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SARD
Support for agriculture and rural development in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia

UNDP

Towards Prospering Rural Areas II

SARD LEADER
for community driven rural development initiatives in Gagauzia, Taraclia and neighboring rural communities

REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA
2016-2018

The SARD LEADER experiment – EU rural development approaches take hold in Moldova

The key actors of all local LEADER/ CLLD initiatives are the so-called Local Action Groups (LAGs) formed by local partners in a bottom-up way. The LAGs are responsible for local governance in development, and represent local authorities, businesses and civil society. LAGs decide on the territorial delineation of their activities, establish formal partnerships, prepare and agree on integrated local rural development strategies, and identify and implement local development actions.

The SARD LEADER initiative supports the creation, functioning and management of the local stakeholder-created LAGs in the targeted regions and neighbouring districts. The programme helps with all necessary human resource development, technical assistance, legal aspects, co-financing and governance.

On a national level, SARD LEADER contributes to the process whereby the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment (MARDE) is setting up the national LEADER Programme for Rural Development in Moldova. SARD LEADER is also a model for national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) piloting LEADER/CLLD all around the country.

SARD is one of the initiators of the set-up and actively participates in the work of the "LEADER Coordination Committee" under

the aegis of MARDE. Knowledge products on piloting LEADER and methodological guidelines for the adaptation of the LEADER/CLLD approach have been prepared and shared with all national and regional stakeholders. A study to identify the most appropriate legal form of LAGs in Moldova has been completed and shared with the relevant authorities. Certificated training on the LEADER method and SARD lessons learned has been provided to relevant staff of MARDE, the Agency for Agricultural Interventions and Payments (AIPA), and Regional Development Agencies.

"LEADER approach may bring considerable changes in the daily life of people in rural areas by supporting the implementation of innovative initiatives for development of localities" – stated Iva Stamenova, Project Manager, EU Delegation to the Republic of Moldova, during the event dedicated to the signing of the Partnership Agreements.

SARD LAGs marked an important milestone in November 2017

In November 2017, members of the eight LAGs, created by local stakeholders with the assistance of SARD, signed their formal Partnership Agreements, which are the basis of their common work.

The eight SARD LAGs, established based on a bottom-up approach, represent partnerships between local rural authorities, economic units and civil society. Before the formal signing of the 'LAG Partnership Agreement', they together identified the problems and values of the cooperating villages, created a participatory strategy and decided to act to achieve a prosperous future.

This is the first time local rural communities have used the LEADER/CLLD method in Moldova. The eight LAG territories cover 44 rural communities in ATU Gagauzia, Taraclia district and neighbouring local communities. A map of the SARD LAGs is provided in the first SARD LEADER leaflet.

From the signing onwards, the empowered LAGs have been playing the leading role in implementation of the LAG-prepared local rural development strategy, ensuring the sustainability of the EU-funded UNDP interventions in the long term. The entire process is built around the CLLD approach.

LAG management teams and LAG offices have been set up. In addition, at the beginning of 2018 local project design, submission and implementation started, financed by the EU through SARD and other channels.

SARD LEADER in a nutshell

Financed by the European Union (EUR 6.5 million) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Support to Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) Programme intends to intensify during 2016–2018 the cooperation between central and local authorities, as well as among regional organizations from Gagauzia ATU and Taraclia district, to upgrade the capacities of Local Public Administrations and foster social-economic development of the region and of the Republic of Moldova. Implementation of the LEADER (a French acronym meaning Links Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy) and the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach is an innovative, cross-cutting measure of the SARD Programme.

LEADER is an EU initiative, a method and programme instrument to support locally-driven rural development interventions to reinvent rural areas and create local jobs. The first LEADER programme started in EU Member Countries in 1991. Since 2013, the LEADER method has been expanded to apply to coastal and urban areas as well as rural ones under the title 'Community-Led Local Development' (CLLD). It has been implemented in EU pre-accession and neighbouring countries with the aid of EU and other donor-financed programmes.

SARD's contribution to change at the local level

The SARD LEADER initiative is an adaptation of the European LEADER Principles in Moldova, which also incorporates the community coaching approach. The values behind this methodology are building on local resources, empowering potential local "changemakers", and generating community driven development process and innovative projects. This helps communities to (re)discover forgotten or less recognized local values, and thus fertilize the tradition with recent technologies and knowledge.

Implementation of the "community coaching" method makes CLLD tools more appropriate for inclusive development in the target areas. The SARD adaptation of the European principles also considers the specific culture and legal frameworks of Moldova and the target pilot regions. These approaches, community coaching and the paramount consideration of the cultural aspects contribute to avoiding the risk of using LEADER/CLLD as a simple technical programme in Moldova.

Everyone can do something to change his or her own life and this process is more efficient and sustainable if potential change-makers in any given community are strengthened and empowered to be able to identify with the "culture of co" – cooperation, co-creation, community leadership, caring for the commons and business collaboration. Through SARD LEADER, interventions have been employed to ignite the spirit of change and to encourage targeted local communities to be active in the implementation of development programmes.

