PROMOTING LINKS BETWEEN THE RURAL ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT ACTIONS – LEADER APPROACH IN EaP REGION

Background Information

"WINNET Armenia" Network of Women Resource Centers, in partnership with Action Against Hunger and the National LEADER Network in the Republic of Moldova, is implementing the project "Promoting Links between the Rural Economy and Development actions - LEADER approach in EaP region" that is financed by the EaP Civil Society Forum. The main goal of the project is to promote the implementation of the LEADER approach in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, through the establishment of an Open Work Platform for the collaboration of interested partners in LEADER implementation. A cornerstone of the project is the development of a guide for the implementation of the LEADER approach in EaP countries, which will be based upon the results of country-level field studies and research.

The LEADER approach is a bottom-up, community-led approach to rural development that promotes the inclusion of a broad range of community stakeholders in planning and decision-making processes. A key element of the approach is a territorial inter-sectoral partnership, known as Local Action Groups (LAGs), which include representatives of the public, private and civil sectors that operate and manage local development processes based on local development strategies for their locality.

COUNTRY RESEARCH OUTLINES

Case Study on Local Development Models:
Perspectives of Introducing LEADER Approach in Armenia

Research goal and objectives

The research aims at identifying the **key factors** for effective design and implementation of local development models in Armenia by examining the introduction and practice of the WINNET model of women's resource centers as a key case for sustainable local development. The study will specifically address the following questions: (i) Motivation of local actors to actively engage in the strategic development of their community; (ii) Cooperation perspectives among different sectors; (iii) Leadership models and management structures/processes; (iv) Sustainability of local development models.

Methodology

The research will be conducted using illustrative case study methodology, as this methodology facilitates the exploration of the defined questions within the context of a specific successful local development model in Armenia, WINNET.

*WINNET model is an innovative reflection of the Quadruple Helix, which embeds **university-industry-government** relations of the Triple Helix by adding a fourth helix, the **"media-based and culture-based public"** and **"civil society"**. The construction of joint action networks involving different groups and actors is **one of the main features of the WINNET model**. In order to support women realize their*

ideas, Women Resource Centers (WRCs) have systematically constructed new constellations of actors from public, private, academic and civil (non-profit)sectors that are capable of contributing, e.g. public authorities, SMEs, global corporations, banks, business development centres, employment offices, research institutes, consultants, educational associations, NGOs and foundations. The WINNET model constitutes an example of creative thinking in the organization regarding how joint action networks can make new knowledge and innovation prosper, thus contributing to the welfare of communities and societies.

Case study is well adjusted for answering the "how" and "why" questions, the key focus of this study, and identifying contextual conditions relevant to local development approaches and models in Armenia. Such analysis aims to further **contribute and serve as an initial guide fo**r **introducing LEADER approach in Armenia.**

Unit of analysis (case)

The proposed case study is an exploration of one case, the WINNET practice as a successful local development model, with several embedded units. The case study will particularly focus on the processes laying the ground of WINNET practice by analysing three embedded units, describing the model in **various social, economic, political, and cultural environments**. Thus, the proposed *first embedded unit* relates to initiating and introducing the **WINNET** Armenia model in major communities of Syunik marz (Meghri, Goris, Kapan) of Armenia back in 2008 and 2009. The *second embedded unit* will illustrate the expansion of the model across south, central and north (Sisian, Yeghegnadzor, Ijevan) Armenia in 2015, with a special emphasis on the dimension of social entrepreneurship. The *third embedded unit* will focus on expansion of the model in northern regions of Armenia (Vanadzor, Berd) in the past two years, in the new reality that was shaped after the 2018 peaceful anti-Government protests, commitment of the new leadership to developing a new comprehensive reform agenda based on the rule of law, protection of rights, fight against corruption and good governance.

For that purpose, 6 Women Resource Centers will be examined in the communities of Meghri, Goris, Sisian, Yeghegnadzor, Vanadzor and Berd, comprising the above-mentioned embedded units of WINNET Armenia's practice and being in different stages of development.

Data collection

1. *Desk review*

An in-depth desk review of relevant policy and regulatory documents, studies and WRC reports will be carried out to establish the key policy, regulatory and environmental factors contributing or hindering local development initiatives in Armenia.

The following tools will be utilized to reveal the perceptions of **state and local government bodies, business and community-based institutions, representatives of WRCs** and **women and men** benefited from their action:

2. *Key informant Interviews*

To collect relevant primary data, at least **15 semi-structured interviews** will be conducted with the representatives of RA Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure, RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, as well as the above-mentioned six women resource centers, local businesses, community-based institutions, local self-government bodies and other key stakeholders.

