

Local Development through Collaborative Action: A Study on the Central Dobrogea Local Action Group (GAL-DC) and its Project-Based Associative Framework

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Abstract

In recent years, the concept of local development through collaborative action has gained global prominence. This study focuses on the Central Dobrogea Local Action Group (GAL-DC) in Romania, examining its project-based associative framework. The study involved a questionnaire administered to 177 participants in Central Dobrogea, with data analysis using SPSS. Findings reveal complex patterns of public engagement, with GAL-DC demonstrating extensive influence and positive engagement with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Local Action Groups (LAGs). Residential distribution highlights GAL-DC's wide reach, while variations in political engagement reflect diverse involvement. NGO engagement suggests openness to participation, and sector priorities emphasize the significance of agriculture, the food industry, and commerce for local development.

Key words: local development, collaborative action, associative framework, project-based analysis, Romania

J.E.L. classification: F64, H00, Q50

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of local development through collaborative action has gained traction globally. Drawing inspiration from Annan-Aggrey *et al's* (2022, p.221) work on mobilizing 'communities of practice' for local development and the SDGs, as well as Cigler's (1999, p.88) insights on collaborative organizations, this research aims to uncover GAL-DC's role in fostering sustainable community-driven initiatives. Additionally, Hübel (Anghel), Stan and Tasențe (2023a, p.1103) findings regarding social responsibility and local sustainable development, along with Kusago's (2019, p.197) perspective on community-based collaborative action research, provide valuable perspectives.

This study delves into GAL-DC's project-based approach, aiming to dissect its mechanisms, challenges, and opportunities for local development in Central Dobrogea. By analyzing GAL-DC's collaborative actions, it seeks to offer insights into the effectiveness of such structures in shaping the socio-economic landscape of the region.

2. Literature review

Local development through collaborative action has emerged as a critical approach to addressing complex socio-economic challenges, particularly in the context of regions like Central Dobrogea, Romania. This literature review explores the foundational concepts and relevant studies in this field, shedding light on the significance of collaborative initiatives and associative frameworks in promoting sustainable local development.

Eraydin (2019, p.85) emphasizes the importance of new forms of local governance in the emergence of industrial districts. This underscores the role of collaborative efforts in shaping local development, as industrial districts often rely on coordinated actions among stakeholders. Ferreira *et al* (2023, p.5) extend this perspective, examining collaborative innovation in local authorities and its implications for economic development projects. These studies highlight the fundamental role of collaborative action in fostering local development.

Romania serves as a unique backdrop for local development studies. Herciu *et al* (2023, p.306) delve into the concept of business models for the circular economy, offering insights into frameworks that drive sustainable practices. This resonates with the idea of project-based analysis, as circular economy projects often require collaborative efforts. Munteanu (2021) explores corporate governance's impact on financial reporting, indirectly alluding to the importance of robust frameworks for effective governance, a concept relevant to collaborative initiatives. Aivaz (2021, p.18) studied the interrelationships between infrastructure, medical staff and financial performance in healthcare companies in Constanta County, Romania. Munteanu and Mirea (2023, p.439) provide a glimpse into the understanding of commodity investments in Romania, emphasizing the role of informed decision-making in economic development. Novikova, De Fátima Ferreira and Stryjakiewicz (2020, p.44) analyze local development initiatives in European rural regions, highlighting the potential for social innovation - a key outcome of collaborative actions - in Romania's context. Additionally, Rus (2019; 2020) investigates tax evasion and local public finances, shedding light on fiscal aspects that intersect with local development efforts.

Macedo *et al* (2020, p.2) and Marín-González *et al* (2022, p.2) offer comprehensive insights into sustainability frameworks and cross-sectoral cooperation, important components in collaborative local development projects. These studies highlight the importance of comprehensive approaches that encompass multiple sectors and promote sustainable outcomes. In this regard, Hübel (Anghel), Stan and Tasente (2023b; 2023c; 2023d) delve into the influence of age, educational levels, and gender on socio-economic perceptions, highlighting the importance of demographic factors in local development initiatives. These findings add depth to the understanding of collaborative actions' impacts on diverse segments of society. On the other hand, Stan (2014, p.143) and Stan and Tasente (2023, p.172) explore the role of public-private partnerships and administrative capacity enhancement in urban and regional development. These studies underline the significance of collaborative models in enhancing local governance and infrastructure.

