

Europe in Rural Albania

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ALBANIAN NETWORK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT
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Introduction

This policy brief aims to shed light on the existing situation of participatory rural development, its main stakeholders, their respective roles, capabilities and positioning in relation to the implementation of the LEADER+ approach. It presents the findings, conclusions and main recommendations from a series of activities organized by the Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD) with the involvement of public and non-public actors, at national and regional level in the period March-May 2016.

The perspective shared by ANRD with stakeholders at both the national and regional/local levels, highlights the importance of non-public stakeholders' involvement in the national agenda for rural development, the cross-cutting and multistakeholder approach that rural development entails and the bottom-up development, which also comprises the founding perspective of the Network. These activities, the conference and the regional workshops, offered the opportunity to carry out a preliminary assessment of the main actors and their capacities, as well as their positioning to contribute to rural development, especially in the implementation of the LEADER+ approach, an important component of the Intersectorial Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development 2014-2020 (ISARD) and IPARD program.

The launching conference was supported by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). Regional activities were made possible

11 March 2016 – The launching conference of ANRD

04 May 2016 – Fier Regional Workshop (Qarks of Berat, Gjirokastër, Fier, Vlorë);

12 May 2016 – Pogradec Regional Workshop (Qarks of Elbasan and Korçë)

18 May 2016 – Shkodër Regional Workshop (Qarks of Dibër, Lezhë, Kukës and Shkodër)

Participants: representatives of Qark councils, municipalities, regional directorates of agriculture; regional educational and health directorates, regional development agencies; farmer associations and federations; representatives of civil society (women's associations, youth, environment, those that promote local democracy and local participatory development, rural development, tourism, etc.), formal and informal community-based groups, private sector (agro- business, banks) as well as active professionals and interested individuals.

through the support of the European Commission¹ and member organizations of the Network (CESVI, AGRINET, VIS Albania and AGROPUKA). It is also worth mentioning the support and active participation in the activities of the Directorate of Rural Development Policies and the Managing Authority at the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration (MoARDWA).

Context

EU membership represents a strategic objective of Albania and the European integration agenda guides the development path of the country. The perspective of the EU integration is reflected on the different strategies of the country, highlighting ISARD which is drafted in line with the main principles of future policy of the EU, CAP (The Common Agricultural Policy) and pre-accession policy (IPARD), but also relevant to the specifics of the agricultural sector and rural areas in Albania.

ISARD recognizes and highlights the role that rural development plays in the restructuring of agriculture and agro-processing, through the support that it provides for the creation of alternative economic activities and job opportunities. Because of the potential that offers for restructuring, strengthening is seen on local initiatives, those which are bottom-up and participation in local planning and development through Local Action Groups (LAGs)².

“Preparation and implementation of local strategies for rural development - “Leader” approach” as a measure to be financed by the funding instrument IPARD II, represents a reversal of the current policy of local development aiming at strengthening local democracy through increased participation of rural population, development of civil society and social dialogue within the rural population, facilitating good governance through local partnerships and promoting employment and human capital development. The requirements and implications, that the implementation of the Leader approach sets and generates, constitute the founding perspective of the Albanian Network for Rural Development positioning the Network at the forefront of participatory rural development in Albania.

The implementation of ISARD, in particular *Preparation and implementation of local strategies for rural development - “Leader” approach* measure will not be easy, in view of the requirements set forth by such approach and challenges that Albanian reality offers to rural development. The presentation of challenges hereafter is made in the form of findings and conclusions identified and concluded from the above-mentioned activities with the participation of rural development stakeholders from both public and non-public sectors.

¹ EC support is enabled through ALTER project - Active Territories for Local Economic Development of Rural Areas, which is under implementation by the consortium of rural networks of the Balkan countries and Turkey as well as PREPARE (Partnership for Rural Europe). Institute for Democracy and Mediation is the partner organizations in Albania acting on behalf of the Albanian Network for Rural Development.

² Inter-sectoral Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (2014-2020)

Challenges and opportunities of rural development

A shared understanding that rural development is a cross-sectoral and multistakeholder approach is one of the initial challenges associated with the implementation of the strategy. The inter-sectoral spirit and vision of agricultural and rural development should involve all institutions at all levels, from central to those at regional and local levels, starting from the regional agriculture directorates and all departments of various sectors like education, health etc.

The fact that ISARD is pervaded by an inter-sectoral spirit, and the already established structures, such as the inter-ministerial group created for coordinating the preparation of the strategy, or the IPARD Monitoring Committee are completely inter-sectoral reflect efforts to share the inter-sectoral vision of rural development. However, despite these, in the ANRD's activities a low presence of stakeholders who do not operate in the agricultural sector, but play their role in various sectors of rural development, such as education, health, tourism, culture, etc were identified.

There is still no common understanding among stakeholders on what is rural development; the perception of rural development as an inter-sectoral approach that involves multiple stakeholders is still low. There is a need to share and to reach by all stakeholders in a shared mindset about rural development - which involves all activities that aim at improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. Such mindset should be present to all stakeholders - both public and non-public sector (civil society, universities, professionals and businesses etc.).