Olga Garceva, an active LAG member and "Eco Bugeac" LAG Manager, gave feedback on the implemented method: "Our advantage is that we benefit not only from grants under the SARD Programme but also from coaching and technical assistance at every stage, as well as from the study visits. The LEADER initiative has helped us to identify the local problems, to find the best solutions for solving them, and to harness the local potential and resources – just like we saw on the study visit to Italy. We are not worse than Italians; we just have to learn things!"

Tangible results

Seventy-eight small local projects will be carried out this year in ATU Gagauzia, Taraclia and in neighbouring communities within the framework of the SARD LEADER/CLLD initiative. 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 some playgrounds and the establishment of a touristic boarding house with national peculiarities – these are just some of the projects which the eight SARD LAGs have decided to implement.

These 78 local projects promote social-economic and environmental development and were selected under a locally announced grants competition. To implement them, every LAG benefits from EU assistance through SARD in the amount of about EUR 25,000. Each LAG contributes an additional 20 per cent to this budget, in cash or in kind. This is a relatively small grant to realize the selected small projects of the LAGs and, through this, to implement a "learning by doing" process. This learning by doing process is crucial from the future perspective as the majority of LAG members are not experienced in planning and implementing projects.

LAGs as the driving force

As with all EU LEADER/CLLD programmes, the SARD-financed local projects are selected by the LAG communities themselves, based on their

own, approved strategy and the overall criteria given by the SARD Programme.

After signing the Partnership Agreements in November 2017, each LAG Council, which is the assembly of the members, approved the participatory strategy documents, elected the decision-making and accountable bodies, and made decision regarding the first-year implementation plans. At the first LAG Council meetings, each council also decided on the location of the LAG office and nominated two LAG managers. Establishing the management offices and the two-member teams, functioning as a small local rural development agency represents the first step in the institutionalization of the LAGs.

On the basis of SARD's support, each LAG announced their local Call for Proposals, addressing local partners, including private persons, local business, civil society and public organizations, who were invited to submit applications. The submitted proposals were evaluated from the perspective of: relevance in relation to the local development principles of the

given LAG, expected results and impact of the project, feasibility, inclusiveness and sustainability. The goal of the LAG local Call for Proposals was to create the opportunity for local development actors to submit development projects and to decide on concrete local projects, which will be supported from the grant provided by SARD to each LAG.

The project proposals were evaluated by the LAG Selection Committees, elected by the LAG Councils, LAG by LAG. The LAG management offices acted as secretariat. The Selection Committee's recommendations were approved by the relevant LAG Council and the SARD Programme Office. All selected proposals meet the eligibility and submission criteria as laid out in the relevant Call for Proposals.

In total, 162 applications were submitted to the eight LAGs and 78 have been approved by the eight LAG Councils and SARD Programme for implementation. Of these, 23 projects aim to develop local businesses, eight are related to tourism development, and 24 projects aim to make local services better, while protection of local cultural heritage is the goal of 18 projects and five are focused on environmental protection or rehabilitation of natural resources.

LAG office to be opened

In February 2018, "Eco Bugeac" LAG opened its office in Joltai village in Ceadir-Lunga district. The event was attended by representatives of the LEADER Programme Coordination Committee formed under the aegis of the MARDE, representatives of the SARD

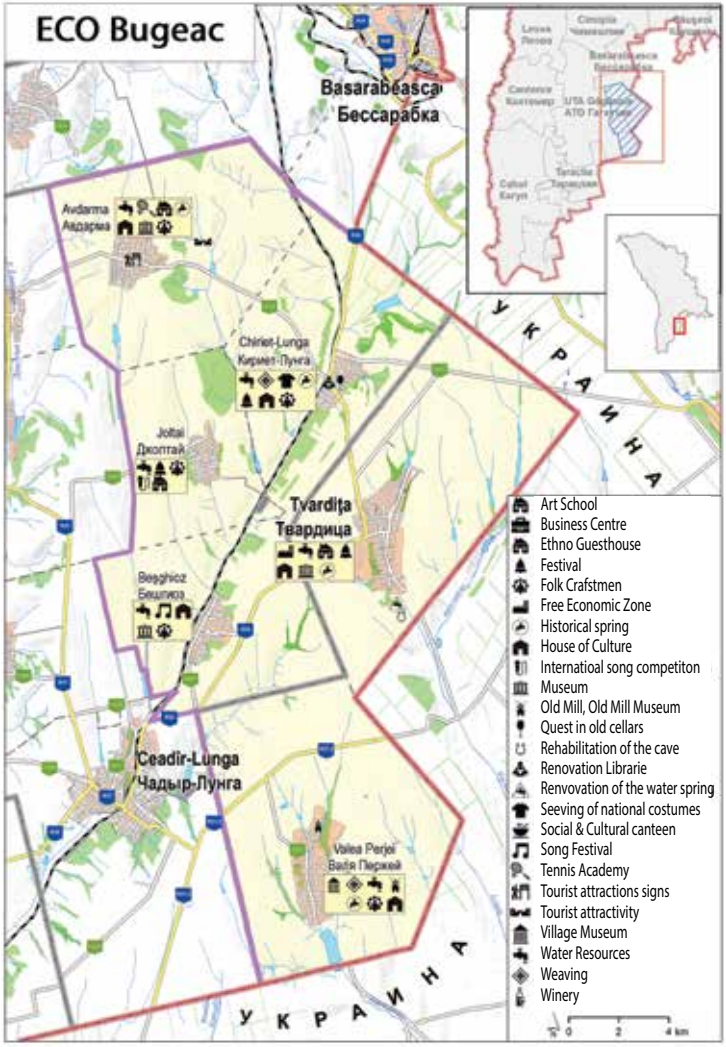
Programme, regional public authorities, and members of "Eco Bugeac" and the other SARD LAGs.

