

Impetus for change in local communities

The LEADER approach in Moldova

Márta Márczis, who led a team of experts in 2016-2018 providing assistance to rural development in the Republic of Moldova, tells an uplifting story of commitment, energy, openness and creativity displayed by hundreds of rural citizen-led initiatives.



Voting with apples at the first meeting of the Moldovan LAGs network.

Márta Márczis (AEIDL)¹

The story I am sharing is not from one of the EU countries; it is about the LEADER initiative in Moldova. It started at the beginning of 2016, with the 'Support to Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) Programme', financed by the European Union within the framework of the Eastern Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI). The three-year programme, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), was closed in December 2018, but the story doesn't end here: the LEADER initiative has been extended and continues to work!

¹ <https://www.aeidl.eu/en/who-are-we/general-assembly-and-board/1234-marta-marczis.html>

The SARD LEADER/CLLD initiative in a nutshell

The main objective of the SARD programme was to develop regions and territorial administrative units with special status in Moldova: the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia, homeland of Gagauzian people², and Taraclia District, where the majority of the population is Bulgarian.

The €6.5 million programme intended to develop these two disadvantaged, minority-populated rural regions, and connect them to national and regional authorities and structures, facilitating dialogue in the development of national strategies. The programme aimed to enhance community empowerment, develop local entrepreneurship and small- and medium-sized enterprises, encourage investment in small-scale infrastructure refurbishments and promote inter-municipal cooperation.

Implementing the EU LEADER/CLLD approach was the cross-cutting (cross-fertilisation?) measure of the programme. Using the LEADER territorial approach, the programme successfully connected ethnically different villages in the two target regions, and the Local Action Groups (LAGs) territorial partnerships were extended to the neighbouring districts around Taraclia and Gagauzia, aiming to eliminate ethnic boundaries. The result is that each LAG has a multicultural character, which LAG members consider to be a great value.



² Gagauzians, who were nomadic until the end of the 18th Century, deal mainly with agriculture and food processing today, and have been the only Christian (Eastern orthodox) Turkish people since the 12th Century. The Gagauzian language is 80% same as today Turkish. It is on the UNESCO list of the endangered languages. There is still no basic Gagauzian education, but my experience is that the language is still the important hidden thread behind the Gagauzian identity. About 150,000 Gagauzians live in Moldova, in the picturesque Bugeac Steppe and watershed area of the Prut and Jalpug rivers. Another 100,000 live in historical diasporas in Ukraine, Greece, Turkey, Russia and Central Asia. The head of the government of the Autonomous Territorial Unit is the elected 'Bashkan', who is today a modern, talented female politician, Irina Vlah. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irina_Vlah

Moldova

A country in Eastern Europe, the Republic of Moldova was part of the Soviet Union, bordered by Romania to the west and Ukraine to the north, east, and south. A related territory on the east bank of the Dniester River has been under the de facto control of the non-legitimate independent government of Transnistria since 1990. To break down this frozen border conflict, the promising Dniester Euroregion³ was created for cross-border cooperation by local administrative-territorial units in Ukraine, Transnistria and the Republic of Moldova in 2012. The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in the south of Moldova is another territory with special status, but it is not a conflict zone.

Independent since 1991, with a constitution adopted in 1994, Moldova is a parliamentary republic on its difficult road to creating real substance to democratic systems. Its capital is Chisinau and its population is 3.36 million (including Transnistria and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia). The official language is Moldovan, which is very close to Romanian. The second language spoken is Russian.

The level of emigration is shocking. In 2015, 22.6% of its citizens lived abroad; 30% were urban, while 70% came from rural areas. Since the late 1990s, migration from Moldova has been directed towards two regions: the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, predominantly Russia (more than 55% of migrants in 2014), and Western Europe, particularly Italy (more than 15% in 2014). Emigration mainly occurs for economic reasons: poverty, lack of employment opportunities, extremely low salaries and social benefits (pension, subsidies for families, etc.). Moldovan GDP per capita (\$2,165 in 2017)⁴ and Human Development Index (Moldova ranks 112 out of the 189 countries)⁵ are permanently the lowest in Europe, although slowly improving in recent years.

