

# IMPACT ANALYSIS OF THE LOCAL ACTION GROUP “LAG – LOM” ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHWESTERN BULGARIA

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## Abstract

The purpose of this report is to analyze the impact of the Local Action Group (LAG) – Lom as a successful model for implementing the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach in the context of sustainable rural development. The selection of LAG Lom as the subject of this study is based on the fact that the Northwestern Planning Region is one of the least socio-economically developed regions not only in Bulgaria but also within the European Union. This region is characterized by extremely unfavorable demographic trends, while at the same time possessing a rich variety of natural resources. These contrasting features prompted our interest in exploring the influence of the LAG's activities on harnessing local potential and improving the living standards of the local population. Understanding the trends and intensity of ongoing processes is of particular importance for revealing regional development disparities and for identifying the need for appropriate measures to reduce and mitigate them.

In this context, the report presents an analysis of the activities of LAG – Lom, identifying several key achievements, including the promotion of entrepreneurship, diversification of the local economy, and activation of social capital. It has been established that innovative aspects in the management and implementation of the CLLD Strategy – such as new forms of partnership, digitalization, and support for social entrepreneurship – contribute to greater competitiveness and social cohesion. The use of a SWOT analysis to outline the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and potential threats during the previous programming period (2014-2020) helped minimize challenges, although it did not eliminate them entirely. These challenges are generally linked to external factors that hinder the development of LAG – Lom. The preparation of the new Strategy for the 2025–2029 period builds upon accumulated experience, newly acquired knowledge, and competencies, with the clear aim of enhancing the organization's capacity for future initiatives. Thus, the implementation of the CLLD approach in the territory of Lom Municipality demonstrates the high potential of local communities to act as active agents of change and provides a solid foundation for achieving strong results by the end of the current programming period (2025-2029), with promising prospects for sustainable growth and innovative rural development.

**Keywords:** Local Action Group (LAG), LEADER approach, Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), rural areas, sustainable development

**JEL code:** Q01, R58, O18

## Introduction

The sustainable development of rural areas is a key priority within the framework of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy and is of critical importance

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for the economic, social, and environmental well-being of local communities. In the context of growing global challenges-such as climate change, demographic shifts, and socio-economic disparities-the need for integrated and flexible approaches to local development is becoming increasingly urgent. In this context, the LEADER/CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) approach has established itself as one of the most effective tools for mobilizing the internal potential of rural territories by encouraging the active participation of local populations in planning, decision-making, and project implementation processes.

During the 2014–2020 programming period, a total of 64 Local Action Groups (LAGs) were approved under the CLLD approach nationwide (Figure 1), encompassing 117 municipalities. The total covered area amounts to 53.8 thousand square kilometers, representing 48% of Bulgaria’s territory and 60% of its rural areas. According to the national definition of a “rural area”<sup>1</sup>, 232 out of Bulgaria’s 265 municipalities are classified as rural.



*Figure 1. Map of Local Action Groups (LAGs) Implementing the CLLD Approach in Bulgaria, 2014–2020*

*Source: <https://2020.eufunds.bg/>*

<sup>1</sup> Rural areas are municipalities that do not contain a town with a population exceeding 30,000 inhabitants and have a population density of less than 150 inhabitants per square kilometer, in accordance with Ordinance No. 14 of April 1, 2003, on the determination of settlements in rural and mountainous areas, issued by the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry and the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works.

As illustrated on the accompanying map, only one Local Action Group-LAG Lom operates within the outer Northwestern Region. The implementation of the CLLD principles contributes to the economic revitalization and improvement of the quality of life in rural areas, while simultaneously supporting the preservation of local identity, cultural heritage, and natural resources through the application of sustainable and innovative solutions. In this context, the Local Action Group Lom has been selected for analysis, as it represents the only active LAG within the Northwestern Planning Region and serves as a representative example of the successful application of the CLLD approach in one of Bulgaria's most socio-economically vulnerable regions. Since its establishment in 2018, LAG – Lom has demonstrated significant progress in building effective public-private partnerships and in implementing projects that contribute to long-term sustainable rural development.

The objective of this study is to analyze and evaluate the impact of LAG – Lom's activities on the sustainable and innovative development of the rural areas in the Municipality of Lom. It focuses on identifying best practices, key challenges, and opportunities for future development. Undoubtedly, the analysis of local development processes plays an essential role in the preparation and implementation of the CLLD Strategy for the current programming period 2025–2029, as well as in ensuring the active contribution of all stakeholders.

Particular attention is paid to the specificities of the local context, mechanisms for overcoming socio-economic barriers, and the role of the local community in territorial development. The analysis aims to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge and experience that could serve as a reference framework for other rural areas in Bulgaria and across Europe in planning and implementing CLLD Strategies during the 2025–2029 programming period.

