

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sustainable Development in Transylvanian Highlands (Romania)





1 Implications for policy and farming support

1.1 The Challenge & Needs – What is the situation?

Four key institutional/policy-related challenges and bottlenecks can be identified in relation to scaling-up and scaling-out a social innovation such as the Transylvanian Highlands

1. Rural Romania continues to be plagued by persistent poverty and a huge gap in living/social standards in comparison with urban areas, as well as in comparison with most rural areas in other Member EU States. As explained in the [‘Mapping Report on Challenges for Romania’](#) this impacts greatly upon the well-being of small farmers, their families/households and communities.

Unfortunately, the two specific concepts of ‘farmer well-being’ and ‘social innovation’ addressed in FARMWELL are poorly understood in Romania, especially in the context of agricultural and rural development policy. Consequently, whilst the ‘economic well-being’ (productivity, profitability, efficiency etc.) of agricultural enterprises and the importance of other forms of ‘rural innovation’ (notably technological) are recognised and increasingly supported¹ by the Ministry of Agriculture Rural Development (MARD), ‘farmer well-being’ and ‘social innovation’ are not addressed directly by MARD policymakers.

2. Issues of ‘farmer well-being’ and ‘social innovation’ do however continue to be addressed indirectly through a range of policy interventions designed to address rural poverty/social exclusion and outmigration.

This includes numerous rural development measures which have been implemented since Romania’s accession to the EU which aim to make rural areas more attractive places to live through investments in basic services and rural infrastructure and support for the creation of new economic opportunities for the rural population (including for the disadvantaged). LEADER is potentially very important in this respect and there has been a high expectation that Local Action Groups (LAGs) would help to identify and deliver appropriate support for the fostering of social innovation at a local community level, especially for those communities facing problems with persistent poverty, outmigration, low educational standards etc.

Unfortunately, very few LAGs have included relevant measures in their Local Development Strategy (LDS) due to lack of relevant expertise; lack of capacity of potential beneficiaries to apply for and administer available funds, and; lack of openness on the part of MARD and the Paying Agency to LAGs adopting alternative approaches such as social innovation for the well-being of farmers and farming families.

¹ For example, through the progressive (‘step-by-step’) programming and implementation of support measures for the EIP-AGRI





3. Even if LAGs and other organisations want to deal with issues of farmer well-being there is a cultural resistance in rural areas to discussing issues such as mental health, as well as a general lack of available expertise at village/community level to facilitate such discussions. Other important 'taboo' issues include the overuse of alcohol, deeply entrenched sexism towards rural women and domestic violence.
4. Finally - compared to other forms of rural innovation, social innovation is especially vulnerable to being suppressed or blocked by a lack of trust between local people and this continues to be a major obstacle to many rural communities coming together to make a collaborative effort to address local issues. This problem is exacerbated by the limited support for social innovation which is available being offered mainly in the form of time-limited projects (often with complex administrative procedures associated with them) which is not a suitable format for the necessary processes of bringing diverse groups of local people together to working in partnership to mobilize their creativity and take advantage of their positive social dynamics.

1.2 Support framework – What is needed?

Transylvanian Highlands started back in 2013 as a form of partnership between well-embedded organisations in Southern Transylvania, that understood the needs and opportunities of the area and had just the right knowledge to bring added value. The partnerships understood the importance of actively supporting communities of small farmers and had the vision, knowledge and access to skilled animators/facilitators and other specialists to engage a broad range of local organisations in their work, as well as individual volunteers who had the willingness to commit to supporting their community.

The type of support provided to the to the rural communities should be made available for grass-roots initiatives in other communities and could a) be provided by LAGs, and b) be extended to address a much wider range of social issues related to well-being and quality of life.

Social innovation has most commonly been associated in the past with LEADER and – in principle - remains a key building block of innovation support within 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plans, including in Romania.

LAGs are potentially also very useful for channelling relevant funding from other EU programmes (e.g. ESF and ERDF) and there are few inspirational LAGs in Romania which i) have made the promotion of social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development the main priority in their LDS and ii) successfully attracted other funding sources. One of the most successful has been the LAG Napoca Porolissum (<https://napocaporolissum.ro/>) that (amongst many other achievements!) established an award-winning² Centre for Social Inclusion in the village of Gilău in north-west Romania. This Centre offered a space for young people from the local community, including many from farming families, to interact and

² Winner of the 'Socially Inclusive & Innovative Futures' category of the 2022 Rural Inspirations Award organised by the European Network for Rural Development:
https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/project/attachments/social-centre-for-social-inclusion_0.pdf





benefit from a variety of integrated social services such as social counselling, health education, healthy lifestyles and parenting skills.

1.3 Recommendations – What needs to be done to realise the support needed?

There is a clear need in Romania to raise awareness generally of the importance of maintaining/improving the well-being of small farmers, their families and communities. Furthermore, there is a much more specific need to raise awareness amongst LAGs that this is an issue that can be addressed in their Local Development Strategies.

However, LAGs need guidance from the RDP/CAP Managing Authority on how to approach this issue in a meaningful and effective way, instead of “just for the money”. Currently, there is a tendency for LAGs to include ‘social measures’ in their strategies in order to satisfy the strategy selection criteria, and then to show very little commitment to implementing relevant actions.

LAGs need encouragement to engage with – and support – social innovation in Romania. More examples of good practice and sharing of success stories is needed, both from within Romania and from other Member States. The Romanian CAP Network has an important role to play in this knowledge exchange, including much closer alignment of the implementation of LEADER with the EIP-AGRI. There is great potential for more direct interaction between LEADER Local Action Groups and EIP-AGRI Operational Groups at the local level, but this is not currently on the political agenda of MARD but could be promoted and facilitated at a more regional/local level.

More independent and impartial specialist expertise is needed in the rural space of Romania to address issues of significance to the well-being of individual small farmers, their families and wider community, and to foster relevant social innovations. This expertise should not be delivered by public agencies but needs to be sought from voluntary (NGOs) or private entities (therapists, consultants etc.). LAGs can also help in this respect by safe and neutral space for people to come together to discuss sensitive issues (taboos) of both a personal/family nature and of relevance to the wider community.