To increase the living conditions of the family members left at home, migrants and shorter-term external employees send large amounts of remittances to Moldova (e.g. in 2017 it was \$211.78 million; based on some research studies, this is one of the highest remittance-contribution to national GDP worldwide).

This small (33 843 km²) multicultural country (about 22% of the total population is from minority groups)⁶ on the border of Ukraine and the EU deals with permanent challenges to balance macro-political influences in its society, economy and politics.

The country's economy is still significantly rural. The urban/rural population ratio is 40/60. The proximity to the Black Sea lends it a mild and sunny climate. The fertile soil supports wheat, corn, barley, tobacco, sugar beet and soybeans. Beef and dairy cattle are raised, and beekeeping is widespread. Moldovan wine, the best-known product, comes from extensive and well-developed vineyards concentrated in the central and southern regions. Moldova is also known for its sunflower seeds, walnuts, apples and other fruits. Agriculture and food processing accounts for about 40% of the country's GDP. Tourism is developing and resources have been identified; a new regional development policy is focusing on its development.

'Community coaching' to ignite the spirit of change

The original European LEADER approach is based on seven specific principles, which must all be present simultaneously in order to ensure the method is applied correctly. In the LEADER approach

³ Website of the Dniester Euroregion: <http://dniester.eu/en/479>

⁴ Source: World Bank - <https://tradingeconomics.com/moldova/gdp-per-capita>

⁵ Source: UNDP - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>

⁶ (8,4% Ukrainians, 5,8% Russians, 4,4% Turkish-speaking Gagauzians, about 2% Bulgarian, with also Polish and other minorities (census data 2004, excluding Transnistria).

adaptation in Moldova, ‘community coaching’ is an additional, eighth principle that makes LEADER/CLLD tools more appropriate for inclusive place-based development in countries and rural areas, where self-confidence and self-organisation in the local community is lacking. Community coaching is designed to mobilise and empower communities.

The impulse to contribute to the ‘common good’ or develop social capital is being lost in many local communities globally, for a variety of historical, economic and social reasons. Community coaching is a development tool that counters this dynamic by encouraging communities and their members to achieve their full potential and build social capital by working together. It is recognised that without active local citizens, we lose the energy, knowledge and ideas of those who are targeted by development programmes, running the risk of producing unworkable solutions with which people cannot identify. This can lead to a lack of appropriate development communication and cause further isolation, instead of inclusion and support.

Step by step

The locally implemented milestones followed the essence of the classical LEADER approach and implementation process, adapted to the Moldavian cultural, administrative and legal situation.