The conclusions and recommendations are directed toward building upon established good practices and shaping more effective policies that promote sustainability, social cohesion, and a higher quality of life for local populations.

### **General Characteristics and Development Potential of “LAG – Lom”**

The concept of “*sustainable development*” encompasses social, economic, and environmental dimensions, which should be considered in synergy when shaping territorial development policies. Within the European Union, the LEADER approach is recognized as an effective tool for promoting the sustainable development of rural areas. The evolution of the LEADER approach into Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) during the second programming period (2014-2020) has been assessed by some authors (Bumbalová, M., Takáč, I., Tvrdoňová, J., Valach, M., 2016) as a flexible approach that provides stronger incentives for rural development. The transition from LEADER to CLLD represents a step forward in empowering local communities to independently define their own

development policies. During this period, the interaction among local authorities, non-governmental organizations, and businesses has become increasingly prominent, providing opportunities for revitalizing rural economies and addressing a variety of public needs aimed at preserving and promoting local identity (Nikolova, 2016). As an expanded form of LEADER, CLLD involves Local Action Groups (LAGs), which develop and implement territorial development strategies based on the needs of the local community. In a monograph prepared by researchers under a project funded by the National Science Fund, a conceptual model for the sustainable development of rural territories in Bulgaria is presented. The model is based on the understanding that local-scale sustainable development management relies on collaboration among government authorities, local communities, and businesses to achieve functional diversification of territorial use and optimal utilization of available resources (Nikolova, M., Doichinova, Y., Stoyanova, Z., Slaveva, K., et al., 2024, 2024). This conceptual model is largely confirmed in the activities of LAG – Lom.

The Local Action Group (LAG) – Lom was established in 2018 as a public-private partnership involving representatives from the public, business, and civil society sectors. The LAG's territory covers the Municipality of Lom, located in the Northwestern Planning Region of Bulgaria (see Fig. 2). The municipality falls under the administrative scope of Montana District (NUTS 3), the Northwestern Region (NUTS 2), and the “North and Southeastern Bulgaria” region (NUTS 1). The identification code of the Municipality of Lom is MON24.



*Figure 2. Functional Land Use, 2016*

*Source: Official website of the municipality of Lom*

The municipality comprises 10 settlements – the town of Lom and 9 villages – with a total population of 27,567 as of July 15 (2025) (see Fig. 3), according to data from the National Population Register (NPR). The area is characterized by negative demographic trends, high unemployment, and limited economic activity; however, it also possesses development potential through the activation of the local community and the sustainable utilization of local resources.

CUCATT	Name of the Settlement	Population
21436	Village Dobri Dol	176
22695	Village Dolno Linevo	147
30291	Village Zamfir	834
37544	Village Kovatchica	913
44238	Town Lom	23354
53970	Village Orsoya	26
67310	Village Slivata	131
68672	Village Stalijska Mahala	1164
68758	Village Stanevo	164
72940	Village Traykovo	620
	Submit	27 529

*Figure 3. List of settlements covered by the LAG LOM*

*Source: Official website LAG LOM*

Its territory is characterized by negative demographic trends<sup>1</sup>, high unemployment<sup>2</sup>, and limited economic activity<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, it possesses development potential through the activation of the local community and the sustainable use of local resources.

The following figure (Fig. 4) presents the functional structure of the territory encompassing the studied Local Action Group. The territorial structure shown in the figure mainly includes agricultural land, small urbanized areas, forested zones,

<sup>1</sup> Birth rate coefficient: 8.0‰ for the Northwestern region.

<sup>2</sup> The number of registered unemployed persons in the Municipality of Lom is 922, representing 11%, while the unemployment rate for the entire territory of Bulgaria is 3.6%.

<sup>3</sup> Problems in the economic sector within the territory include: Lack of a key (structurally defining) enterprise that could serve as a source of local taxes and income; Decrease in the number of enterprises within the territory of LAG-Lom by 3.7% during the period 2014–2020; Relatively low share of export revenues from non-financial enterprises in 2021 – 27.6% within the territory of LAG-Lom. As a result, the local SMEs demonstrate comparatively low innovation capacity and competitiveness.

pastures, orchards, and vineyards. The predominance of agricultural land reflects the area's primary economic focus on farming and the utilization of natural resources. This structure clearly highlights the agricultural character of the region and underscores the need for an integrated and sustainable approach to managing the available resources.

