania, there were emphasized the objectives and activities encompassed in a local development plan, managed by the leaders of the local action group called ‘Vrancea County’. In order to reinforce the strengths of Vrancea County and implicitly to assure a sustainable development of this area from the South-East part of Romania, a LAG constituted through a partnership between public and private actors settled a set of priorities to be exploited by means of specific actions. The goal of this paper is to highlight these priorities, by integrating them in a project management approach. The paper concludes with specifications about how Microsoft Project software could support project management initiatives that will be developed by the LAG Vrancea County in the next period.

Keywords: public policy, regional development, project management, local action group

JEL Code: H50, O20

1. General considerations regarding the regional development strategies in Romania

The traditional approach to regional development was undertaken by central governments using the levers of subsidies to firms, infrastructure and the location of public sector activity (Bachtler and Yuill, 2001). The formulation of regional development strategy is a basic requirement for the successful implementation of regional programming. A constitutive element of this strategy is the selection of the spatial or regional development model. Internationally, there are two dominant models, according to Christofakis and Papadaskalopoulos (2011): the growth poles and diffusion model, and the model of integrated – local - endogenous development. The first perspective refers to the attraction of activities and the concentration of growth in poles, from where the diffusion of growth is expected to occur towards the surrounding region. The second model refers to the integrated spatial development, which is based on the utilisation of the endogenous potential of the regions.

In Romania, the regional policies concern the following main areas: development of enterprises, labour market, attracting investments, development of SME’s sector, improvement of the infrastructure, the quality of the environment, rural development, health, education and culture (Tumbar et al., 2006). The regional development policy strengthens the role and the responsibilities of the local public administration and of the regional organisms in the economical and social development of each settlement and of the development regions, in the same time with the reduction of government institutions involvement in such activities (Scutariu and Ciotir, 2011).

Previous researches outline that there are adjacent processes which are subordinated to the processes related to local development, and their objective is represented by the decentralization of public policies to the regional and local governments, the cooperation and the networks between the different government levels (Matei, 2008).

In Romania, as in other European countries, regional and/or local development policies involve four levels, according to a survey conducted by Barca et al. (2004):

- the European level, for setting the general norms and objectives;
- the national level, for adapting the above mentioned norms to the national context, as well as for monitoring their implementation and for providing technical assistance;
the regional level, with a fundamental role in selecting projects, assigning resources to them and monitoring their implementation;

- the local level, with a role in involving the local actors, drawing up projects and promoting their implementation.

Institutional instabilities and frequently changes in shared competences regarding regional development between actors involved in the decision-making process at national level, institutional dysfunctions, weak regional actors with limited resources and competences, not enough active sub-national actors and not enough effective roles playing at the moment are the major limits of multi-level governance of Romanian regional development policy (Dodescu and Chirilka, 2012).

The development strategy of the South-East Region was fully accomplished only by means of an integrated approach which allowed the approval of department policies that are compatible with the needs of the area under jurisdiction. Thus, the integrated projects represent the main instrument of carrying out a programming pattern.

Geographically and historically, the South East Region is the mix of Moldova, Muntenia and Dobrogea, located thus to the confluence of history and national culture. The administrative structure of the region includes 6 counties: Constanta, Tulcea, Braila, Galati, Vrancea and Buzau. The region’s economy consists of the traditional branches of agriculture, trade, tourism and services and also several branches of developed industries (Muntean et al., 2009).

The necessity to follow the territory integration method is mostly revealed from the debates and discussions with the representatives of the economic, social and administrative partnership at the district level. There is an awareness of the operational instruments’ importance which allow joint initiatives which are able to revaluate the resources and the potential of the communities and territories as efficient as possible. In the same time, the integrated projects represent the most appropriate way to promote ‘from bottom to the top’ development concept. The South-East Development Region intends to highly promote it. The integrated projects represent a complex of inter-district actions which are coherent and closely connected between them. They converge towards a territory development mutual objective and which require a unitary approach of the deployment stages. This definition emphasizes two aspects:

- The programming integration concept, the fundamental feature of the activities co-financed by means of Structural Funds;
- The region as an essential reference point, seen not only as a recipient of the development initiatives and actions, but also from the value point of view of the existent potential.

Integrated projects are included in the Regional Strategy by intervention lines (territorial, district and channel) and by programming methods (concertizing, cooperation between public and private representatives).

These projects are carried out under two forms:

- Both by concentration, where the fixed resources are able to attract important mobile resources;
- And under extended form, at a regional and sub-regional level, where more areas have the same development objective although they are not neighbouring: the extended integrated project reflects more local realities, under the form of production channels, circuits, itineraries, district or thematic networks.

