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# LOCAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN SERBIA'S RURAL COMMUNITIES AS PREREQUISITE FOR THE LEADER IMPLEMENTATION: AGRICULTURAL ADVISORS' PERCEPTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The Leader approach, as a national measure of rural development is still in the initial development phase in the Republic of Serbia. In the coming period, more intense support for the implementation of this measure is expected, from the national/regional/local budget and through the IPARD III 2021-2027 pre-accession support program. How effectively the available support funds will be used largely will depend on local stakeholders in rural communities, primarily citizens and civil society representatives, and the capacity of their development initiatives. Based on the perceptions of 118 agricultural advisors involved in the study and using descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance and Pearson's coefficient, the authors found a moderately capacity of local development initiatives in rural communities in the Republic of Serbia that does not differ by the regions, as well as the moderate positive correlation between the quality of life and capacity of local development initiatives.

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## Introduction

Nearly 40% of the population in the Republic of Serbia lives in rural areas (Babović, 2022)<sup>4</sup>, which are characterized by numerous systemic and structural economic, social, institutional and infrastructural developmental constraints. They are reflected

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  - 4 In the absence of Eurostat's urban-rural typology for NUTS 3 regions, official statistics and domestic literature have accepted the so-called "other" settlements (typology based on administrative-legal criteria) as the closest to rural.

in intensive depopulation, underdeveloped labor market, slow farm restructuring, rural poverty, high migration, especially of women, young and highly-educated people, which further worsens the situation and opportunities for these areas (Babović, 2022; Bogdanov, 2007; Joldžić, Batrićević, Stanković & Paunović, 2019; Kotevska & Martinovska Stojcheska, 2015; Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia 2014–2024; Živojinović, Ludvig & Hegl, 2019).

Rural development requires much more than declarative and political support, and within the balanced territorial development, it will be key to achieving set of sustainable development goals in the Republic of Serbia by 2030 (Babović, 2020; Joldžić, Batrićević, Stanković & Paunović, 2019; Radukić, Petrović-Randelović & Kostić, 2019; United Nations, 2015). In planning and implementing of the rural development process, it's important to view rural areas as high value territories, with heterogeneous local characteristics and resources, with a focus on needs and initiatives of local inhabitants, networking (intersectoral and vertical at the local-regional and national level), and respecting the principle of democratic decision-making (Popescu & Andrei, 2011; Cizler, 2013; Djukić, Volić, Tišma & Jelinčić, 2014; Ilić, Pavloska Gjorgjieska & Ciaian, 2019; Janković, 2012; Popović, Katić & Savić, 2011; Rodriguez, 2010; Vujičić, Ristić & Ćirić, 2013; Popescu et al., 2017).

The LEADER approach, which has proven its effectiveness in promoting rural development in EU, is useful in many ways for development of rural areas in the Republic of Serbia, and in the Western Balkans countries in general, which are in the process of harmonizing with the EU's common agricultural policy (CAP) (Ilić, Pavloska Gjorgjieska & Ciaian, 2019; Popović, Katić & Savić, 2011). At the same time, developed and strong local initiatives of citizens and civil sector representatives, among other things, will be an important prerequisite for implementing the Leader approach and "attracting" financial support for the implementation of this measure, especially after its accreditation under the IPARD III program.

Given the above, and based on the perceptions of agricultural advisors involved in the research, authors will try to answer the following three research questions: (1) What is current state of local development initiatives in rural communities of the Republic of Serbia? (2) Is there a statistically significant difference of the state of local development initiatives in rural communities by region (NUTS 2 level)? (3) What is direction and strength of correlation between the state of local development initiatives and the quality of life adapted to the needs of young people in the rural communities of the Republic of Serbia?

The goal of the research is directed, above all, towards acquiring empirical knowledge of the current state of development of local development initiatives (abbr. LDIs) of citizens and civil sector representatives in rural communities in the Republic of Serbia. The results can be used by academia, practitioners and representatives of all levels of government, especially local government, in directing future rural development policies

## Research background: Leader approach and local development initiatives

The Leader approach is the only approach to endogenous, multi-sectoral, inter-territorial and integrated rural development, in which LDIs and local stakeholders, through bottom-up and local partnerships, play a key and central role in planning, designing and implementing local development strategies (EC, 2017; EC, 2006; ENRD, 2020). Its proper application in EU countries has positively affected the development and the process of managing rural development in general, thus improving the quality of life in these areas, diversifying the rural economy and advancing social capital, social and cultural innovation (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; EC, 2017; Esparcia Perez, 2000; EU, 2021; EU 2013; Konečný, 2019; Nieto Masot, Cárdenas Alonso & Costa Moreno, 2019; Ray, 2000).