Teilmann (2011, p.2) discusses rural development experiences in Denmark, offering insights into the dynamics of local action groups - an approach akin to GAL-DC - in promoting regional development. Von Schnurbein, Potluka and Mayer (2023, p.319) analyze social innovation in urban development through collaborative processes, providing international perspectives that can inform local initiatives.

The imperative for sustainable development is paramount, shaping the outcomes of projects within the local community. So, Braşoveanu (2013; 2023) focus on environmental protection and legislation's role in sustainable development, addressing vital aspects of local development initiatives related to environmental sustainability. Also, the significant role of the tourism sector in supporting an associative framework through locally implemented projects is unquestionable, as it has the capacity to drive economic growth and facilitate community development. In this regard, Hübel (Anghel) and Condrea (2023a; 2023b) explore the influence of age, residence, and gender on perceptions of sustainable tourism. These studies contribute to the understanding of sustainable tourism as an integral component of local development.

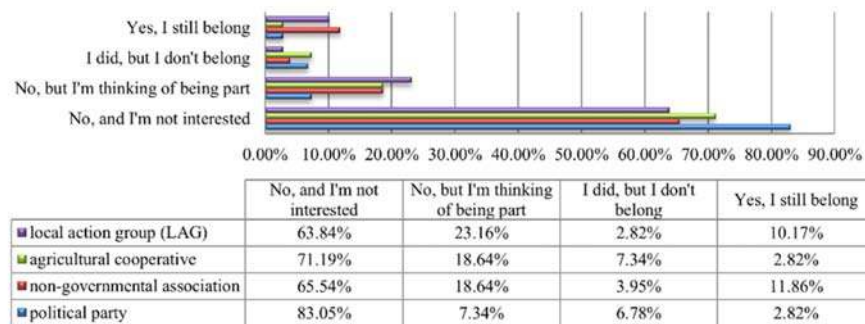
3. Research methodology

The research methodology employed in this study involved the administration of a questionnaire to 177 participants residing in various localities within Central Dobrogea (Casimcea, Ciocărlia, Crucea, Horia, Negru Vodă, Peștera, Rasova, Saligny, Saraiu, Seimeni, Tortoman and other localities). Subsequently, the data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, ensuring a rigorous and systematic approach to data processing and interpretation.

4. Findings

In this section, the study's findings shed light on the complex interactions within different associative structures and the sectoral preferences for local development, offering valuable insights into the collaborative endeavors of the Central Dobrogea Local Action Group (GAL-DC). The survey data shows a complex pattern of public engagement with various associative structures (Figure no. 1). There is a notable disengagement from political parties, with 83.05% of respondents indicating that they are not interested or involved. On the other hand, there is a more favorable inclination towards non-governmental organizations (NGOs), agricultural cooperatives, and Local Action Groups (LAGs). Although the majority of individuals do not express interest in political parties, NGOs and LAGs demonstrate a relatively stronger engagement and potential interest, with 18.64% considering involvement in NGOs and 23.16% in LAGs. Active participation remains modest across all structures, with the highest in NGOs (11.86%) and LAGs (10.17%). The data suggests that the public prefers organizations that are directly involved in addressing specific community issues or have a clear, localized impact. On the other hand, there is a general skepticism or disinterest towards political party involvement. The public stance is nuanced, and there are opportunities to enhance engagement in associative structures, particularly those with a strong community focus or transparent, impactful initiatives.

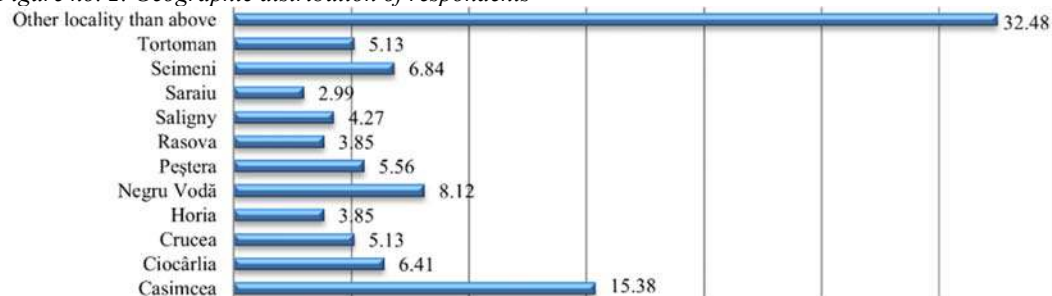
Figure no. 1. Type of association structure to which respondents belong



Source: Authors' work

The dataset outlines the residential distribution of participants in a study (Figure no. 2).