The people present at the event discussed the experience of the SARD Programme in implementing the LEADER/CLLD method, the benefits provided by this method to communities in Europe, as well as the prospects of a national LEADER Programme in Moldova.

"Our priority is to improve the quality of our people's lives by using local energy, values, and talents of people, and we are glad that the European Union supports local initiatives and assists our villages' prosperity", stated Ms. Valentina Caichi, Mayor of Chiriet-Lunga, President of "Eco Bugeac" LAG.

From the non-reimbursable assistance provided by the EU through SARD, USD 5,000 is used for the LAG's office management. The remaining amount, namely USD 25,000, is for implementing the best development projects in Avdarma, Joltai, Chiriet-Lunga, Besghioz, Valea Perjei and Tvardita villages, which are members of the "Eco Bugeac" LAG. Individuals, enterprises, and NGOs from these localities are eligible for non-reimbursable financing of up to USD 4,000.

The "Eco Bugeac" LAG Selection Committee, which is composed of representatives of mayoralties, local businesses, and civil society, selected the most feasible and relevant proposals for financing in May 2018. At one of the working meetings, Irina Selezniova, manager of "Eco Bugeac" LAG, said: "It is the decision of the Local Partnership, based on our five-year strategy, that we support those projects, which are related to improving the touristic attractiveness of the villages and rehabilitation of public spaces, creation of entertainment areas and promotion of healthy lifestyles."



"We cooperate in our businesses because of LEADER"

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

Sergiu explains his project, which was selected by his LAG for financing from the SARD subsidies, as follows: "There is no milk collection point in the territory of our LAG, but we need it. My company, AGRO-SARIGUL SRL works in cheese production and, to this end, 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 is to purchase refrigeration equipment and to put in place a milk collection point to be used by milk producers from the three LAG villages, Cișmichioi, Etuilia and Alexandru Ion Cuza.

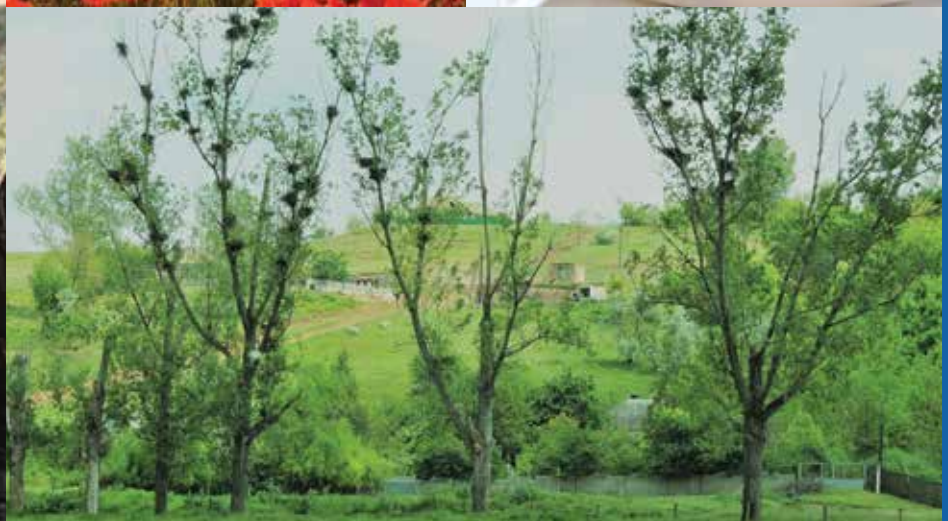
As the Chismeaua Suduliu LAG Council agreed at the council meeting to decide

on financed projects, the implementation of this plan will help Sergiu's own business but will also help to stimulate the interest of local farmers to continue dairy activities, because of the opportunity to sell quality milk.

SARD contributes with 80 per cent of the necessary funding, while AGRO-SARIGUL SRL invests a further 20 per cent into the project.

As 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."

This project is one of the 78 approved local initiatives under the SARD Programme, and shows that the implementation of SARD LEADER generates significant social and economic development in the targeted rural areas.



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