In the current transition budget period, this approach is a mandatory component of the national and regional European Union's Rural Development Programs, funded through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (abbr. EAFRD) (EU, 2020). The new, modernized and reformed CAP 2023-2027 brings no change, given that the CAP regulation states that "LEADER should therefore be continued in the future and its application should remain compulsory with a minimum allocation under the EAFRD" (EU, 2021, p. 16).

Although it is indisputable that strong institutions, decentralization, interaction between local, regional and central administration, as well as partnerships of civil, private and public sector are the basis for successful implementation of the Leader approach, it is important to emphasize the importance of knowledge and initiatives of citizens, civil society representatives, i.e. social entrepreneurs to promote local development based on an endogenous approach, reduce poverty, and improve the level and quality of life in local communities (Coffey & Polese, 1985; Klein, Fontan & Tremblay, 2009; Vázquez-Barquero & Rodríguez-Cohard, 2016).

In the Republic of Serbia, leader approach, as a national measure of rural development, is under the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management. For a long time, the incomplete regulatory and planning framework has prevented the implementation of the Leader measure, thus having a disincentive effect on local stakeholders (Bogdanov, et al., 2018; Paraušić & Bekić Šarić, 2021; State Audit Institution, 2020). At present, the Leader measure is completely defined in legal, strategic and program documents. However, the authors of this paper, as well as numerous of other authors believe that the necessary preconditions for proper implementation of the Leader measure are missing, especially bearing in mind lack of regional and local initiatives and networking of local stakeholders in creating and implementing local development strategies; low level of trust, knowledge and experience of the rural population on local initiatives and institutionally organized cooperation; low human resources capacities in local administration, politicization and bureaucratic approach in directing local development; difficult access to sources of funding at the local level and the like (Bogdanov, et al., 2018; Djukić, Volić, Tišma & Jelinčić, 2014; Janković Milić, Stanković & Marinkovic, 2014; Janković, 2012; Kotevska & Martinovska Stojcheska, 2015; Paraušić & Domazet, 2018; Rodriguez, 2010; Vujicic, Ristic & Ciric, 2013). In this paper authors will try to confirm or reject these opinions through answering the defined research questions.

## Material and methods

The research is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with acceptance of the semi-structured interview guide developed by Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson and Kangasniemi (2016). The survey covered licensed agricultural advisors employed in all Agricultural Advisory and Expert Service (abbr. AAES) in Serbia (total of 35), which operate as companies founded by the Republic of Serbia.

The sample included 118 licensed agricultural advisors distributed by regions as follows: Beograd (11), Juzna i istocna Srbija (27), Kosovo i Metohija (5), Sumadija i zapadna Srbija (34) and the Vojvodina (41). Territorially, the sample is equal to the spatial representation of the licensed agricultural advisories in the Republic of Serbia (Djurić, 2020), and the sample size represents 57% of the total number of advisors employed in AAES (Decree on determining the annual program for the development of advisory services in agriculture for 2022).

The selection of advisors is the result of simple random sampling, and the interviews cover the period from June to December 2021, through personal contact and by phone. All licensed agricultural advisors involved in the research answered the questions and expressed huge desire to share their knowledge from practical work with researchers.

Authors selected the licensed agricultural advisors as research participants because we assumed that they know well the socio-economic resources and problems of local rural communities, where they have obligations or jurisdiction to provide advisory services, in accordance with the Law on agricultural advisory and professional activities (2010, Article 2). Also, the authors believed that agricultural advisors would have greater objectivity and impartiality in relation to other local stakeholders.

Two variables were examined in rural communities of the Republic of Serbia: (1) State of local development initiatives and (2) Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people. The first variable is defined as a scope of joint, networked and planned initiatives of local stakeholders, primarily citizens and civil society representatives, aimed at sustainable development and improving the quality of life in rural communities, while the second variable indicates the labor market situation (employment of young people, women and highly-educated staff and/or development of one's own business), proximity, i.e. access to larger, urban centers, as well as the level of development of physical and social infrastructure and services in rural communities.