Figure no. 2. Geographic distribution of respondents

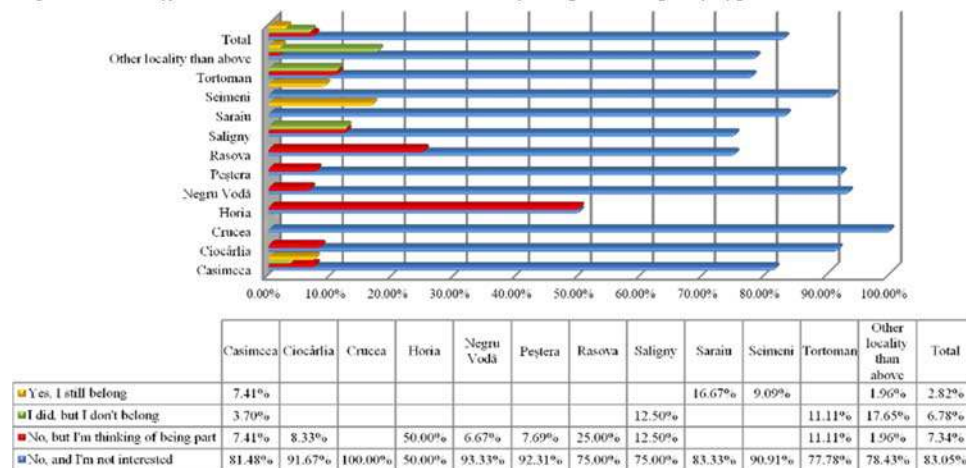


Source: Authors' work

The broad spread across various localities, with a notable 32.48% residing outside the listed towns, suggests GAL-DC's reach and influence extend across a wide area. While Casimcea shows the highest specific participation rate (15.38%), indicating either a higher level of engagement or a larger population, the overall distribution denotes diverse involvement from numerous localities within Central Dobrogea. This diversity in respondents' locations underscores the region-wide relevance of GAL-DC's initiatives and possibly reflects the varied impact of its developmental projects across different communities.

In response to the query: "Have you ever been or are you currently a member of an associative structure such as a political party?" the aggregated data reflects a pronounced disengagement with political parties across various localities in the context of the Central Dobrogea Local Action Group (GAL-DC), with 83.05% of respondents indicating no interest or involvement (Figure no. 3). Notable variations among localities suggest a spectrum of political disengagement and engagement, with areas like Crucea showing complete disinterest (100%) and others like Horia displaying a balanced consideration of political involvement (50% considering involvement). Although a general trend of disinterest prevails, instances of active consideration and involvement, as seen in localities such as Saraiu and Seimeni, underscore a nuanced, locality-specific political engagement landscape within the Central Dobrogea region. The low engagement with political parties in Central Dobrogea may be due to distrust in politics, a preference for local development initiatives, varying levels of political awareness, economic concerns, and differences in community demographics and history.

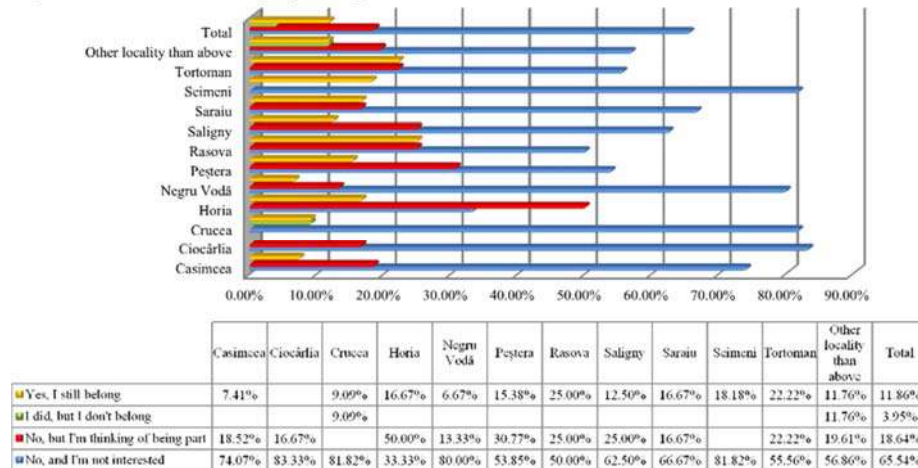
Figure no. 3. Affiliation to associative structures of the political party type