Sharing a common understanding about rural development has the advantage of helping stakeholders to better identify and articulate their role in this undertaking. Consequently, their inclusion in rural development will be concrete and contributing to advance the rural development agenda. MoARDWA as the main lead institution should share a clearer and broader vision of agricultural and rural development.

Indeed, the development takes place locally

The importance of localization of the development agenda including all levels of government has been one of the lessons drawn from the international community based on the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) during the process after the 2015. A series of declarations and agendas on global level³ have underlined the role of local government in improving democracy, accountability and participation. While the most recent statements (the New Agenda 2030 and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda)⁴ consider the local level as essential to implement the development at all levels.

The 61 municipalities that represent the first level of governance play an important role in enabling local

3 Rio +20 Declaration 2012 http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/rio20_outcome_document_complete.pdf; Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-Operation 2011 <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/49650173.pdf>

4 Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20eb.pdf>

Addis Ababa Action Agenda 2015: http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AAAA_Outcome.pdf

development, providing basic public services and improving the living conditions of their residents. Municipalities represent the governance closer to the citizens and their needs and have a better understanding of the problems; they harmonize national policies with local development priorities. Municipalities represent the public authorities in the best position to promote development at the local level - where the development really happens.

The importance of local actors in agricultural and rural development is conveyed also in ISARD, where its implementation requires close cooperation with local authorities, relevant organizations that operate locally and local businesses. Although local economic development is an exclusive function of municipalities, and there are high expectations about the role of municipalities on local socio-economic development (especially now after the territorial and administrative reform), in reality, municipalities are unprepared to address the needs and problems that rural communities manifest. Theoretically, the administrative and territorial reform and further decentralization seem to be useful arguments supporting of idea of rural development by the new municipalities. But in practice, these reforms should enable the development of necessary capacities of local government to fulfill the assigned functions and the creation of an enabling environment for local development. Systematic efforts by central institutions are needed as a prerequisite of the preparation of municipalities to enable community-led local development and to implement the LEADER approach, which engages local governments in partnership with civil society and business.

Civil Society and Community-Led Local Development

Civil society represents an important interest group for rural development and one of the actors of the tripartite partnership (between civil society, public and private sector actors) that characterizes Local Action Groups. Despite the general progress of civil society in our country, the sector in rural areas is underdeveloped and limited in number and human capacities. An underdeveloped civil society excludes local communities to benefit from the advantages of good governance, as long as local governance works on the lack of influences and pressures that only an active civil society can exert.

Empowerment of civil society and of the overall non-public sector is a priority to enable the development through bottom-up approach, the kind of development that occurs by the rural communities. LAG partnerships represent the proven and successful alternative of rural development – a partnership that should be part of the social and institutional structure of rural community representing this way the final form and the peak of local development. But to get there is still a lot of work to be done at all levels.

Despite the range of problematic issues in the country in regard to the civil society sector, the preliminary findings from the regional workshops are optimistic about the potentials that this sector offers to rural development through the implementation of the LEADER approach. The regional workshops identified the existence of capacities, experiences and different investments by civil society in agriculture, agro-tourism (promotion, creation and functioning of farms, clusters and producers groups), promotion of the territory, cultural heritage, environment etc. Currently, it can be said that civil society constitutes the most dynamic and vital part of rural development. Successful experiences of rural development, coming from CESVI, VIS

Albania, AgroPuka, AgriNET and many other organizations that work on local level, demonstrate the great potentials and capacities that civil society has to bring transformative changes in the lives of the residents of rural communities. Furthermore, over the years it was invested in human capacities from different programs of rural development. These capacities are potentials that each community has and they should be recognized and promoted as agents of development.

These capabilities and potential (organizations and individuals) create the right motivation to promote community-led local development with civil society as an agent of change at the local level. These identified nucleus and others like these represent the practices over which can be invested and further efforts be built in the implementation of the LEADER+ approach and the involvement in the Local Development Plans of Local Action Groups.

Recommendations

1. The regulatory framework for the establishment and functioning of LAGs

The current legal framework/regulator does not facilitate the creation and operation of a functioning model of Local Action Groups. That would give impetus to all pioneering initiatives of similar partnerships. On this regard, MoARDWA should lead the process of developing a regulatory framework on the establishment and functioning of LAGs.

2. Establishing multi-stakeholder forums on community-led local development at local and regional level

Taking into consideration the challenges in implementing the ISARD, spaces for discussion, information, consultation, capacity building, know-how transfer, networking and sharing experiences should be present and near local development actors. These spaces can take the form of non-formal multistakeholder forums serving as a mechanism to descend the strategy at the local level to be implemented easily and naturally. Forums "Europe in Rural Albania" can be an instrument of change at local level.

Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD) – a civil society initiative to promote and implement the community-led local development through advocacy and initiatives on the designing and implementation of sustainable rural development policies with the final aim the improvement of quality of life for local communities in Albania – was formalized in the end of 2015, crowning a series of efforts over the years. ANR marked also the creation of the last network created in the Balkans in the continuum of the Pan European enlargement movement for rural development.