Respondents evaluated the analysed variables descriptively, as well as quantitatively on a scale from 1 to 5 (where a score of 1 indicates the least favourable condition of the examined variable and a score of 5 the most favourable condition). Advisors scored variables only in rural settlements where they have a legal obligation to provide advisory services, and since Republic of Serbia does not have an official definition of rural areas, they were asked to follow the OECD definition of rurality in the typology of settlements, according to which “*rural settlements (NUTS 5 level) are considered to be those with a population density below 150 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>*” (Bogdanov, 2007, p. 39).

For the purposes of inference, the authors defined range of average score of the answers for both variables and gave description of variables for every range (*Table 1*).

**Table 1.** Range of the average values of responses and their meaning by analysed variables

Range of average score	Analysed variables	Descriptive expression of variables
1.0-1.5	State of local development initiatives	Underdeveloped local initiatives
	Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people	Quality of life is not adapted to the needs of young people
1.6-2.5	State of local development initiatives	Low capacity of local development initiatives
	Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people	Quality of life slightly adapted to the needs of young people
2.6-3.5	State of local development initiatives	Moderate capacity of local development initiatives
	Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people	Quality of life moderately adapted to the needs of young people
3.6-4.5	State of local development initiatives	Strong capacity of local development initiatives
	Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people	Quality of life well adapted to the needs of young people
4.6-5.0	State of local development initiatives	Extremely strong capacity of local development initiatives
	Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people	Quality of life highly adapted to the needs of young people

*Source:* Author's presentation.

The semi-structured in-depth interview consisted of several units, and only part of the collected data was used for the purposes of this paper.

Primary quantitative data collected in the empirical research was processed in the statistical program IBM SPSS Statistics 26. For the purposes of inference, descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), as well as Pearson's correlation coefficient were used. In addition, the presentation of qualitative answers related to the assessment of the state of local development initiatives in rural areas by agricultural advisers significantly improved and enriched the research results.

## Results and discussion

Agricultural advisers' perceptions regarding to state of the LDIs and quality of life adapted to the needs of young people in the rural communities of the Republic of Serbia are presented in Table 2 and Figure 1. Those results provide an opportunity to answer the first research question. Namely, the mean value of the responses of the variable "State of the LDIs in rural communities" indicate the moderate capacity of LDIs (mean 3.2), which are much more positive and optimistic results compared to the research conducted by Bogdanov (2007) and Janković (2012). Observed by region (NUTS 2), mean value of variable is in a range of 3.0-3.6, and only in Kosovo and Metohija region advisers assessed strong capacity of LDIs.

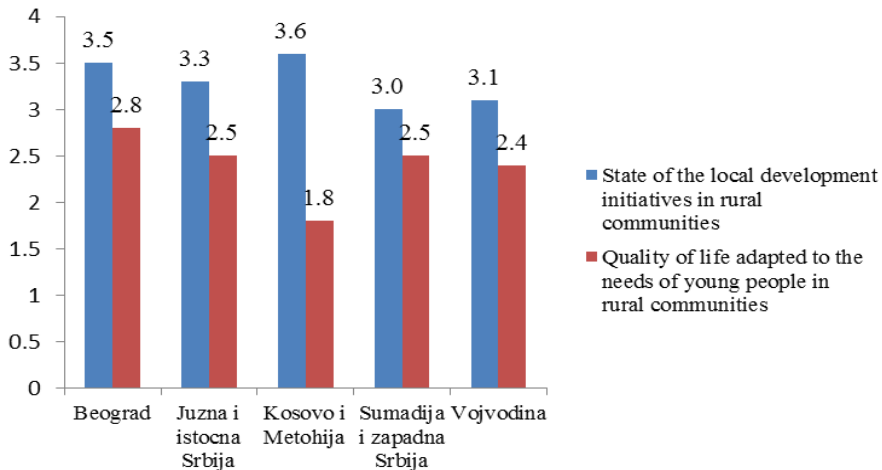
At the same time, data in the Table 2 and Figure 1 indicates that quality of life in rural communities is slightly adapted to the needs of young people (Mean 2.4), and also the same result was obtained for all regions except Belgrade region.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of the agricultural advisors' answers for analysed variables on a scale of 1-5

