



# From Living Lab to Smart Village Strategies: The Someș Transilvan Model, Romania

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# What I will talk about today

- how, in our case, the Smart Village concept is implemented through the LEADER LDS
- the wider Romanian context
- the steps we took in LAG Someș Transilvan
- what this experience shows



**Smart Village through LEADER**  
not as a one-off project,  
but as a supported local process

## About me

- I work with several LAGs in North-West Romania
- I support strategic planning and implementation of territorial approaches
- I focus especially on LEADER and Smart Village
- I am also a PhD candidate at Babeş-Bolyai University
- My research looks at community-based local development

## About the LAG

- rural territory in Cluj County, North-West Romania, east of Cluj-Napoca
- covers 12 communes: Apahida, Aluniș, Bontida, Bobâlna, Borșa, Cornești, Dăbâca, Iclod, Jucu, Mintiu Gherlii, Sic and Vultureni.
- a territory of around 45,600 inhabitants.
- located at the meeting point of the Transylvanian Plain and the Someș Plateau.
- a mixed rural area: partly peri-urban and closely connected to Cluj-Napoca, partly more agricultural and remote.

## About the Romanian context

- In this programming period, Smart Village in Romania is largely implemented through LEADER
- 91 of 246 Romanian LAGs allocated at least 10% of their LDS budgets to Smart Village actions
- This was linked to a MA quality criteria
- So in Romania, Smart Village is not a stand-alone instrument - it is shaped through LEADER framework
- In Romania, Smart Village is still understood in many different ways.
- In many LDSs, it still appears mainly in a technology-driven form.
- The community-driven version is harder to explain, facilitate and deliver.
- LEADER procedures often fit hard investments better than social innovation or other soft approaches.



# Our approach

Our approach builds on the community-driven logic developed through Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27.

# Two-stage intervention

## 1. Umbrella project for strategy development

- spread a more community-driven approach
- fund a real community-led planning process
- accompany communities closely through the process
- explain the concept, clarify expectations and help mobilise local resources

## 2. Support for Smart Village actions

- after strategies are developed, support selected actions and investments
- use the strategies as a basis for implementation
- connect planning with future local delivery

# Extra step: the Bontida Living Lab

- we added a Living Lab to pilot the strategy-development process in one community
- to see how local actors react and can be activated
- to test whether Smart Village can become a real community process
- to build a strategy-model that can later be transferred
- to prepare the wider umbrella project





# What we first had to do

- explain what Smart Village means in our vision
- clarify what kind of engagement was expected from the community
- test whether Smart Village can become a real local process
- prepare the ground for a strategy owned by the community



**Then we explored the parts of community life that are often less visible in classical local strategies:**

- community cohesion
- local entrepreneurship
- tourism and recreation
- education
- democratic participation
- communication among local stakeholders
- skills, traditions and mobility

**We wanted a wider conversation than the one usually created by a classical strategy run only by the local authority.**



## We were also testing whether a local group could take ownership

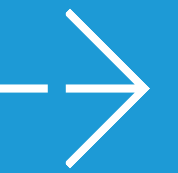
- active people in the community
- people willing to get involved
- people available to cooperate
- a local group able to own the strategy, stay involved and revise it over time



## Our view of the strategy

- not a final document, but a starting point, and a living document
- **The deeper goal was to bring people together often enough to develop a habit of thinking together, planning together and working together.**
- **A village becomes smart not because it buys technology, but because it learns to organise local intelligence: cooperation, participation, prioritisation and shared action.**

- **This shift from document-logic to capacity-logic is central to how we designed the umbrella process too.**



## **The umbrella project**

- The umbrella project turns the pilot into a guided territorial process
- This is not just a grant. It is a staged pathway from activation to planning.
- Communities are expected to lead the local process — the LAG enables it