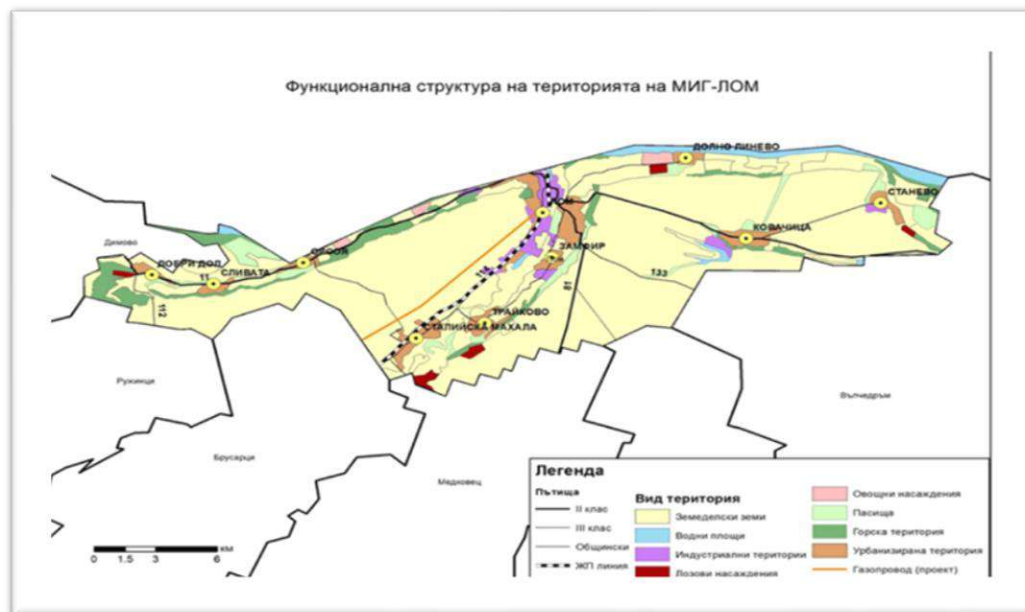


Figure 4. Functional structure of the territory of LAG LOM

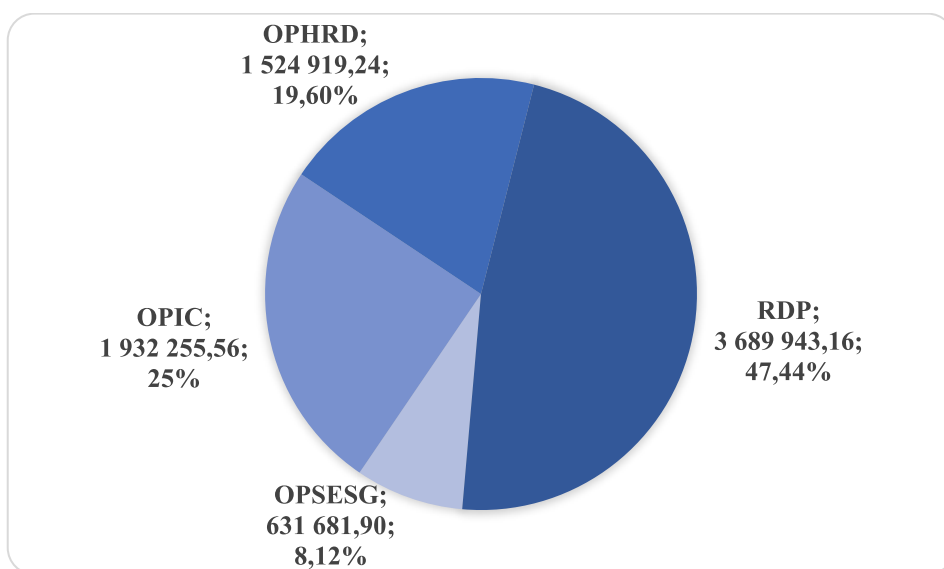
Source: Official website LAG LOM

According to Nikolova and Pavlov, “The choice of a model for increasing sustainability in a specific territory should focus on the optimal utilization of regional resources, diversification in the functional use of the territory, optimal diversification of production and economic activities, environmentally friendly business practices, and, above all, effective interaction between institutions, local administration, business, and local communities” (Nikolova, M., P. Pavlov, 2023). The resource potential of Lom Municipality shapes the stakeholders’ commitment to enhancing the territory’s sustainability and the pursuit of optimal solutions for balanced territorial development.

The main objective of the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) Strategy for 2014–2020 is to promote sustainable economic and social development through the implementation of integrated measures tailored to local needs. The Local Action Group Lom implements the Strategy through funding from the European Agricultural

Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Social Fund (ESF), enabling it to carry out diverse projects with high added value for the local community. Lom LAG is an association with established experience<sup>1</sup> in applying the CLLD approach and has successfully implemented the Strategy for the 2014-2020 period.

