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THE ROLE OF ACTIVE AND INCLUSIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN TULCEA COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Tourism represents an important factor in the socio-economic development of rural areas in Romania. Natural landscapes and local traditions are valued by entrepreneurs from the countryside and are transformed into attractions for tourists from the urban environment or from abroad. At the same time, the development of tourism and leisure businesses also has a social role by creating jobs for the local population and improving the standard of living in the countryside. Local Action Groups are active partnerships at the level of a relatively small territory and that include in a balanced way representatives of the public, private and civil society sectors. The "bottom-up" LEADER approach, applied by the Local Action Groups, is based on the identification of solutions that meet the real needs at the local level and the provision of financial resources for them. The research paper aims to carry out an analysis of the development of businesses in the tourism sector in Tulcea county supported by measure 19 Local Development LEADER from the National Rural Development Program. To carry out the study, information was collected, processed and interpreted from the database of the Agency for the Financing of Rural Investments, from the local level and from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The research conclusions highlight the role of LAG partnerships in supporting tourism initiatives in rural areas and the importance of applying the LEADER approach in solving local problems and socio-economic development in rural areas.*

Keywords: LEADER, tourism, Local action group, rural development

JEL Classification: Q01, Q26

INTRODUCTION

The main activity of rural population is agriculture, but this sector does not cover the needs of the population from the perspective of ensuring a constant and sufficient income for a decent living. In this context, non-agricultural activities become a necessity to supplement incomes and increase the quality of life in rural area. (Sima E. 2022) Tourism is a field that can be exploited as an alternative or in complementarity with agricultural activities.

The existing natural and human resources in the countryside can generate earning opportunities for local entrepreneurs and, to the same extent, meet the demands of tourists, increasingly attracted by natural settings and traditions. Even if the tourism sector was hard tried during the pandemic, tourist reception structures specific to the rural environment (pensions and agropensions) were preferred by tourists. (Roșu E., Voicilaș D-M, 2022)

Grants from the European Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development, through specific national programs, support local entrepreneurs to start non-agricultural businesses in the countryside, including in the tourism and leisure sector.

Within the National Rural Development Program 2014-2020, measures 6.2 and 6.4 are provided to support the initiation and development of the non-agricultural field. (Părnăș Rusu A., Gheorghe E., Mitulescu R., Marin Ilie N., Ifrim D. 2023), (MADR, 2023). At the same time, through measure 19 Local development LEADER, partnerships formed at local level under the name of Local Action Groups (LAGs), develop and implement local development strategies using the LEADER tool.

The "bottom-up" LEADER approach applied by the Local Action Groups is based on the identification of solutions that meet the real needs at the local level and the provision of financial resources for them. (European Commission, 2023).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The purpose of the research paper is to carry out an analysis of the development of tourism sector businesses in Tulcea county supported by measure 19 LEADER Local Development, from the National Rural Development Program and to present the impact of starting tourism and leisure businesses for increasing the quality of life in the targeted area.

The following research methods and techniques were used to carry out the research: the identification and collection of specific data, their analysis, synthesis, interpretation. Information is presented in graphical and tabular form.

The information analyzed and used in the paper was taken from representative materials from the websites of the authorities with a role in the elaboration, management, implementation and control of rural development programs in Romania, namely: the Management Authority for the National Rural Development Program, within Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development; Agency for Financing Rural Investments, Local Action Groups from Tulcea county. Also, the specialized literature and the legislation with incidence in the field of the work were studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Local Action Groups have the opportunity to elaborate development strategies for territories made up of communes and cities with a population of up to 20,000 inhabitants - this being the eligible territory where the LEADER financing instrument can be applied.

These partnerships aim at the socio-economic development of the territory in which they operate, increasing the attractiveness of tourist destinations in the territory through innovation and authentic rural experiences, as well as increasing the standard of living of the inhabitants. In many areas of Romania, the tourism sector represents an opportunity for development, therefore in most local development strategies we find measures to support it.

This paper proposes an analysis of the situation of LAGs in Tulcea county from the perspective of start-ups financed in the tourism sector. Five LAGs are active in Tulcea county, covering the entire LEADER eligible territory: Macinului Mountains-Old Danube LAG, Razim LAG, Danube Delta LAG, North Dobrogea LAG, People of the Delta LAG.