Source: Authors' work

The results from the Chi-Square analysis indicate a statistically significant association between the variables tested, as evidenced by the Pearson Chi-Square test (p-value = 0.027). However, the Likelihood Ratio and Linear-by-Linear Association tests do not show statistical significance at the 0.05 level (p-values of 0.077 and 0.148, respectively). This suggests that while there is some evidence of an association between the variables, the nature of this association might not be linear, and caution should be exercised in interpreting the relationship due to the mixed significance levels across different test results.

Figure no. 4. Membership of non-governmental association structures



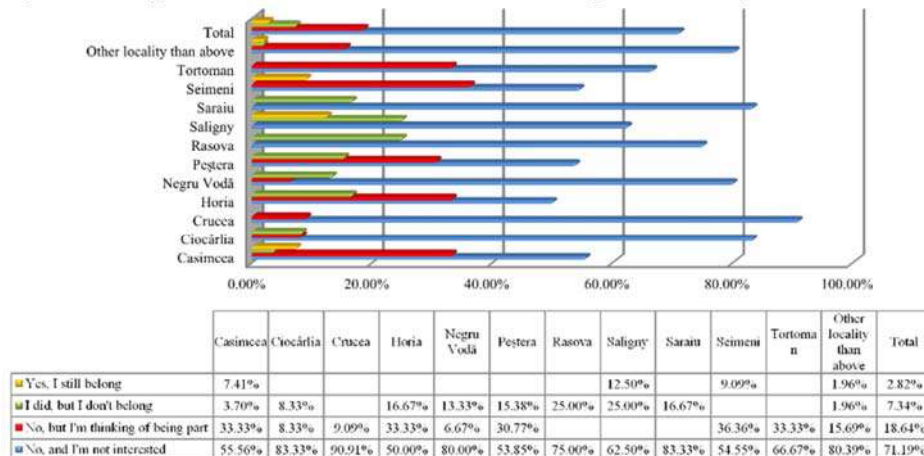
Source: Authors' work

In answer to the question "Do you belong, or have you ever belonged to a non-governmental association?" the data reveal a predominant disengagement (65.54% not involved) across the Central Dobrogea region (Figure no. 4). However, a considerable proportion is considering involvement (18.64%), and a notable fraction is actively involved (11.86%). This indicates a nuanced landscape of NGO engagement, with variations across localities reflecting differing levels of interest, potential openness to engagement, and active participation in NGO activities within the community.

The results from the Chi-Square test and associated measures, based on 177 cases, reveal predominantly non-significant associations between the examined categorical variables. Specifically, both the Pearson Chi-Square test and the Likelihood Ratio indicate no significant relationship. However, the Linear-by-Linear Association suggests a possible linear trend between the variables, although this finding stands as an exception in the context of the overall non-significant results.

In answer to the question "Do you belong, or have you ever belonged to an associative structure such as an agricultural cooperative?" the data indicates a predominant disinterest (71.19% not involved) across the Central Dobrogea region (Figure no. 5). However, there's a substantial consideration for participation (18.64%), and a smaller fraction is actively involved (2.82%). This pattern suggests a nuanced landscape, with certain localities showing potential openness to engagement in agricultural cooperatives as part of local development initiatives.