The general objective of the Regional Development Strategy is to increase significantly the regional GDP by 2013 based on an economic growth rate which is superior to the national average, by increasing long term competitiveness and the region’s attraction for investments; the capitalization of the surrounding patrimony, the creation of new opportunities for the labour force and the improvement of the population’s life condition.

The specific objectives are:

1. The increase of the region’s attractiveness by developing access, continuing the extension and modernization of the harbour and air harbour infrastructure, the road and rail system, creating a multimodal system of transports; the creation of an innovative access system which is capable of insuring fast and efficient connections with the international markets, reevaluating the special geo-strategic positioning of the region.

2. The rendering of favourable conditions for the location of new investments and the reinforcement of the potential of the already existent ones by developing the utility system and the quality services for companies, by simplifying and accelerating the administrative procedures; for licenses and growth conditions of the companies’ productivity by using innovative processes and products.
2. The local development plan of the local action group ‘Vrancea County’ - A case study.

LEADER, a concept that comes from ‘connections between rural development actions’, doesn’t represent only a set of measures that should be implemented, but also a method to rally and promote rural development in the local rural communities and an instrument which works efficiently in different areas and situations by adjusting the decisions regarding the rural environment to the extremely diverse needs of the rural areas. Thus, LEADER has become an integral part of the rural development policy which encourages the local involvement for the planning and implementation of the sustainable development strategies belonging to the local rural communities. The public-private partnership Vrancea County was initiated in September 2009 by LAG representative – Vrancea County.

Sixty-six members are involved in the partnership: 15 representatives of the public partners (14 local public administrations and a school institution), 23 private partners and 28 representatives of the civil society. 16 towns are included, 14 of which are represented by local public administrations and two by private organizations: the town of Tulnici by an ONG and the city of Covasna by a trading company (Figure no. 1).

![Pie chart showing distribution of partners](image)

Figure no. 1 – The proof of the partnership between public and private actors within the project Vrancea County

As it can be seen in the picture above, the public–private partnership Vrancea County has respected right from the beginning the criterion referring to the share of the private partners and the civil society, that is, they have always been over the threshold of 50% recommended by the Rural Development National Plan and even over the threshold of 65% recommended by the Rural Development and Agriculture Ministry for the selection of the potential LAGs organized in September-October 2010. The partners signed a partnership agreement in which they decided over the following responsibilities in what concerns the territorial development of the area which gathers the 16 towns:

- The improvement of the rural environment and area, the increase of the life quality and the diversity of the economic activities by implementing the local development integrated strategies;
- The improvement of the ecologic, social and economic life conditions, having as an objective the development of an attractive and motivating environment for the population that lives here and the encouragement of keeping young people in the region.
- The preservation of the historic cultural landscape as a basic component of the natural and cultural patrimony in order to contribute to human prosperity and the reinforcement of the regional identity.
- The support of an ecologic agriculture in the ‘Local Action Group Vrancea County, for the diversity of the live-stock species and plant varieties specific to the area and the promotion of the local products.
- The increase of the area economic interest belonging to the ‘Local Action Group Vrancea County’ and the support of trades, services as well as the processing and promotion of the local products.
The promotion of a target-region in the department of ‘Local Action Group Vrancea County’ for a sustainable rural tourism and thus, the creation of a new important economic frame.

The promotion of the ‘Local Action Group Vrancea County’ area and its association with other national and international regions and the contribution to the development of the rural environment. Considering that rural development presupposes a high level of involvement of the rural representatives in order to identify the local needs correctly and in useful time, having as a result action integrated strategies, designed for the development of the local community (including the economic environment). The activities for the elaboration of the Local Development plan of LAG - Vrancea County had in view the following aspects:

- Territorial analyses and surveys.
- A diagnosis analysis.
- SWOT analysis.
- An international cooperation action.
- The formulation of the development priorities.
- The settling of an action program.
- The drawing up of the budget necessary for the action implementation.
- The identification of the best methods of implementation, evaluation and monitoring of Leader Axis activities.

The present legal representative of the private public partnership had the initiative for the carrying out of the activities which were previous to the implementation of Leader Axis in LAG area - Vrancea County. Thus, he was involved in various activities to convince the local representatives, to animate the territory and the population for the Leader implementation in the area.

He also had the initiative to prepare a non-refundable financing request in order to carry out the Local Development Plan of the respective territory. As a consequence, the private-public partnership LAG – Vrancea County, formed after having signed the Partnership agreement mentioned above, requested non-refundable financial support by means of Measure no. 431.1 – stage 3- PNDR, provided by the Rural Development and Agriculture Ministry for all the potential Romanian LAGs in order to develop their local development strategies.