During the programming period, projects financed by four operational programs were contracted and executed (Fig. 5). The largest share was allocated to the Rural Development Program (RDP) with funds amounting to BGN 3,689,943.16 (47.44%), followed by the Operational Program “Innovation and Competitiveness” (OPIC) with BGN 1,932,255.56 (25%), the Operational Program “Human Resources Development” (OPHRD) with BGN 1,524,919.24 (19.60%), and the Operational Program “Science and Education for Smart Growth” (OPSESG) with BGN 631,681.90 (8.12%). The distribution of funding demonstrates the active participation of local beneficiaries across various sectors and the effective utilization of resources under the CLLD approach.



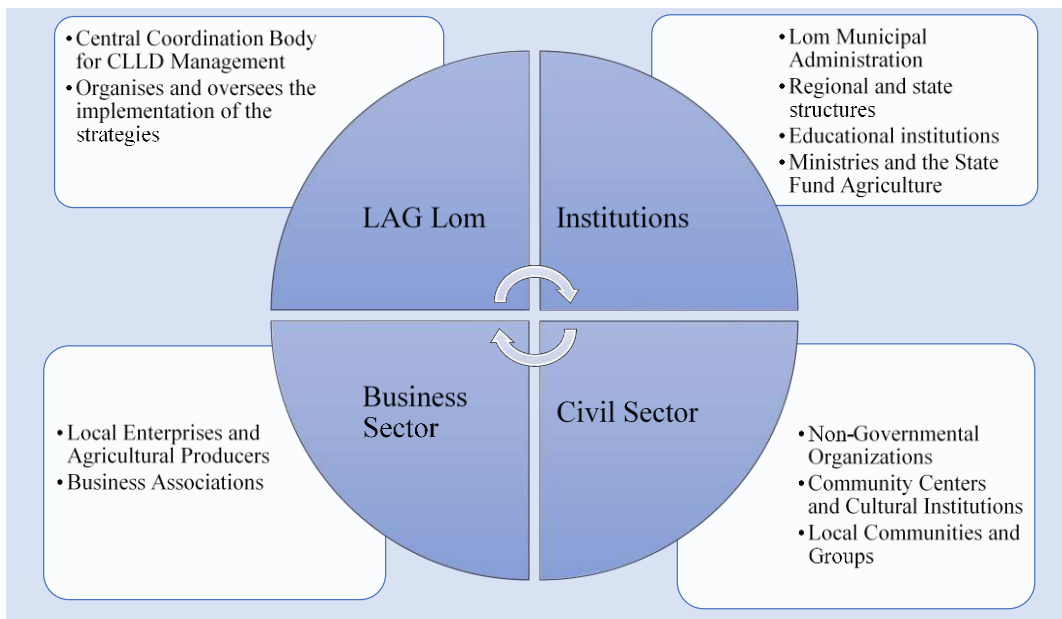
*Figure 5. Value of concluded contracts (Grants)*

*Source: Information system for management and monitoring of eu funds in Bulgaria 2020; LAG Lom*

<sup>1</sup> A total of 93 project proposals were submitted to the Local Action Group (LAG) Lom under 31 announced calls, amounting to over BGN 12,300,000, compared to the planned total budget of BGN 7,469,488.31 for the entire strategy. Of these, 67 projects were implemented through funding agreements totaling BGN 7,138,579.17 in EU grant funding under four operational programmes, representing 95.6% of the allocated funds utilized.

Over the years, Lom LAG as an organization has gained public recognition and earned the trust of the local community, simultaneously establishing itself as a local community hub. The association has become a driving force behind the socio-economic and cultural development of the territory. The public-private partnership realized through Lom LAG's activities has become a vital engine for the social, economic, and sustainable development of Lom Municipality.

The collaboration between institutions, business, and the civil sector (Fig. 6) in Lom Municipality serves as a successful model for addressing local challenges. It contributes to revitalizing the local economy, improving living conditions for residents, and fostering civic awareness. This confirms the key role of effective cooperation among all stakeholders in achieving balanced and integrated territorial development.



*Figure 6. Collaboration Framework of LAG Lom*

*Source: Author's framework*

### Impact of Lom LAG on the Sustainable Development of the Territory

During the 2014-2020 programming period, the Local Action Group (LAG) – Lom achieved significant results that contributed to the overall sustainable development of the territory. Within this period, LAG-Lom successfully absorbed a total of BGN 7,778,799.86, directed toward financing initiatives in various key sectors through combined multi-fund financing from the Rural Development Programme (RDP), the Operational Programme “Human Resources Development” (OPHRD), the

Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth” (OPSESG), and the Operational Programme “Innovation and Competitiveness” (OPIC).