Figure no. 5. Affiliation to associative structures such as agricultural cooperatives

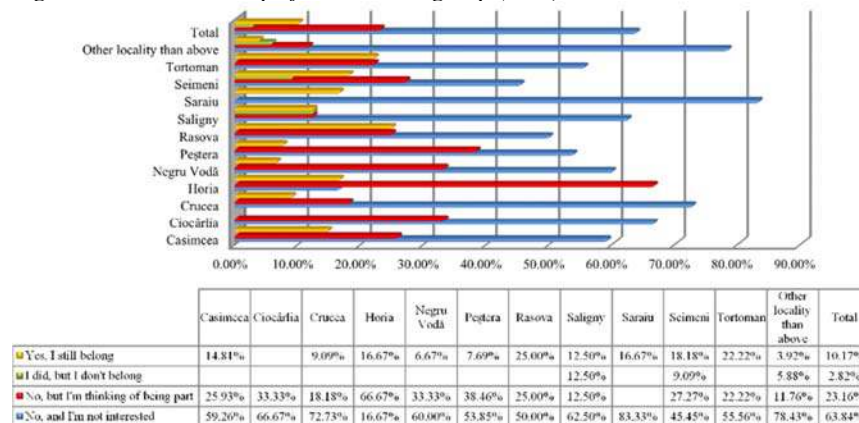


Source: Authors' work

The Chi-Square test results, comprising the Pearson Chi-Square, Likelihood Ratio, and Linear-by-Linear Association, indicate no statistically significant association between the categorical variables studied, given the p-values of 0.134, 0.078, and 0.242 respectively. These results suggest that the observed distributions are consistent with the null hypothesis of independence among the categories, albeit the Likelihood Ratio approaches the conventional significance threshold, suggesting a potential for further investigation.

Regarding the question of whether the respondent belongs or has ever belonged to an associative structure, such as a Local Action Group (LAG), overall, a significant proportion of respondents (63.84%) indicate no interest or involvement with LAGs, suggesting a degree of disengagement (Figure no. 6).

Figure no. 6. Membership of local action group (LAG) structures



Source: Authors' work

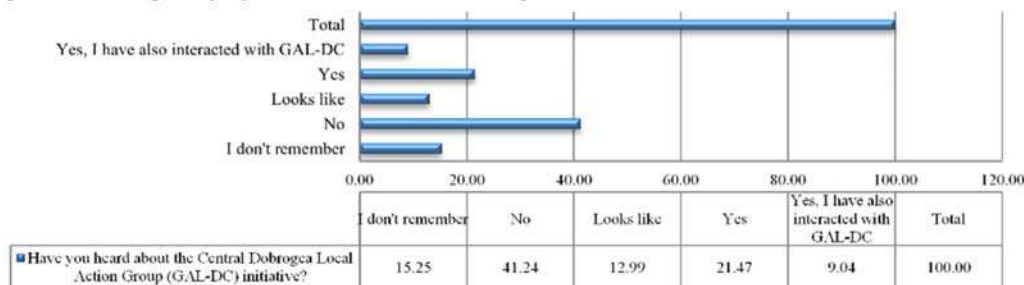
However, there is a substantial inclination towards considering involvement (23.16%), and a modest fraction is actively involved (10.17%). This pattern illustrates a nuanced landscape of engagement with LAGs: localities like Horia and Rasova show a notable openness towards LAGs, with high percentages of residents considering involvement (66.67% and 25.00%, respectively) and a fair level of active participation (16.67% and 25.00%, respectively). Conversely, localities such as Saraiu and 'other localities' exhibit higher levels of disinterest, yet still maintain a segment of the population that is actively involved (16.67% and 3.92%, respectively). This indicates a varying degree of awareness, interest, and active engagement with LAGs across the region, reflecting the diverse perceptions and potential of LAGs in fostering local development through collaborative action.

The results from the Chi-Square analysis, including the Pearson Chi-Square test, Likelihood Ratio, and Linear-by-Linear Association, indicate no statistically significant association between the examined categorical variables, given the p-values of 0.370, 0.269, and 0.431 respectively. These outcomes suggest that the observed distributions align with the null hypothesis, proposing independence among the categories. The data does not provide sufficient evidence to suggest a significant relationship or a linear trend between the variables based on the provided sample of 177 cases.