Indicators	State of the local development initiatives in rural communities	Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people in rural communities
N	118	118
Missing	0	0
Mean	3.2	2.4
95% Confidence Interval for Mean	3.0-3.4	2.3-2.6
Median	3.0	2.0
Variance	0.913	0.822
Coefficient of variation (CV)	29.85%	37.78%
Std. Deviation	0.9552	0.9067
Minimum	1.0	1.0
Maximum	5.0	5.0
Range	4.0	4.0
Q1	3.0	2.0
Q3	4.0	3.0
IQR	1.0	1.0
Skewness	-0.388	0.311
Kurtosis	-0.270	-0.090

Source: Author's calculations.

**Figure 1.** Mean of the agricultural advisors' answers on a scale of 1-5



Source: Author's calculations.

Authors used one-way analysis of variance for response to the second research question, and in order to determine the existence of statistically significant difference in the agricultural advisors' perceptions of the state of LDIs in the rural communities by the regions of the Republic of Serbia. At the significance level of 0.05, the authors concluded that there is no statistically significant difference in the agricultural advisors' perceptions of the state of LDIs observed by regions (Table 3.).

**Table 3.** State of the local development initiatives in rural communities by NUTS 2 region: results of the ANOVA application

Source of variation	Df	Sum of squares (SS)	Mean square (MS)	F value	Sig.
Between groups	4	$SS_A = 4.642$	$MS_A = 1.160$	1.284	.281
Residuals (within groups)	113	$SS_R = 102.121$	$MS_R = .904$		
Total	117	106.763			

Source: Authors' calculations. IBM SPSS Statistics 26

Having in mind that the regions in the Republic of Serbia differ by the level of economic development (measured by the value of gross domestic product per capita<sup>5</sup>), the presented results suggest that state of the LDIs in rural communities isn't relate to the stage of economic development of the region.

**Table 4.** Correlations between State of the local development initiatives (LDIs) and Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people in rural communities

		State of the LDIs	Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people
State of the local development initiatives in rural communities	Pearson Correlation	1	.462**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	118	118
Quality of life adapted to the needs of young people in rural communities	Pearson Correlation	.463**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	118	118
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Source: Authors' calculations. IBM SPSS Statistics 26

5 Based on the Regulation on establishing a unified list of development of regions and local self-government units for 2014 (Official Gazette of RS No. 104/2014), the Belgrade region and the region of Vojvodina are classified as developed regions, as regions with gross domestic product above the national average, while underdeveloped regions are the region of Šumadija and Western Serbia, the region of Southern and Eastern Serbia and the region of Kosovo and Metohija, as regions in which the value of gross domestic product is below the value of the national average.



The answer to the third research question, regarding agricultural advisors' perceptions of the possible correlation between both analysed variables (direction and strength of the correlation), is given in Table 4. Results showed a moderate positive correlation ( $r=0.470$ ) between two variables, according to range of values of the Pearson correlation coefficient (Profillidis & Botzoris, 2018).

Regarding the qualitative assessments of the state of the local development initiatives in rural communities, licensed agricultural advisors are almost unanimous in their views that local initiatives of citizens and civil society representatives exist only when it comes to the need to solve problems (acute or long-standing), while there are almost no long-term initiatives or initiatives to improve the situation in the local community. This is in line with the findings of the group of authors that most local initiatives are "short-term and ad-hoc in nature" (Djukić, Volić, Tišma & Jelinčić, 2014, p. 56). Changes in the local community are most often initiated by young people, informal groups of citizens or registered farmers' associations. According to the respondents, the inhabitants of rural areas are increasingly informed, interested in their progress and improving the quality of life in the areas in which they live, they know their rights, as well as the procedures for their realization.