1. *Focus Groups*

Further, at least **3 Focus groups with 6-10 participants in each** will be conducted with business representatives and specific beneficiary groups of target WRCs.

Research limitations

Given the limited time and resources, as well as the nature of the qualitative research method the collected data results will not belong to the whole population. However, the research findings will describe the implementation of the WINNET Model in Armenia, while projecting the common ground and success for incorporation of the LEADER approach in Armenia.

Field research on the implementation of the
LEADER approach in Georgia

The LEADER approach was introduced into Georgia in 2015 under the European Neighborhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPARD). Initially, ENPARD assisted the implementation of the approach in three municipalities, but in subsequent ENPARD programmes the LEADER approach has been expanded to cover a further nine municipalities in Georgia, and five districts in the breakaway region of Abkhazia.

Research aim and objectives

The proposed research aims to study the implementation process of the LEADER approach in Georgia and develop recommendations for improving this process in the future. In particular, the study will examine the following core pillars:

1. Motivation of participants to actively engage in the strategic development of their locality;
2. Composition and cooperation of sectors/interest groups within the LAGs;
3. LAG structure and management and leadership processes / models;
4. Sustainability of Local Action Groups.

Overall, the study aims to identify lessons learned and best practices as well as main obstacles faced during the first phases of adoption of the LEADER approach in Georgia.

Methodology

Desk Research

Initially, the study will apply a critical desk review of all materials related to the LEADER approach including project documents, final reports, studies, evaluation reports and other relevant materials.

Qualitative Study

Then the study will apply a qualitative methodology using the focus group discussion technique to elicit key information from the target group. The data will be collected by using a focus group discussion guide with open-ended questions. Questions will be broad and will offer participants an opportunity to elaborate on their responses based upon their knowledge and experience. During the discussion, participants will also be allowed to explain in detail their attitudes. The focus group discussion guideline consists of several questions designed to capture information on the following topics within the aforementioned core pillars:

1. Motivation of participants to actively engage in the strategic development of their locality
   - How did you learn about the LEADER approach/Local Action Group (LAG)?
   - What was the motivation to become the member of the LAG?
   - What do you consider are the strengths and weaknesses of community engagement in local development?

2. Composition and cooperation of sectors/interest groups within the LAGs
   - Which are the sectors represented in the LAG?
   - Which sectors are most represented? Which is the sector least represented?
   - What are main obstacles during the cooperation between the different sectors?
   - What is the role and influence of the public sector/local authorities in the decision-making process?
   - What are the benefits of collaboration across different sectors?
   - Which different interest groups are involved in your LAG?
   - What were the ways to bring together the different interest groups?
   - What were the ways to ensure different sex, age, ethnic and geographic representation during the LAG creation?
   - What were the challenges and lessons learnt in bringing together different interest groups as LAG members?

3. LAG structure and management and leadership processes / models
   - How LAG members were selected? What are the formal procedures?
   - What is the LAG management structure?
   - How is LAG governed?
   - How are the LAG governing body (i.e. Executive Board) selected? What are the formal procedures?
   - What is the leadership model of the LAG?
   - How are the LAG leaders (chair, president, vice president etc.) selected? What are the formal procedures?
   - How are the decisions made, including on funding sub-projects?
   - What grant application process/forms and systems are in place to assist the LAG members make decisions on funding?
   - Is the LAG registered and legally recognized?
   - Do the administrative/financial oversight requirements of the LAG constrain its ability to implement the LEADER approach?

4. Sustainability
   - To what extent can the LAG continue its activities after donor funding has been withdrawn? What activities can be continued?
   - To what extent are the LAGs likely to find the financial resources to support their activities? From where?
   - To what extent has being in the LAG increased the capacity of its members? In what way have their capacities been increased?
   - What are the main challenges for the future of LAGs?

In addition, before starting the discussion, participants will be required to fill in a registration form, where they will answer standard demographic questions.

Key informant Interviews

Additionally, several key informant interviews will be conducted with the relevant stakeholders (representatives of MoA, local authorities, LAG associations, etc.)