The level of awareness regarding the GAL Dobrogea Centru initiative indicates that a significant portion of respondents (41.24%) are not aware of GAL-DC, suggesting a potential gap in outreach or public awareness of the initiative. About 15.25% cannot recall hearing about GAL-DC, which might indicate either infrequent exposure or a lack of impactful communication about the group's activities. A modest fraction (12.99%) vaguely recognizes GAL-DC, implying some level of awareness but possibly limited understanding of the group's objectives or functions. A proportion of respondents (21.47%) affirm familiarity with GAL-DC, reflecting a degree of successful outreach and impact recognition. Notably, 9.04% have interacted with GAL-DC, indicating active engagement and possible direct involvement or benefit from the group's

initiatives. Overall, the data suggests (Figure no.7) varied levels of public awareness and engagement with GAL-DC, highlighting the importance of enhancing visibility, communication, and community involvement to bolster the group's role in local development.

Figure no. 7. Degree of information about the Dobrogea Centru LAG initiative

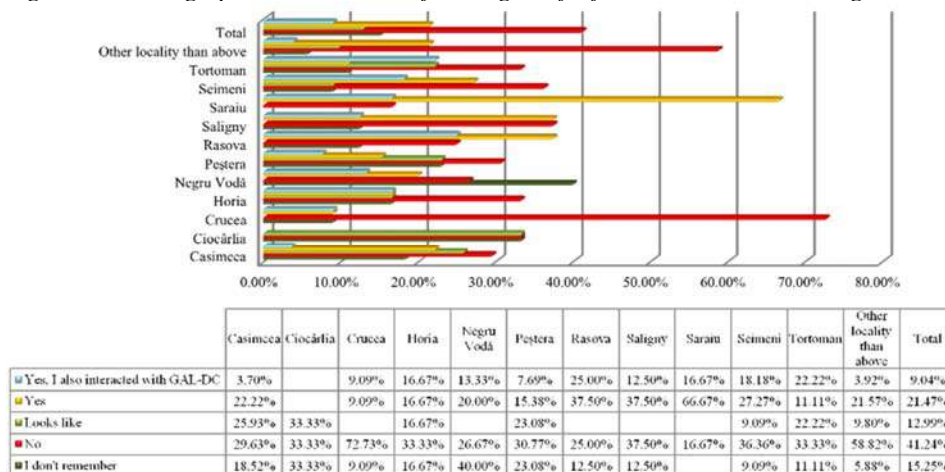


Source: Authors' work

The data regarding the GAL Dobrogea Centru initiative reflects a varied geographical distribution of awareness and engagement (Figure no. 8). Overall, there's a noticeable lack of awareness or recall (15.25% cannot recall, 41.24% unaware), suggesting challenges in the initiative's outreach or communication. However, a segment of the population exhibits vague recognition (12.99%), while a more informed group acknowledges the initiative (21.47%). Notably, a smaller yet significant fraction of respondents (9.04%) reports active interaction with GAL-DC, indicating specific regions of active participation.

Thus, the data on the GAL-DC initiative reveals a mixed level of awareness and engagement across different localities. Notably, certain areas demonstrate significant data points: Crucea shows a high percentage of unawareness (72.73%), yet it also records notable levels of confirmed awareness and interaction (9.09% each), indicating polarized levels of engagement. Horia displays an evenly distributed awareness spectrum, with each category (except 'I don't remember') capturing 16.67%, suggesting diverse levels of community engagement. Rasova and Saligny have higher rates of confirmed awareness (37.50%) and interaction (25.00% in Rasova and 12.50% in Saligny), pointing towards effective engagement in these localities. Saraiu stands out with a significant majority acknowledging the initiative (66.67%), reflecting potentially successful outreach or impactful activities there. These patterns underscore the initiative's uneven penetration across localities, pointing to the need for targeted strategies to enhance visibility, awareness, and involvement in the GAL Dobrogea Centru's activities.

Figure no. 8. Geographical distribution of the degree of information on GAL Dobrogea Centru