As early as 2022, (Doitchinova) noted that the implementation of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) with multi-fund financing provides a basis for significantly better targeting of public funds to meet the specific needs of individual rural areas.

LAG Lom has implemented over 67 projects, representing 95.6% utilization of the contracted funding—a clear indicator of high efficiency and effective management of public resources.

The completed projects covered a wide range of activities: development of small and medium enterprises<sup>1</sup>, modernization of agricultural holdings<sup>2</sup>, provision of social and educational services<sup>3</sup>, as well as support for local initiatives and non-governmental organizations<sup>4</sup>. Significant impact was observed in promoting entrepreneurship, diversifying economic activities, and increasing employment opportunities. Through targeted support for businesses and the non-governmental sector, new jobs were created, and local economic activity was stimulated.

The financial resource of over EUR 96<sup>5</sup> billion allocated for the 2014–2020 period from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) has contributed to enhancing the competitiveness of agricultural producers and the modernization of farms. In parallel, the European Social Fund (ESF) has financed measures aimed at social inclusion and skills development, which have supported greater social integration and strengthened the human capital capacity in rural areas. An important element is LAG’s Lom experience in strategic planning and capacity building for local development management. Over recent years (Local Action Group Lom, 2023, 2023) it has implemented two projects under preparatory measure 19.1, with a total value of BGN 98,634, through which strategies for two separate programming periods were developed. This demonstrates institutional sustainability and readiness for effective implementation of future programs and projects. Through the implementation of the CLLD/LEADER Strategy for 2014–2020 and planned interventions for the 2025–2029 programming period, LAG LOM continues to consolidate the partnership model and integrated territorial development. In the long term, this contributes to achieving sustainable economic growth, social cohesion, and improved well-being of the local community.

The implementation of the LEADER/CLLD approach by the Local Action Group (LAG) – Lom is distinguished by its flexibility and strong orientation towards

<sup>1</sup> [https://miglom.org/proj\\_map/project\\_35.php](https://miglom.org/proj_map/project_35.php) ; [https://miglom.org/proj\\_map/project\\_36.php](https://miglom.org/proj_map/project_36.php)

<sup>2</sup> [https://miglom.org/proj\\_map/project\\_05.php](https://miglom.org/proj_map/project_05.php) ; [https://miglom.org/proj\\_map/project\\_02.php](https://miglom.org/proj_map/project_02.php)

<sup>3</sup> [https://miglom.org/proj\\_map/project\\_33.php](https://miglom.org/proj_map/project_33.php) ; [https://miglom.org/proj\\_map/project\\_25.php](https://miglom.org/proj_map/project_25.php)

<sup>4</sup> [https://miglom.org/proj\\_map/project\\_47.php](https://miglom.org/proj_map/project_47.php)

<sup>5</sup> [www.fi-compass.eu/sites/default/files/publications/EAFRD\\_The\\_european\\_agricultural\\_fund\\_for\\_rural\\_development\\_BG.pdf](http://www.fi-compass.eu/sites/default/files/publications/EAFRD_The_european_agricultural_fund_for_rural_development_BG.pdf)

innovation, tailored specifically to the unique needs and characteristics of the local community. Innovative elements manifest both in management methods and in concrete activities and projects. From a management perspective, LAG LOM applies approaches that build upon standard administrative practices, emphasizing transparency, digitalization, and proactive stakeholder engagement. A distinctive feature is the continuous, two-way communication with the local community via digital channels and social media<sup>1</sup>, facilitating easier access to information and enhancing beneficiary involvement. The management is characterized by adaptability to territorial needs through accessible consultation formats, visual presentation of information, and the creation of summarized materials that ease understanding and participation in decision-making processes. The use of visual and interactive tools – such as maps with QR codes<sup>2</sup>, online catalogs<sup>3</sup>, and multimedia content – contributes to improved accountability<sup>4</sup>, higher visibility of results, and stronger connections with local stakeholders. A particularly important focus in LAG’s LOM management is the active participation of the “Roma – Lom” Foundation, a well-established Roma organization with extensive experience working with vulnerable communities. This partnership ensures that the Roma community’s voice is equally represented in strategic decision-making, and that the specific challenges and opportunities of minority groups are considered from the earliest stages of planning and strategy implementation. This fosters the creation of more sustainable mechanisms for social integration and inclusion. In this context, innovative elements in LAG’s LOM management emerge not only through the inclusion of diverse local partners but also through the modernization of management approaches themselves.