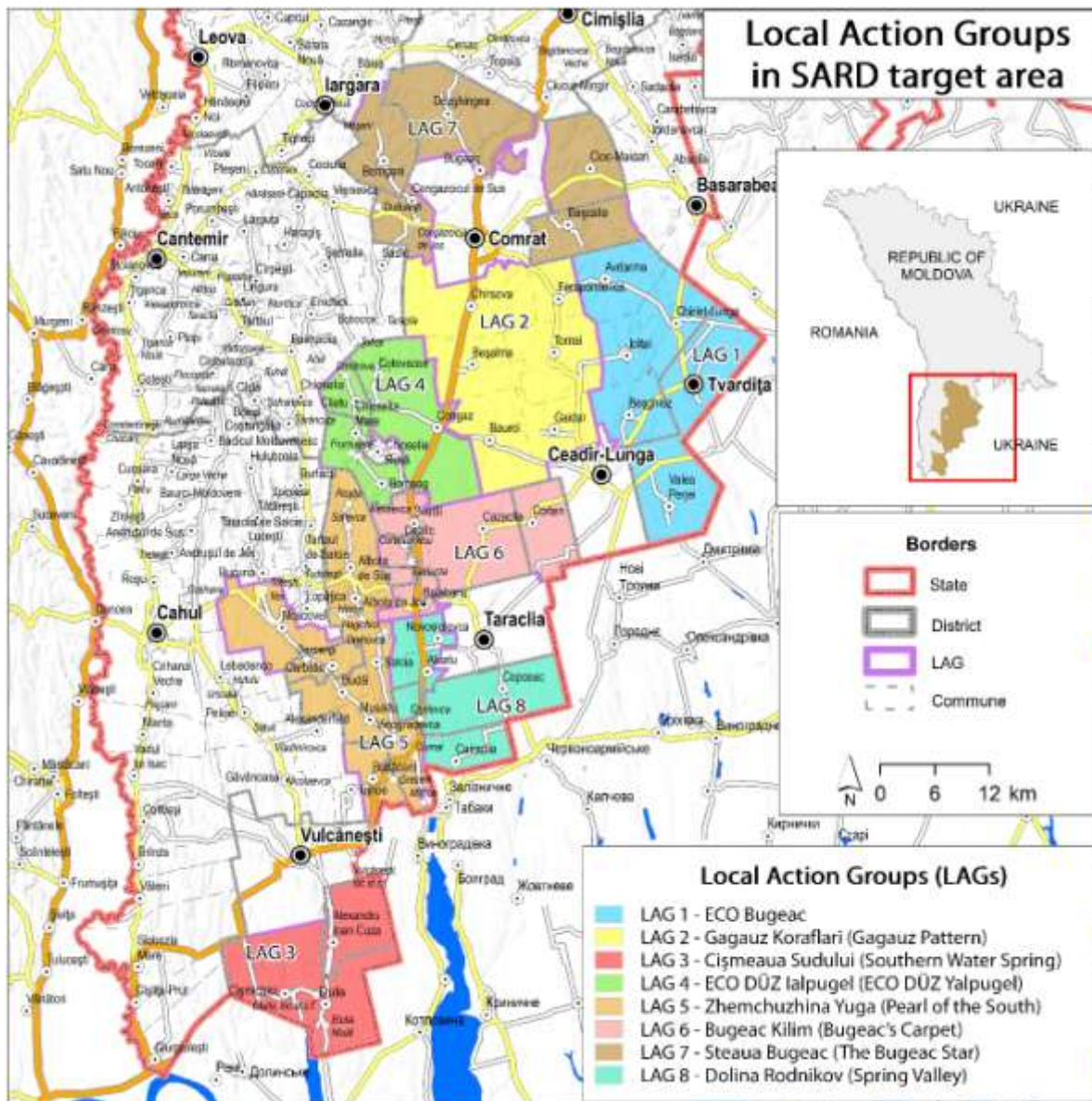
In 2016, local implementation of the SARD/LEADER initiative started with an awareness-raising campaign aimed at mobilising local partners in targeted regions. Selected and trained community coaches came to the targeted south Moldovan rural communities without being invited or announced. They were experts, being familiar with the targeted local development challenges, but didn’t belong to the given communities. They began coaching in a passive social environment, where the challenge was to find local change-makers – those who would be the first to try ‘something new’. They spent a year working with the target communities, organising actions and common works at least once a month. This participatory process was about investment in people’s self-confidence, attitudes and thinking. The result was the bottom-up creation of eight local rural development partnerships, covering the greater part of the rural areas in Gagauzia, Taraclia and villages in neighbouring districts.

Through the meetings and common actions, community self-organisation and reorganisation has initiated and fostered new partnerships between local stakeholders, and an empowered change-maker group emerged from among the originally passive community. At a crucial point, this group became a local initiator group – a LAG – and started to function with its own responsibility. Importantly, the impetus for change was not related to quickly available financial resources. The members of the LAG initiatives recognised that funding for development is not the only thing they required: they also needed to identify the unused local development resources and people’s learning on how to change.