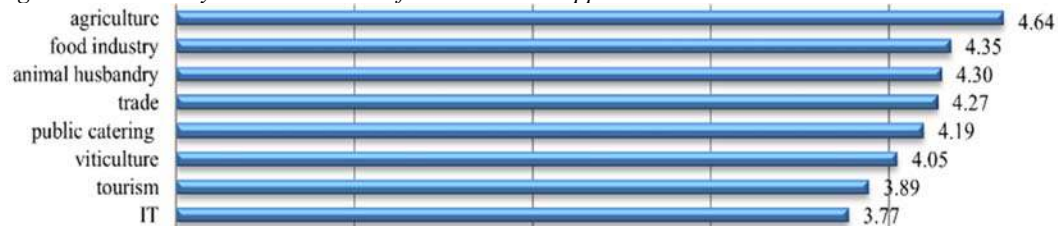
Source: Authors' work

The analysis of the data reveals significant results: the calculated Pearson Chi-Square value is 61.523 with 44 degrees of freedom, and the two-sided asymptotic significance is 0.041. This indicates a statistically significant association between the variables being studied. Likelihood Ratio yields a value of 65.084 with 44 degrees of freedom, and the two-sided asymptotic significance is 0.021. This finding also points to a statistically significant relationship between the variables. The linear-by-linear association test produces a statistic of 1.667 with 1 degree of freedom, and the asymptotic significance is 0.197. Although this statistic does not reach conventional statistical significance levels (typically set at 0.05), it provides insights into linear trends within the data. In summary, the data analysis indicates a statistically significant association between the variables, as confirmed by both the Pearson Chi-Square and Likelihood Ratio statistics. Additionally, the linear-by-linear association test contributes to understanding linear trends within the data.

In Figure no. 9, the graphical representation of the analysis of data on sectors that a community-based association should prioritize for support through locally implemented projects reveals valuable insights. According to the respondents, agriculture emerges as the most critical sector, with a substantial rating of 4.64 on a scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). This underscores the fundamental role of agriculture in the community's development.

Following closely, the food industry is deemed highly significant, receiving a rating of 4.35. Commerce also appears prominently, with a rating of 4.27, indicating its importance for local development. Other sectors such as animal husbandry (4.30), public catering (4.19), viticulture (4.05), and tourism (3.89) also receive notable ratings, emphasizing their relevance to the community's well-being. However, it's worth noting that information technology (IT) falls slightly behind, garnering a rating of 3.77. While still considered important, this suggests that the community places relatively less emphasis on IT compared to the aforementioned sectors.

Figure no. 9. Priority economic sectors for associative support at local level



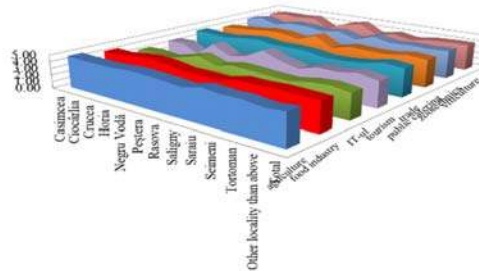
Source: Authors' work

In summary, the community's strong emphasis on supporting sectors like agriculture, the food industry, viticulture, and animal husbandry through local projects can be attributed to several key factors. Firstly, the region's economic structure plays a significant role. It is possible that the area has a historical reliance on these sectors for income and sustenance. Additionally, these sectors may offer opportunities for employment and income generation, making them essential for local economic development. Secondly, the specific needs and resources of the community likely influence these preferences. For instance, if the region has fertile land suitable for agriculture and viticulture, it makes sense that these sectors would be prioritized due to their potential for growth and profitability. Cultural significance could also be a factor, with certain sectors being deeply rooted in the community's traditions and heritage. This cultural attachment might drive support for projects related to viticulture and food production. Furthermore, economic viability is essential. Sectors like trade and public catering are likely seen as economically sustainable and capable of generating revenue, which could benefit the community. Local expertise and knowledge in these sectors may also be abundant, making it more feasible to implement successful projects. Lastly, environmental considerations cannot be overlooked. Agriculture and viticulture might align with the region's environmental conditions and sustainability goals, making them attractive choices for community development projects.

Therefore, the community's preferences reflect a complex interplay of economic, cultural, environmental, and practical factors that drive their prioritization of certain sectors for local development initiatives.

The data analysis by Figure no. 10 reveals varying economic priorities across different localities within the region. These variations indicate that the importance of specific economic sectors for local development projects differs from one locality to another. Comparing the localities with the highest and lowest scores for each economic sector sheds light on these differences.