During the development and implementation of the CLLD Strategy, innovative participation and consultation methods have been employed. These include online platforms, surveys, and public discussions, all of which enhance transparency and allow for the active involvement of representatives from various social groups. Their input has been integral in shaping priorities and planning interventions within the strategy. Another significant innovative aspect is the focus on human capital development<sup>5</sup>, achieved through targeted training, experience exchange initiatives,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/miglom.org>

<sup>2</sup> [https://miglom.org/proj\\_map/projects\\_map.php](https://miglom.org/proj_map/projects_map.php)

<sup>3</sup> <https://publuu.com/flip-book/800688/1766827/page/1?cover>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/@%D0%9C%D0%98%D0%93-%D0%9B%D0%BE%D0%BC>

<sup>5</sup> A good example of this is the professional training and integration of marginalized communities through the project implemented by ENERGY SUPPORT 2011 Ltd. with a budget of BGN 87,418.87, in partnership with the Roma Foundation – Lom. Economically inactive individuals were engaged through four meetings with unemployed and inactive persons, as well as motivational training for 20 participants. The construction company provided six months of employment for 15 individuals, who continue to work as construction workers to date.

and the adoption of best practices from other regions and countries. This approach not only strengthens the capacity of local beneficiaries and partners but also reinforces the long-term sustainability of local development. By supporting modernization and digitalization, LAG LOM encourages local businesses and agricultural producers to adopt advanced technologies, leading to increased competitiveness. Many projects incorporate sustainable and resource-efficient solutions, such as the use of renewable energy sources, energy-saving technologies, and environmentally friendly agricultural practices. This aligns with European priorities for green transformation and climate change adaptation. Lastly, LAG LOM fosters innovation in the social sector by promoting social entrepreneurship and the integration of vulnerable groups<sup>1</sup>, which significantly contributes to social cohesion and the improvement of living standards at the local level.

Through the application of these innovative mechanisms and partnership models, LOM LAG demonstrates that CLLD can be simultaneously effective, sustainable, and forward-looking.

### **Problems, Challenges, and Future Development of the Approach**

Despite positive results, the implementation of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) Strategies faces a number of challenges encountered by a significant portion of local action groups (LAGs) in the country. These challenges highlight the need to reconsider and improve the approach in future programming periods. One of the primary issues is the limited administrative and expert capacity at the local level. Often, additional training and support are required for beneficiaries in project preparation and implementation, especially for small enterprises or non-governmental organizations with limited experience and resources. A second major problem, stemming from the Managing Authority of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) and the State Fund Agriculture (SFA), concerns the financing and management of the approach and the operation of the LAGs themselves. As early as 2019, (Doitchinova, J., Stoyanova, Z., Harizanov-Bartos, H., 2019) analyzed that the implementation of the LEADER approach through the creation of an innovation system is constrained by non-compliance with the legally established deadlines for implementing measures under the RDP, frequent changes in the regulatory framework, and other factors. This causes the Paying Agency consistently delays reimbursement of funds on LAG requests,

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<sup>1</sup> A Mobile Health and Social Counseling and Prevention Center was established with a capacity of 50 individuals under the project “*Sustainable Integration through Motivation and Employment.*” The project simultaneously improves health awareness and access to social services for the Roma communities in the neighborhoods of Stadion, Humata, Mladenovo, and Momin Brod. In the context of the pandemic and elevated illness rates within the Roma community, the center plays a crucial preventive role.

which prevents effective cost planning and results in a persistent financial deficit – even regarding salaries and fees for experts. Frequently, funds are provided as loans from municipal administrations. This creates a strong dependency of LAGs on the municipalities in whose territories they operate or on certain sectoral organizations, compromising the autonomy of their decisions and raising suspicions of political influence, which often discourages some beneficiaries from participating. As a third significant and common problem for all LAGs, the regulatory framework and administrative requirements under the RDP are often unnecessarily complex, with cumbersome procedures subject to constant changes. Substantial difficulties also arise from shortcomings in the operations of the State Fund Agriculture (SFA) – the main intermediary in managing financial resources. These include slow processing of project proposals, frequent changes in application and implementation guidelines, and a high administrative burden on beneficiaries. These factors negatively impact not only the implementation of the CLLD approach but also the overall absorption of funds under the Rural Development Programme. Consequently, this leads to project delays, withdrawal of potential candidates, and reduced programme effectiveness. Insufficient coordination with managing authorities, significant delays in project contract negotiations, and limited institutional and expert support at the local level further prolong project implementation deadlines, burdening both LAG teams and applicants. This often results in project delays or cancellations. A revision of contracting mechanisms is necessary to accelerate and simplify the contracting process. The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the activity of local communities and businesses, limiting opportunities for public discussions and live events, as well as delaying the implementation of certain projects under the OP HRD and NRDP. Experience shows that for the CLLD approach to be effective, greater procedural flexibility and easier access to financing are needed for small local initiatives that generate significant social impact but have limited resources for administrative management. For example, NGOs often lack the necessary own financial resources to pre-finance project activities, as the State Fund Agriculture (SFA) does not generally provide for advance payments under most measures. This creates serious difficulties for NGOs in project execution, despite their important role in implementing development projects with substantial local community impact.