Following the bottom-up, territorial and partnership principles, the eight local initiatives formalised their LAGs, which were the first flagships in Moldova. The eight LAG territories cover 44 rural communities.

Administrative units represented in the 8 SARD LAGs	Number of involved rural localities	Population (1000)
Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia	25	97,9
Taraclia District	11	27,8
Cahul District	5	19,3
Cantemir, Basarabasca and Leova Districts	1-1-1	
TOTAL	44	145

Map of the eight LAGs created by local partnerships involving localities from Gagauzia, Taraclia and neighbouring districts.⁷



Activities of each LAG cover a bottom-up selected group of rural municipalities with populations of between 11,000 and 34,500. The number of LAG members amounts to around 30 on average, with a balance across each type of stakeholder group (public sector, local businesses and civil society) – represented by around 30% each.

In 2017, 'LAG people' have organised themselves, informed and invited others, and have set down and started to think about their local development strategy, including economic, social, cultural and environmental actions and projects. Each strategic working group had at least 15 members on average, spending 1,000 hours on discussing, learning and planning the local development process. The groups emerged voluntarily, with members wanting to invest in the future. Each LAG identified 80–150 local projects.

⁷ Source: http://www.leadmoldova.eu/assets/4b_map_of_the_sard_local_action_groups_en.jpg

Finally, the eight Partnership Agreements were signed by all founding members and the planning process finalised in November of the same year. The signature event was the first networking meeting of the members of the eight LAGs, which attracted around 320 participants who were ready to share their hopes and ideas in a spirit of openness.



South Moldavian LAGs' first local product exhibition in Comrat, the capital of Gagauzia in 2017.

In 2018, LAG management teams and LAG offices were set up by each SARD LAG, and during the year, 110 local LEADER projects have been carried out in Gagauzia, Taraclia and in neighbouring communities. The projects promoted local economic, social and environmental development, and were selected under locally announced competitions for grants, including a regional festival of local carpets, an enterprise for producing condiments and medical plants, cultivation of strawberries in greenhouses, construction of a rural market, equipping of playgrounds, the establishment of a touristic boarding house with national characteristics, health remedies involving bees and opening local restaurants serving traditional food.

The local calls for projects were based on development measures included in the approved LAG strategy. Administration of the local applications has been the responsibility of the LAG offices. Project selection was made by LAG selection committees, composed of representatives of mayoralties, local businesses, and civil society. It was the first opportunity that these people had ever had to sit down and make decisions together: to discuss a project, which might have been proposed by the mayor, and to say 'no', if decided. They reported being very afraid of this step, but it went very well. There were strong debates sometimes, but common satisfaction with the decisions taken. A new era of change!