Target Group and Sampling

The LAG Executive Board members of all LAGs created across the Georgia proper (12) and Abkhazia (5) will be identified as the target group for the study. Purposive sampling will be utilized for the study. In total, six (6) focus group discussions will be conducted. Specifically, two (2) focus groups will be conducted in Abkhazia and four (4) focus groups in Georgia proper. The table below summarizes the selection of the municipalities / districts per each focus group discussion:

#	Selection of Municipalities / Districts
1	Lagodekhi, Kazbegi and Borjomi (Georgia proper)
2	Dedoplitskaro, Akhmeta and Tetritskaro (Georgia proper)
3	Keda, Khulo and Akhalkalaki (Georgia proper)
4	Tsalka, Mestia and Tskaltubo (Georgia proper)
5	Tkvarcheli, Gali and Ochamchire (Abkhazia)
6	Gagra and Gudauta (Abkhazia)

Research limitations

The nature of the qualitative research means that the research findings are not representative of the whole region. Despite the limitations, the research findings provide an interesting picture that assesses implementation of the LEADER approach across Georgia proper and Abkhazia, as well as identifying the lessons learned/best practices and constraints.

Field research on the implementation of the LEADER approach in Moldova

The LEADER approach has been implemented in Moldova since 2015 with the support of development partners (EU, Poland, Switzerland, USA, UK, Romania, Estonia, Czech Republic and others) in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment of the Republic of Moldova. Currently, there are 32 LAGs operating in the Republic of Moldova, which cover about 300 administrative-territorial units (30% of the rural territory) and have more than 1,100 actors (LAG members) involved, including representatives of local authorities. LAGs are at different stages of development: some LAGs are in the process of creation, others have already implemented/are implementing local micro-projects - about 160 micro-projects in 2018 with a total budget of co-financing from external sources in amount of approx. 350 000 EUR and about 250 micro-projects in 2019 with total budget co-financing from external sources in amount of more than 500 000 EUR

Research aim and objectives

The proposed research aims to identify key factors to ensure successful implementation of the LEADER approach in the Eastern Partnership countries as a tool of public policy for rural development, and as an instrument for streamlining development assistance provided by development partners, through revealing the experience of the Republic of Moldova gained in the process of implementation of the LEADER approach (methodology and implementation phases).

The research will reflect the following issues related to:
1. LEADER approach implementation context in the Republic of Moldova;
2. Implementation of the LEADER principles;
3. Motivation and involvement of the local partners;
4. Cooperation between organizations and institutions for the implementation of the LEADER approach;
5. Model for the creation and institutionalization of LAGs;
6. Financial sustainability;

The following stages of the process will be analysed:

- Elaboration and piloting of the Implementation Methodology: 1st phase – creation and institutionalization of the LAGs; 2nd phase – LAGs functioning, including financing of the local projects by LAGs;
- Consolidation of the implementation methodology;

- Multiplication of the implementation methodology;
- Creation of the inter-organizational and inter-institutional partnership with the aim to implement the LEADER approach (incl. creation of the National LEADER Network in the Republic of Moldova);
- Regulatory stage – institutionalization of the LEADER approach at the national level;
- Professionalization of the LAGs;
- Consolidation of the LAGs' financing methodology (LAG-managed local calls);
- Elaboration of the state-financed LEADER Program;
- Consolidation of the LEADER approach as a tool of public policy for rural development, and an instrument for implementation of the external development assistance.

Methodology

Methods of collecting information:

- Study of documents: a) official (national normative acts, documents establishing the LAG, decisions of the management bodies of the LAG, minutes, activity reports of the LAG) and b) unofficial (newspapers, magazines, websites of information platforms for relevant data, LAGs 'Facebook pages, LAGs' Viber accounts);
- *Directed structured interview* (6 types of personalized questionnaires: 1 for LAG members, 1 for LAG beneficiaries, 1 for LAG area residents, 1 for LAG management, 1 for LAG body representatives, 1 for implementation team representatives, 1 for MADRM representatives, 1 for representatives of development partners);
- Observations in the cadre of focus groups.

Methods of analysis and interpretation of information:

- Longitudinal and cross-sectoral analysis,
- Comparison method;
- Statistical methods.

Instruments:

- Questionnaires with 2/3 closed questions (for quantitative data) and 1/3 open questions (for qualitative data);
- 3 Focus groups (for each sector) in the 4 LAGs;
- Discussions with the people involved in the process;
- Diagrams and Histograms;
- Flow Chart - for processes;
- Round table to validate research results

Target Group and Sampling

The following will be identified as the target group for the study*:* representatives of the public, civic and entrepreneurial sector from the LAG territories (LAG members, representatives of the LAG bodies, LAG beneficiaries, residents of the LAG territory); members of the Local LEADER Implementation Team (4 experts and 4 coaches); representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment; representatives of development partners who support the LEADER approach in Moldova.