The most critical problem, however, is the serious delay in launching the new programming period, which was supposed to cover 2021-2027 but has effectively been postponed to 2025-2029 within the Strategic Plan for Agricultural and Rural Development (SPARD). The preparation process for the new CLLD strategies began in March 2023, aiming to reflect the needs and development potential of over 200 predominantly rural municipalities in the country. Although CLLD strategies are designed as instruments for timely and flexible support, their actual implementation will not commence until late 2025. This delay has caused serious

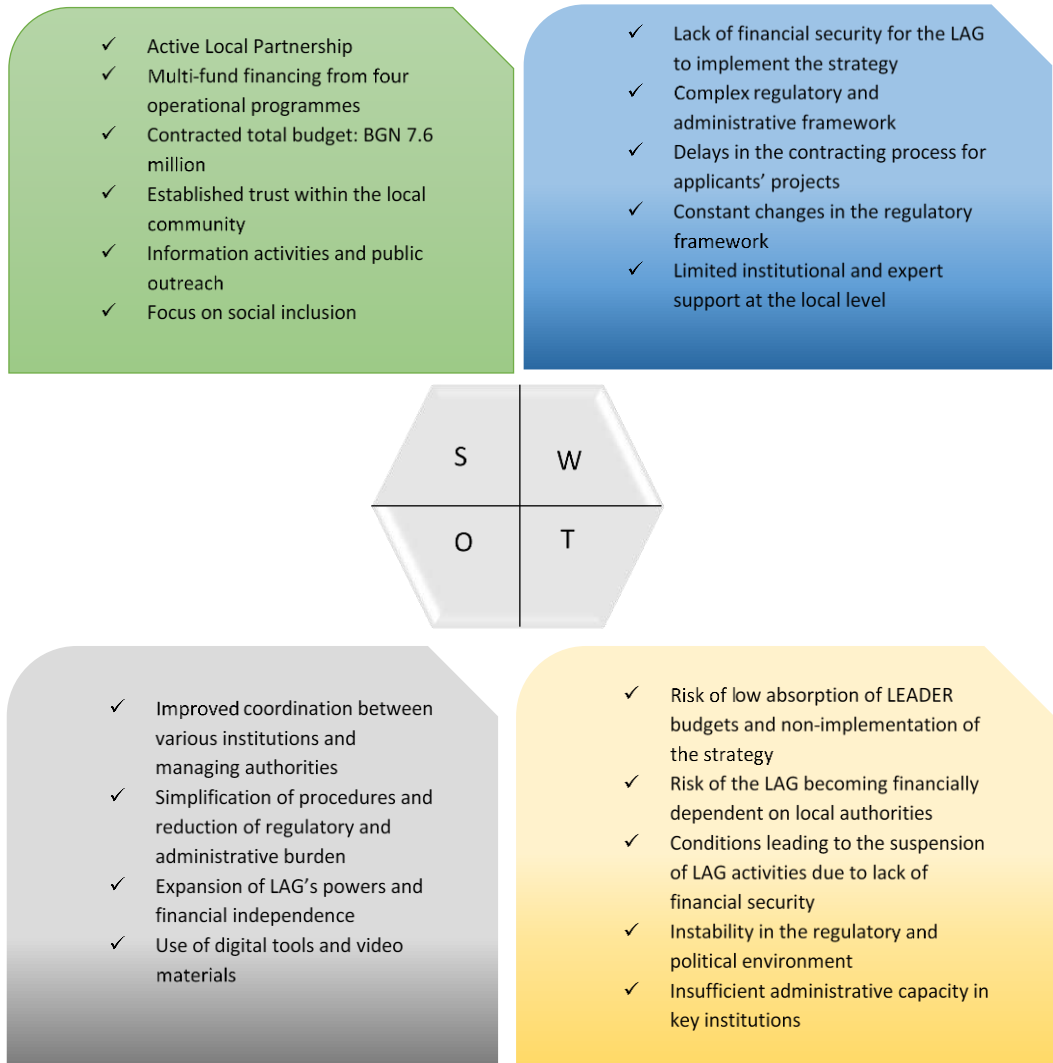
concern among all local action groups in Bulgaria, as the approach's application was practically blocked for nearly two years. The lack of clarity and real opportunities to implement the new strategies poses a genuine risk of undermining the approach's objectives and losing substantial financial resources approximately BGN 740 million – allocated for the development of Bulgarian rural areas during the 2025–2029 programming period.