After having submitted the financing request, LAG - Vrancea County received a non-refundable financial support of approximately 49,000 Euros in order to carry out the objective of Measure no. 431.1 which included the territorial dynamics and competences for the financing and functioning of the Local Action Group – VRANCEA COUNTY.

The major objective of the contract signed between LAG - Vrancea County and CRPDRP Constanta, as a result of the non-refundable financing was: the drawing out of the Local Development Plan for LAG selection by involving the local representatives in the development of the territory.

A series of specific objectives derives from this general objective:

- 0.1 The involvement of the local representatives who are essential for the territory of the Local Action Group – Vrancea County.
- 0.2 The carrying out of territorial analyses and surveys, diagnosis and SWOT analyses at the level of LAG – Vrancea County for the correct and precise identification of the integrated rural development opportunities and the risk minimization.
- 0.3 The involvement of four Spanish experts in the project who will work within LAG territory – VRANCEA COUNTY for the elaboration of the local development strategy.
- 0.4 An experience exchange with a Spanish LAG in order to make connections and contacts for future collaborations.
- 0.5 The drawing out of the territory development priorities and the identification of the best ways to implement the prior activities.
- 0.6 The presentation of an integrated and well-documented Local Development Plan within the LAGs’ selection session launched by the Agriculture Ministry.
- 0.7 The attraction of new partners from the adjacent territories.
- 0.8 Informing the citizens in order to gain their trust and support.

The financed project facilitated the development of LEADER rural territories with the help of some well-prepared local representatives who stand for a strong decisional factor and are responsible for the evolution in time of the delimited territorial areas where they will act. The objectives mentioned above have insured the presentation of a Local Development Plan within the LAGs selection session and have underlined the advantages that Leader intervention measures have over the sustainable development of the rural environment.
The general and specific objectives were in accordance with LEADER Axis objectives: the launching and functioning of the local interest initiatives, using the ‘from bottom to the top’ approach by involving the local representatives in the development of their own territories. These objectives also help with the completion of axes no. 1, 2 and 3 within the Rural Development National Program by means of the implementation of some specific activities.

In what concerns the project management activities, software application Microsoft Project was used in order to emphasize the Gantt Chart reflecting the interdependencies between the activities managed by the LAG Vrancea County (Figure no. 2).

![Microsoft Project - Project LAG Vrancea County](image)

Figure no. 2 – Gantt Chart related to the activities integrated in the project managed by the LAG Vrancea County

The resources configuration and their assignment to the activities detailed in Figure no. 2 will be the next steps envisaged in order to develop the project management activities by means of the Microsoft Project functionalities. Thus, any project team member will know at every moment its responsibilities linked to a certain task and the communication between team members will be facilitated by the use of collaborative functions provided by this software.

3. Conclusions and future research lines

The financing contract signed between LAG Vrancea County and the Payment Agency for Rural and Fishing Development by LEADER program proved its opportunity once with the promotion of the Local Development Strategy for the public or private partners and beneficiaries from the territory belonging to LAG Vrancea County. The actions undertaken lead to non-refundable European financing measures for the citizens of this area, possibilities to develop local businesses, to increase the living standard, opportunities for the development of the young generation, the growth of the public services level. The beneficiaries have been informed about this approach by means of which LAG Vrancea County can change the local development conditions and encouraged the areas' citizens to get involved actively, to come with ideas and suggestions, to hand in projects for the support of Vrancea County historical territory in order to be compatible with the European standards. The impact is reflected by the number of projects handed in within LAG Vrancea County, the citizens ‘good and optimistic perception, as they have understood the role and objective of the association, that is, to support the community, the public and private institutions, to help local development. The new technologies allow administrative decentralisation. While this can mean greater local autonomy and power for LAG Vrancea County, it can also mean to greater central control.

With the view of securing long lasting results of the project initiative in the LAG Vrancea County, it would be important to complement training programs with a comprehensive promotional campaign that would raise awareness about the benefits of project management across all activities that will be developed under this initiative. Public sector procurement requirements can be leveraged to include project certifications as part of large projects and thus drive demand for project management expertise.
In this context, the future research agenda will be focused on how Microsoft Project tools could lead to an effective management of the projects that will be launched and coordinated by the members of LAG Vrancea County. In this way, the identification of appropriate resources, assessment of their value and their assignment to the activities related to the future projects will facilitate the budgeting processes, as well as the appraisal of resource allocation to diverse tasks.

References