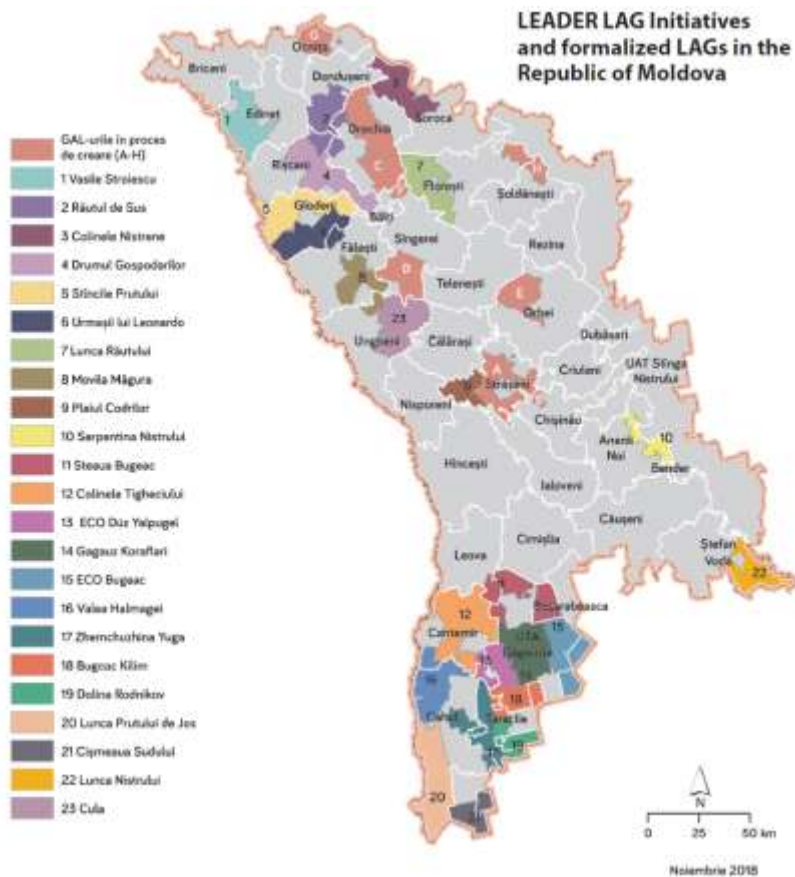
The main concrete benefit is that LAG local calls created development opportunities for those who are not usually winners of competitive macro-economic processes – i.e. rural small enterprises,

youth and women entrepreneurs, social institutions with business interests, community initiatives, and educational and public institutions aiming to improve the local living conditions.

The LEADER spirit has spread to the whole of Moldova and is looking for EU connecting points!

Successful implementation in the south has inspired many rural communities to start to learn and implement the LEADER approach elsewhere in Moldova. This extended interest and great energy exhibited by the 23 rural development Local Action Group (LAG) initiatives identified in 2018 demonstrates that Moldovan rural communities are ready for significant social and economic development change.

In December 2018 the Moldovan national LEADER Association was established with the aim of facilitating all LEADER initiatives in the Republic of Moldova. LAGs are interested in networking to get to know each other and to learn from each other, acquiring experiences from other countries and cooperating on projects⁸. The network has a strong cooperation with Ministry of Regional Development, Agriculture and Environment, whose relevant department is working on setting up the national LEADER programme. The ministry and the network is organising the first international LEADER networking conference to be held in Chisinau in April this year.



Source: <http://www.leadermoldova.eu/assets/4gen.jpg>

⁸ Representatives of Moldovan LAGs participated at the 'LEADER Reloaded' conference organised by the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD) on 26-28 September, 2018, in Evora, Portugal.

Three examples of projects

The milk collection point

“Thanks to the LEADER approach we have learned the value of cooperation and started to cooperate in our businesses,” says M. Sergiu Sargheliu, a young and ambitious businessman – a real change-maker –from Cișmichioi, located in the Chismeaua Sudului LAG area.

Sergiu describes his project, which was selected by his LAG for financing from the EU fund, as follows: *“There is no milk collection point in the territory of our LAG, but we need it. My company works in cheese production and thus we constantly need fresh milk. On the other side, milk producers in the LAG territory also need this collection point to ensure the quality of the milk that they want to sell. As milk is a perishable product, it requires primary cooling, as well as appropriate conditions for storing finished products.”* To solve the problem, Sergiu’s project involves purchasing refrigeration equipment and putting in place a milk collection point to be used by milk producers from three LAG villages: Cișmichioi, Etulia and Alexandru Ion Cuza.



The Chismeaua Sudului LAG Council agreed at the council meeting to finance the milk collection point project. The implementation of this project helps Sergiu’s own small business, and also help to stimulate the interest of local farmers in continuing dairy activities, because of the opportunity to sell quality milk.