They have 17,530,063.46 euros at their disposal to implement the strategies, with the 2014-2020 PNDR as a source, including the additional funds related to the 2021-2022 transition period. (Pârnuș Rusu A., Gheorghe E., Mitulescu R., Marin Ilie N., 2022)

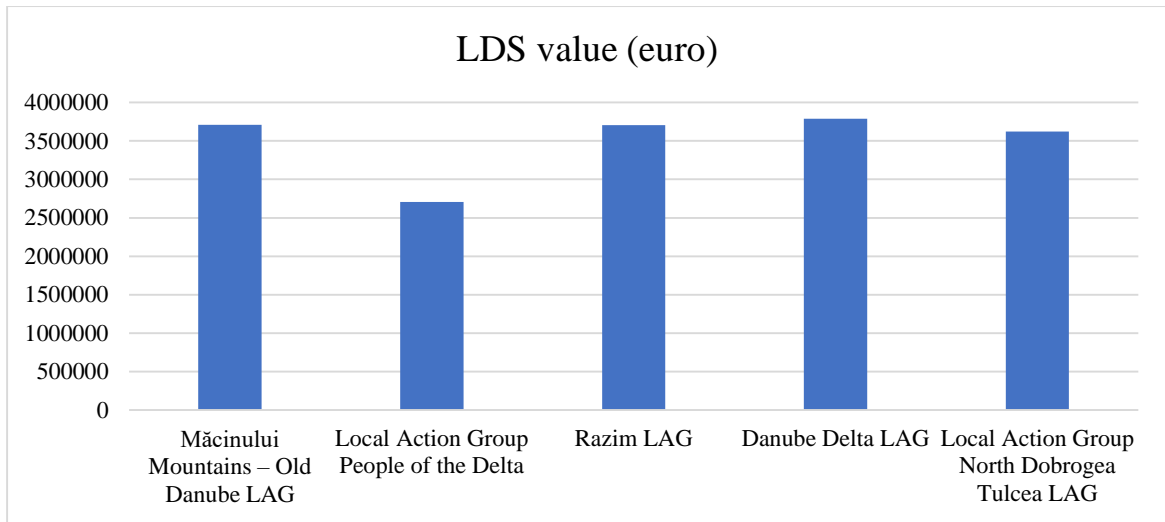


Figure 1. – LDS value (euro)

The allocation of each LDS was made according to the area covered by the LAG and the number of inhabitants in the respective territory, as well as based on quality criteria of the strategy. Thus, SDL Măcinului Mountains – Old Danube LAG has a value of 3,711,129.53 euro, LDS of "Local Action Group People of the Delta" has a value of 2,704,712.04 euro, LDS of Razim LAG has a value of 3,704,152.54 euro, LDS of Danube Delta LAG has a value of 3,787,203.44 euro, LDS of "Local Action Group North Dobrogea Tulcea" has a value of 3,622,865.91 euro. (MADR, 2022)

This funding is for projects in the public field, the agricultural field and the non-agricultural field. Considering that a significant part of the territory covered by the 5 LAGs is found in the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, with a special natural setting, it creates opportunities for the development of tourism and leisure activities. Thus, in each of the strategies of the LAGs there is a measure that can be used to finance the start-up of non-agricultural activities, including in the tourism sector. Within the SDLs, 43 projects were financed to support start-ups that carry out tourism and leisure activities, with a total value of 1,655,000.00 euros

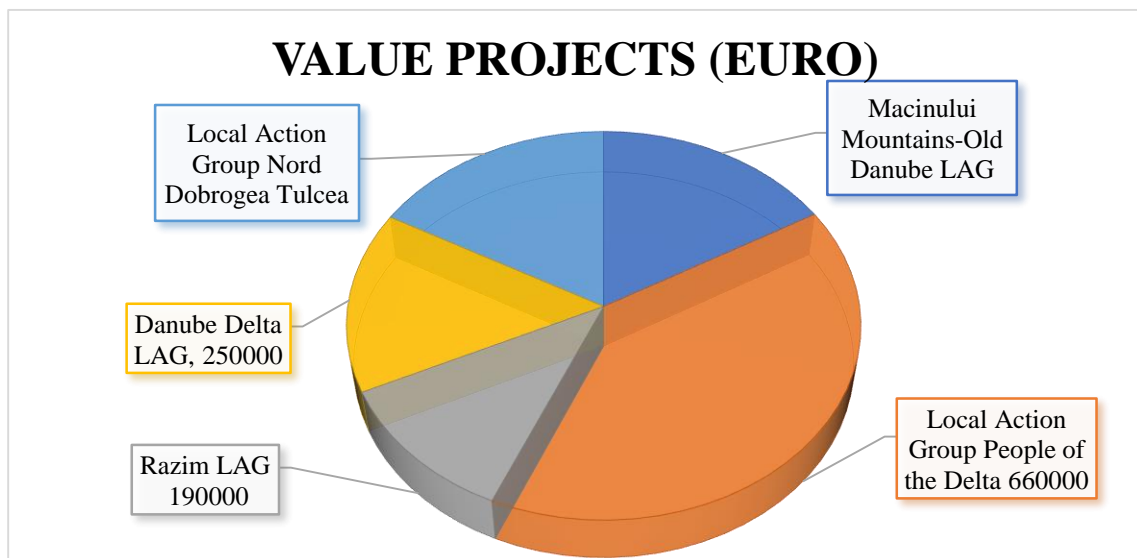


Figure 2. Value of projects in the tourism field for start-up

At the Măcinului Mountains - Old Danube LAG level, 9 projects were financed, with a total value of 275,000 euro, at the "Local Action Group People of the Delta ", 22 projects were financed,

with a total value of 660,000 euro, at the Razim LAG 3 projects were financed, with a total value of 190,000 euro, 5 projects were financed at the Danube Delta LAG, with a total value of 250,000 euro, 4 projects were financed at the "Local Action Group North Dobrogea Tulcea", with a total value of 280,000 euros. (AFIR, 2023)