Despite these challenges, the European LEADER Association for Rural Development ((ELARD) Development, 2019), in its position statement as early as 2019, continues to uphold the view that the LEADER/CLLD approach and the network of local action groups represent an adequate and effective tool for localizing, implementing, monitoring, and revising sustainable development goals in rural areas. According to the organization, active participation of rural communities is essential for achieving sustainability at the local, regional, and national levels. In her report, Zornitsa Stoyanova (Stoyanova, 2012) recommends that certain changes be implemented at the stage of establishing Local Action Groups (LAGs) to improve the operating environment for LAGs in Bulgaria. These changes aim to promote local identity, build local capacity and governance structures, enhance the capacity of the respective territories, and strengthen LAGs' connections with other regions. Such measures are expected to positively influence the future development of rural areas in the country and increase the significance of local communities in regional development.

The numerous challenges faced by LAG LOM in the implementation and development of the CLLD approach highlight the need to build functional optimization for its execution in the new programming period. Nevertheless, the association is exposed to various risks that could hinder the effective implementation of the CLLD Strategy and jeopardize the long-term sustainability of its activities. The attached SWOT analysis (Fig. 7) summarizes the key factors shaping the external and internal environment for the operation of the approach within the LAG LOM territory, as well as the measures/actions that could contribute to enhancing its effectiveness at the local level.

The philosophy of the program documents for the 2014–2020 period treats rural development as a priority of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but also as part of the integrated development of regions (cohesion policy). The territorial approach is embedded in both policies, implemented top-down through sectoral interventions in municipal plans and bottom-up through the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach. The “area-based” principle applies in both cases and means, firstly, a specific, homogeneous territory characterized by natural and economic conditions, human resources, culture, shared history, and joint planning for sustainable development; and secondly, that the potential and problems, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats are reflected, with activities and measures responding to real needs and based on local competitive advantages. Since

the Rural Development Programme (RDP) and the CLLD strategies are developed based on the needs and potential of the same territory, there must be synergy and complementarity between them.



*Figure 7. SWOT analysis LAG LOM*

*Source: Author's framework*

Nevertheless, the CLLD approach has significant advantages, as it promotes sectoral development and supports categories of beneficiaries often excluded from funding programs. The strategies create opportunities for implementing small-scale

projects by local beneficiaries who would find it more difficult to secure support at the national level. A key role in the eligibility and success of these projects is played by their scale and thematic scope, as well as the capacity and motivation of the applicants themselves. Despite existing difficulties, LAG Lom has substantial practical experience at the local level that contributes to more effective engagement with the population. The importance of effective communication and active work with the local community stands out, with the establishment of accessible information channels and the application of flexible consultation methods proving to be key factors for successfully promoting funding opportunities. This experience reinforces the role of the CLLD approach as an effective tool for mobilizing local potential and achieving sustainable development in rural areas.

Based on the conducted analysis, we can conclude that overcoming the challenges and leveraging the experience provide a solid foundation for improving the approach in the next programming period. They establish LAG Lom as an active intermediary between the local community and sustainable development opportunities. The experience from the 2014–2020 period revealed the need for more flexible procedures, capacity building within the LAG, and better integration of local policies with national and regional strategies. The implementation of CLLD ensures rural areas additional access to funding under European programs, enhancing the connections between sectors and stakeholders in ways that have a multiplying effect on the main operational programs. According to the new Strategic Plan for Rural Development until 2029, the application of the CLLD approach will continue to create better economic and social living conditions in the settlements covered by the LAG and support the multisectoral development of the local economy through the developed CLLD Strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The Local Action Group (LAG) Lom serves as a successful example of applying the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach in a rural area facing significant socio-economic challenges. The results achieved confirm the importance of a locally based approach to attaining sustainable development. The integrated and innovative nature of the actions carried out through the CLLD 2014–2020 program demonstrates the potential of local communities to be active agents of change.

The work of LAG Lom clearly shows that through active local community participation, the development of partnerships, and the implementation of innovative solutions, significant social, economic, and environmental outcomes can be achieved. Despite challenges related to administrative requirements, limited resources, and external factors, LAG Lom is actively working to build its capacity for future initiatives.

Looking ahead, it is crucial to build on these achievements through the strategic use of accumulated experience and the active involvement of all stakeholders in the programming and implementation of the CLLD Strategy for the 2025–2029 period. This will ensure sustainable development, improved quality of life, and will further strengthen the role of LAG Lom as an active intermediary and driver of positive change in the region.

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