Figure no. 10. Geographical distribution of economic sectors selected for associative support at local level



	Casimcea	Ciocărlia	Crucea	Horia	Negru Vodă	Peștera	Rasova	Saligny	Saraiu	Seimeni	Tortoman	Other locality than above	Total
■ agriculture	4.77	4.67	4.64	4.67	4.87	4.77	4.63	4.38	5.00	4.73	4.78	4.43	4.64
■ food industry	4.27	4.17	4.55	4.67	4.47	4.00	4.00	3.88	4.50	4.45	4.56	4.45	4.35
■ IT-ul	3.27	3.33	3.00	3.67	4.40	3.46	4.00	3.88	3.67	3.55	4.00	4.18	3.77
■ tourism	3.62	3.67	2.36	4.50	3.13	3.62	5.00	4.00	3.33	4.09	4.00	4.43	3.89
■ trade	4.23	4.08	4.00	4.33	4.60	4.23	4.25	4.13	3.67	3.73	4.00	4.57	4.27
■ public catering	3.81	4.00	4.18	4.50	4.47	4.00	5.00	3.50	4.17	4.00	4.00	4.43	4.19
■ zootechnics	4.31	4.83	4.09	4.67	4.60	4.23	4.63	3.75	4.67	4.09	4.22	4.14	4.30
■ viticulture	4.23	4.50	4.36	4.67	3.20	4.31	4.88	3.38	4.00	3.45	3.89	4.02	4.05

Source: Authors' work

In terms of agriculture, Saraiu stands out with the highest score of 5.00, indicating a strong emphasis on farming, possibly due to favorable agricultural conditions and historical traditions. In contrast, Crucea, while still valuing agriculture highly with a score of 4.64, may have other economic factors slightly reducing its priority.

The food industry receives the highest importance score of 4.47 in Negru Vodă, possibly influenced by local food processing businesses or regional culinary traditions. Conversely, Saligny scores the lowest at 3.88, suggesting a smaller presence of food-related industries.

Rasova assigns a perfect score of 5.00 to the IT sector, possibly due to the presence of tech-related businesses or a local focus on technology-driven development. On the other hand, Saligny scores the lowest at 3.88, indicating less emphasis on IT, possibly due to different economic priorities. Rasova also places the highest importance on tourism with a score of 5.00, suggesting attractive natural or cultural landmarks. In contrast, Saligny, while still valuing tourism (4.00), may not have as many tourism-related resources or attractions.

In terms of commerce, Negru Vodă assigns a high score of 4.60, possibly due to a strong local business community or commercial activity. Horia, although still valuing commerce (4.33), may have fewer commercial enterprises.

Saligny attributes relatively higher importance to food service (4.13), possibly due to a thriving restaurant or catering industry. Tortoman, while still valuing food service (4.00), may have a slightly smaller food service sector.

Rasova scores the highest for animal husbandry (4.63), likely related to local farming practices or livestock production. Horia values animal husbandry but scores lower at 3.73, possibly indicating a smaller agricultural focus.

In summary, the data underscores the diversity in economic sector preferences for local development projects across the region. These variations may be influenced by local resources, economic structures, and community needs. Tailoring development initiatives to align with these preferences can lead to more effective and community-driven outcomes.

The survey data reveals a complex scenario of public engagement with different associative structures, with notable disengagement from political parties and a more favorable inclination towards non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Local Action Groups (LAGs). Residential

distribution highlights GAL-DC's wide-reaching influence across diverse localities, and variations in political party engagement reflect a spectrum of political engagement within the region. NGO engagement presents a nuanced landscape with potential openness to involvement and active participation. Sector priorities underscore the significance of agriculture, the food industry, and commerce for local development, influenced by local factors.

5. Conclusions

The concept of local development through collaborative action has gained global prominence. The study delves into GAL-DC's project-based approach, dissecting its mechanisms, challenges, and opportunities for local development. It offers insights into the effectiveness of such structures in shaping the socio-economic landscape of the region.

Survey data reveals complex public engagement patterns with different associative structures, highlighting GAL-DC's wide-reaching influence. Notable disengagement from political parties contrasts with a favorable inclination towards non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Local Action Groups (LAGs). Residential distribution reflects GAL-DC's extensive influence, while variations in political party engagement underscore a spectrum of political involvement. The diverse field of NGO engagement suggests a potential openness to engagement. Sector priorities underscore the significance of agriculture, the food industry, and commerce for local development, influenced by local factors.

In summary, project-based associative framework demonstrates the potential for collaborative action to drive sustainable community initiatives within the local socio-economic context.

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