Local initiatives are primarily present in the segment of improving the situation in the field of physical, i.e. communal infrastructure (water supply and sewerage network), energy (electricity, gas) and road infrastructure. In addition, initiatives to build or improve agricultural infrastructure (arrangement of rural roads, irrigation/drainage canals, and support for hail protection) are highlighted. Our results confirm the research by a group of authors who also point out that "infrastructure development is an important prerequisite for economic diversification and socio-cultural development, which should in turn provide a better standard of living" (Vujicic, Ristic & Ciric, 2013, p. 123). On the other hand, although "rural vitality is composed of economic, social and cultural dimensions" (Vujicic, Ristic & Ciric, 2013, p. 123), our results indicate that there are insufficient initiatives to address social infrastructure (investment in schools, kindergartens, cultural centers, health institutions, construction/reconstruction of sports fields and playgrounds) and improve cultural, educational, health and sports services and facilities, as well as initiatives in the field of landscaping, parks, sidewalks, pedestrian paths, cleaning public spaces and the like. There is also a lack of initiatives by agricultural producers to build cold stores, storage facilities and the like together and using joint funds in order to improve their market position and ensure better marketing of their products. Even where these types of farmers' initiatives do exist, they remain only "on paper", because they lack financial resources for the realization of planned investments.

The results show that the following factors largely demotivate the LDIs of citizens and the civil sector: (1) the slowness of decision-making on the implementation of certain projects, as well as the long period of implementation of ongoing projects; (2) complicated bureaucratic administrative procedures; (3) lack of financial resources for project implementation, as well as (4) significantly strong policy influence in all spheres of local government. These results are in line with research by other authors,



who point to obstacles to rural development through local and/or regional initiatives in the form of polarized and bureaucratic structures of local self-government, which do not contribute to the improvement of the business environment, nor encourage the formation and operation of local partnerships (Bogdanov, et al., 2018; Cañete, Navarro & Cejudo, 2018; Esparcia Perez, 2000; Janković Milić, Stanković & Marinkovic, 2014; Janković, 2012; Navarro, Woods & Cejudo, 2016).

As the biggest limitations of the research, the authors state the following: inclusion of only one group of stakeholders (agricultural advisors) in the research, their subjective attitude in the evaluation of analyzed variables which is typical for social research (Shipman, 2014), as well as a small number of employed advisory workers in the Belgrade region (only one registered AAPS with 15 advisors employed) and the region of Kosovo and Metohija (only one AAPS based in Kosovska Mitrovica with 5 employed advisors). However, having in mind the size of the sample, impartial, objective and expertise- and experience-based perception of advisors, as well as the fact that there is no research of this kind in domestic literature, the authors believe that this research provides useful knowledge of current state of LDIs in rural communities of the Republic of Serbia.

In the following papers, the authors will try to examine other features of rural areas, especially the state of social capital development, with the expansion of the scope of respondents to other participants and decision makers in rural development, such as: local government representatives, local economic development office, representatives of the business sector and the like.

## Conclusion

Assuming that, among other factors, local initiatives and “bottom up” approach are necessary prerequisites for effective and correct implementation of the Leader approach to rural development, the authors investigated the current state of local development initiatives of citizens and civil society representatives in the rural areas of the Republic of Serbia and their connection with the quality of life in these areas. The analysis was based on the perceptions of 118 agricultural advisors, involved in the research through an in-depth semi-structured interview, which was conducted in 2021.

The results show moderately capacity of local development initiatives of citizens and civil sector representatives (mean 3.2 on a scale of 1-5), from the point of view of agricultural advisors. Observed by region, all regions have the same level of local development initiatives, except for the region of Kosovo, where agricultural advisors assessed strong capacity of local development initiatives. Using one-way analysis of variance, the authors concluded that there are no statistically significant differences in the agricultural advisers' perceptions of capacities of local development initiatives by NUTS 2 regions, which means that different characteristics of regions (natural, social) and different levels of their economic development, do not affect agricultural advisers' perceptions. The correlation analysis pointed a moderate positive correlation ( $r=0.470$ ) between the quality of life

and capacity of local development initiatives in rural communities, so we may conclude that conditions and quality of life in rural areas are not in significant connection with the capacities of local development initiatives and vice versa.

Results suggested that, in the coming period, central, regional and local levels of government must undertake planning activities (educational, promotional, and financial) to empower and encourage local capacities and ensure the successful implementation of the Leader measure. Also, article can provide guidance to policy makers at all levels (especially at the level of local governments) in directing future local rural development policy, in order to strengthen capacities and strengthen local development initiatives, as important prerequisites for effective implementation of Leader measures and the use of EU pre-accession funds for rural development.

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### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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