Sergiu concludes: *“So, we began to take the responsibility for providing and supporting the further development of cheese production in the villages of our LAG. It is our plan to increase the volume and variety of locally produced organic dairy products in the future.”*

LAG network of vegetable producers in Congaz

Piotr Radcov is an informal leader among his peers. As soon as he comes up with a new idea, others copy it. He constructed a greenhouse, one of the few in Congaz, but has struggled with various improvised heating solutions to keep it warm during the cold season. Until this year he could not afford to buy a special boiler. Now he has one, thanks to the SARD LEADER grant of €2,500.

Piotr is proud of his experience and has encouraged other local entrepreneurs to submit applications to their LAG and invest in new equipment. *“Instead of applying for a second fund for my business, I convinced another vegetable producer in our village to apply. It will help my business, if we can develop our products and market together with her and some other local vegetable producers.”* Piotr Radcov received European support as an active member of the Local Action Group ‘ECO Düz Jalpugel’, to which the Congaz area belongs, along with other five neighbouring communities.



Local market in Musaitu village and the ‘Pearl of the South’

Every Thursday, people of Musaitu village in Taraclia district, populated mostly by Bulgarians, have a new meeting point, right in the heart of their small community – the recently inaugurated local market.



Alexandru Tatu is a senior citizen and a regular trader at the local market. He notes that villagers use to socialise only on Memorial Day, at the cemetery, once a year. Since the market was built, they socialise weekly at the market: *“I make brooms and weave baskets from osier cans and sell them. I can see now people coming with more confidence, as the new setup encourages buyers to stay longer and purchase more”*. Alexandru’s neighbour at the market, who sells milk, cheese and cream, seems very content: *“The European Union has finally arrived at our home,”* she says.

The mayor of Musaitu admits that they would not have managed to build and arrange the local market without the EU’s support through SARD LEADER. She thinks that the greatest value of the programme has been to bring people closer under one umbrella, the Local Action Group. Musaitu joined efforts with other 19 neighbouring rural communities to form the Zhemchuzhina Yuga LAG (translated as the ‘Pearl of the South’).

“Our LAG is so diverse but concentrated, as we cover many ethnicities within just 14,000 inhabitants,” notes Ruslan Liteanschi, one of the leaders of the LAG. The LAG members visited all of the LAG communities and discussed with people from all walks of life. Regardless of the native language spoken, they realised that they share the same burdens and concerns, and they could team up to find a common solution. *“In this thick folder we have gathered 140 dreams, translated into project ideas of all kinds, from infrastructure to culture,”* says Ruslan Liteanschi.

During discussions, people agreed that all roads lead to Musaitu, as it is in the centre of the LAG. So, everybody agreed that one of the first implemented projects would be the local market. Each

LAG project, including the Musaitu market, benefited from co-financing from the SARD programme, amounting to around €25,000. Of this total, €5,250 was allocated to the construction and arrangement of the local market. The fund was used for the procurement of building materials. The works have been carried out by villagers on a voluntary basis. The next step will be to organise market days also on weekends. The municipality has other ambitious plans: to arrange parking places, to install garbage containers and to extend the water pipe to the market site.

The journey of the Pearl of the South LAG is just beginning, as mentioned by the local leader, Ruslan Liteanschi: *“We were helped to make the first steps, and soon we will be ready to run our first marathon. We realised that only together are we strong enough to improve our livelihoods and enjoy a better life. We used to be only neighbours, now we are friends with the other members of the LAG. We consult and help each other.”*

More information on the SARD Programme is available on the www.leadermoldova.eu and www.localdevelopmentforinclusion websites.

Publications:

Towards prospering rural areas I – II. SARD LEADER leaflets - written by Marta Márczis, UNDP Moldova, 2017 and 2018. http://www.leadermoldova.eu/assets/sard1_en.pdf
http://www.leadermoldova.eu/assets/sard2_eng.pdf

Handbook on implementation of LEADER/CLLD – community-driven rural development initiatives, in the Republic of Moldova – written by Marta Márczis. UNDP Moldova, 2018. <http://www.leadermoldova.eu/assets/handbook2018en.pdf>

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