# Communities are expected to lead the local process — the LAG enables it

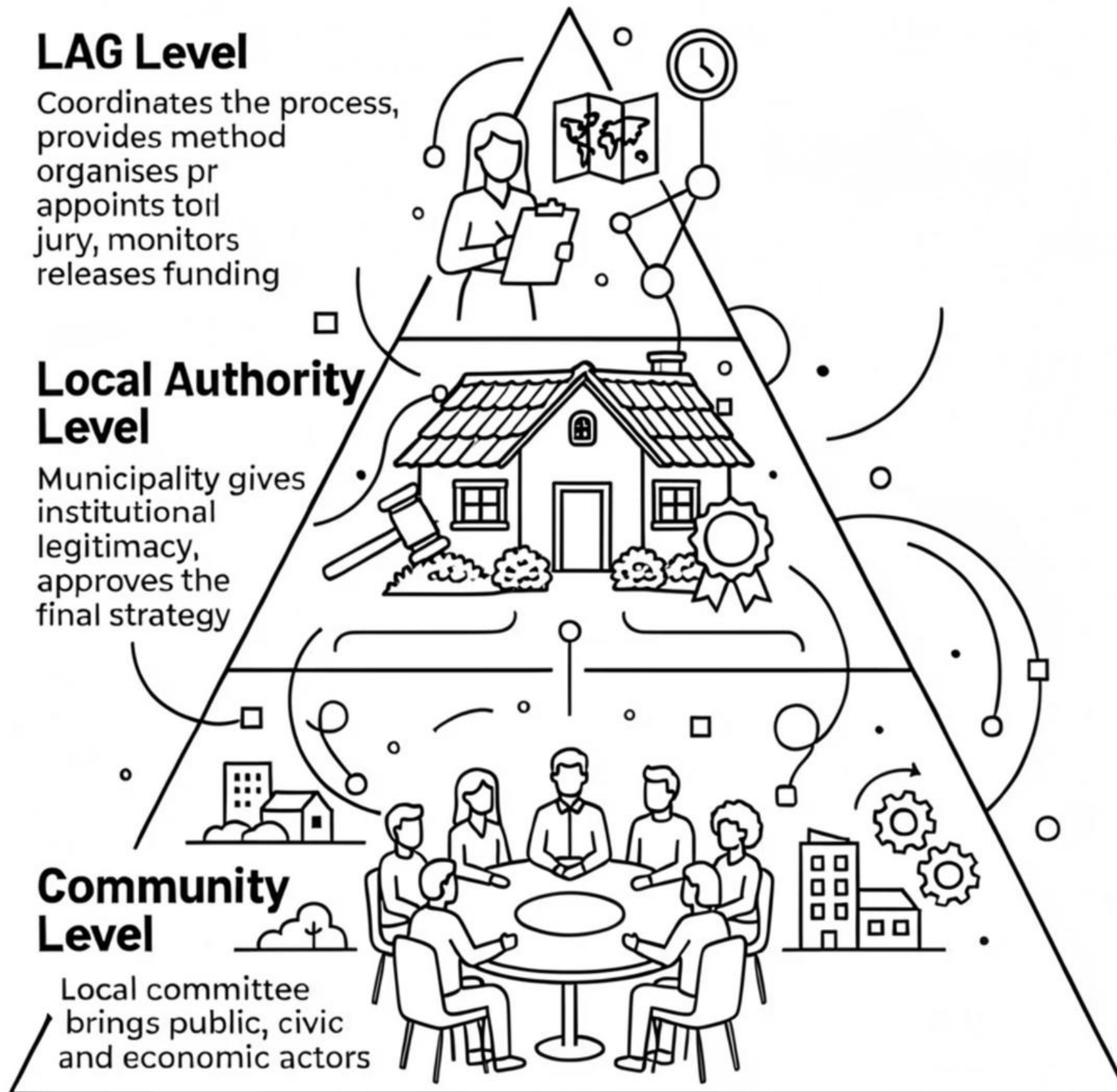
## What communities are expected to do

- build a local strategy committee
- include young people, local authority, entrepreneurs and other local actors
- present a shared vision
- take part in workshops and counselling
- organise public consultations
- analyse needs, identify solutions and prepare the strategy

## What the LAG brings

- Smart Village framework and concept clarification
- selection process and methodology
- local workshops and personalised counselling
- monitoring and staged financial support
- the wider context that makes local coordination possible

# Governance across three levels



## Communit

Ideas, priorities, participation — the community is an active co-author, not a beneficiary.

## Municipalit

Institutional anchor — validates the process and formally approves the final strategy.

## LA

Rules, methodology, coordination, transparency — the connective tissue of the whole process.

# THREE PILLARS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

## **Sustainable Finance**

The Smart Village concept needs dedicated financial support to move beyond one-off projects. The LEADER framework is the ideal vehicle for this

## **Conceptual Clarity**

There is a need for a deep, unified understanding of the concept to move past purely "technology-driven" definitions. This knowledge should be spread by the EU/EC, potentially through Managing Authorities, to ensure quality and consistency.

## **LAG Empowerment**

Local Action Groups must play the lead role in "spreading the word". However, they must be properly equipped with the specific knowledge and training to fully assume and understand this responsibility.

# GOVERNANCE, ACTORS, AND THE DEEPER GOAL

## Local Development Organizations

While not yet widespread in Romania, local development organizations can be effective alternatives for fostering community-driven growth.

## Strategic complementarity

Actions must be complementary to existing local strategies, requiring carefully chosen topics to bridge "soft" innovation with "hard" investments.

## The deeper goal

Beyond the document, the process must bring people together often enough to develop a habit of thinking, planning, and working together.



# Thank You!

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