Table 1. Number and value (euro) projects in the tourism field for start up

LAGs	Projects number	Value (euro) projects
1. Măcinului Mountains - Old Danube LAG	9	275,000.00
2. Local Action Group People of the Delta	22	660,000.00
3. Razim LAG	3	190,000.00
4. Danube Delta LAG	5	250,000.00
5. Local Action Group North Dobrogea Tulcea	4	280,000.00
Total	43	1,655,000.00

The typology of the projects is varied and we can note the development at a high level of business in the tourism field. For the most part, the projects are aimed at tourist reception structures, new constructions or modernizations and extensions of existing ones being supported. The financed accommodation structures are structures of the agro-pension, camping or guest rooms type, which combine the function of accommodation with agricultural, fishing or handicraft activities specific to the Danube Delta area. Tourists thus have the opportunity to get involved in the activities of the locals and discover the traditions and customs of the area.

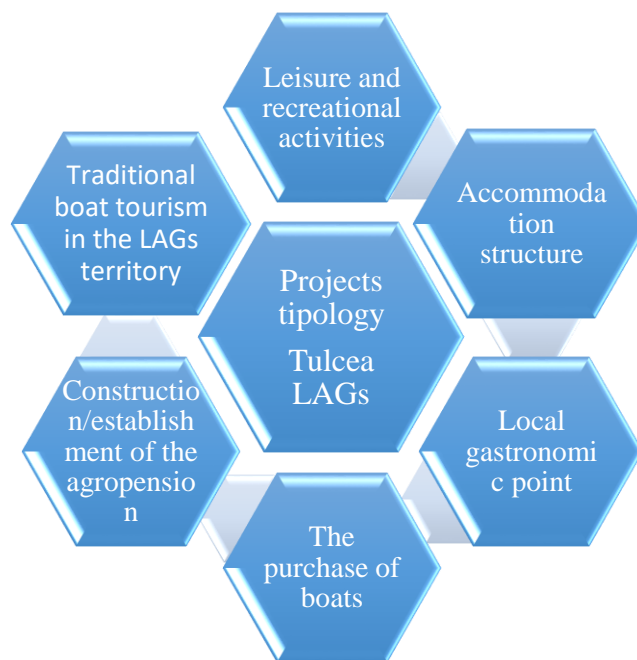


Figure 3. Projects typology in the tourist field

Locals from Tulcea County exploit the attractions of the Danube Delta, offering tourists specific recreational opportunities, such as boat trips on the Delta's canals, observing specific flora and fauna, unique in Europe. An important attraction is the specific cuisine, based on fish and aquaculture products. The local gastronomic points financed are represented by private kitchens, where food is prepared according to culinary recipes specific to the area, which are served directly to

the final consumer. The products served are prepared according to traditional methods, those used in the household, tourists can discover special dishes.

Table 2. Number of projects according to typology

LAGs	Projects number	Projects typology
Măcinului Mountains - Old Danube LAG	9	Accommodation structure Recreational and leisure center Local gastronomic point
Local Action Group People of the Delta	22	Accommodation structure Leisure tourist services Local gastronomic point The house upgrade and appropriate equipment for introduction in the tourist circuit Traditional boat tourism
Razim LAG	3	The purchase of equipment for the organization of recreational and entertaining events Leisure and recreational activities
Danube Delta LAG	5	The purchase of boats Accommodation services in camping cabins Leisure and excursions Accommodation structure
Local Action Group North Dobrogea Tulcea	4	Construction/establishment of the agro pension

As can be seen in table 2, all LAGs in Tulcea county supported local entrepreneurship in the tourism and leisure sector and encouraged local residents to carry out economic activities in a legal, legally constituted form. This aspect increases the confidence of tourists, who can spend a safe stay. The number of projects is directly proportional to the size of the territories covered by the LAGs, thus the Delta People LAG has the most funded projects, covering all tourism domains.

CONCLUSIONS

The five LAGs in Tulcea county promote sustainable tourism, help preserve natural and cultural resources in rural communities and lead to the improvement of the quality of life of the inhabitants of the People of the Delta area.

From the typology of projects, we can see the involvement of the business environment in promoting tourism in Tulcea county and the variety of activities that tourists from Romania and abroad will enjoy.

In essence, these are small projects with huge potential for the development of the rural area and with a major impact on the development of the business environment. Also, the funding granted also has a social impact for the local community, by creating jobs in established businesses and developing related services that rely on tourism activity, for example transport activities, handicraft production activities and crafts, cultural activities that promote traditions and folk wear.

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