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Romania Territorial Impact Assessment (P172820)

Output 1.b

**Report with practical recommendations for
improving strategic documents, implementation
mechanisms and their associated actions plans
(based on the area under study)**

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CLLD	Community Led Local Development
CPR	Common Provisions Regulations
DDBR	Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
IB	Intermediary Bodies
IDA ITI DD	Inter-community Development Association for implementation of ITI Danube Delta
ITI	Integrated Territorial Investment
IUDS	Integrated Urban Development Strategies
LAG	Local Action Group
LDS	Local Development Strategy
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MA	Managing Authority
MPWDA	Ministry of Public Works, Development and Administration
POCA	Operational Program for Administrative Capacity
POCU	Operational Program for Human Capital
RDA	Regional Development Agency
RDP	Regional Development Plan
ROP	Regional Operational Programme
SIDDD	Danube Delta Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy (RO: <i>Strategia Integrată de Dezvoltare Durabilă a Deltei Dunării</i>)
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the EU
WB	World Bank

Executive summary

The World Bank is providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Public Works, Development and Public Administration (MPWDA) broadly on the topic of Territorial Impact Assessments as it relates to public investment. As part of this project the World Bank has conducted a review of the Strategy for Integrated Sustainable Development in Danube Delta (SIDDDD) as well as six local strategies in the same geographical area. As part of technical assistance provided to MPWDA to elaborate the Urban Policy the World Bank also reviewed 183 local strategies from towns and cities with more than 10,000 residents. This report presents succinct, high level findings and recommendations from the various analyses.

Local development strategies are development planning tools that must respond to the local development needs, ensuring a long-term continuity of the development vision. They should consider the regional/national/European context, be aligned with relevant national and regional strategies, and accordingly reflect the national and regional priorities. Strategies help government entities and other responsible role players to acknowledge the main problems of the community, formulate priorities for the future, identify investments needed, as well as access and allocate funding for their implementation.

During the programming period 2014-2020, the local development strategies became the very heart of EU policies. The locally led approach stemmed from the formalization of territorial cohesion as an objective for the European Union (EU), according to the updated Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), and the subsequent regulations for European Structural and Investment Funds approved in 2013. Three types of local strategic plans or tools have been entrenched through EU programs, namely Community Led Local Development (CLLD), Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDS). These have also found traction in Romania, with the Danube Delta being the only ITI during the 2014 -2020 programming period. The local development strategies are expected to play an even greater role during the programming period 2021-2027. One of the five overall policy objectives set at EU level is to have a “Europe closer to citizens, by supporting locally-led development strategies and sustainable *urban development across the EU*” (Policy Objective 5, CPR Art. 4(1)(e) and ERDF/CF Art. 8-9)

A number of key findings are drawn from the various reviews of strategies conducted; these include:

- a) Strategies seem to be overwhelmingly motivated by and oriented towards accessing EU Funds;
- b) There are often large volumes of work around descriptions of local issues included in strategies, with little focus on interpreting these towards a coherent strategy, this also results in a lack of realistic visions and objective setting;
- c) Project lists tend to be long and often more like wish lists (disconnected from actual needs), with a notable absence of realistic budgets being attached to these lists. Where prioritization has taken place there is often little clarity around the actual process adopted.
- d) While many strategies mention participatory processes, these tend to only mean a strategy was published for comment on a local website, often resulting in no comments being received;
- e) There is a generally lack of good monitoring & evaluation (M&E) practices and a disconnect due to lack of clear division of responsibilities to move from strategy to project implementation,
- f) Capacity to develop quality development strategies is mainly lacking in smaller and medium municipalities;

Of greatest concern is the absence of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems, and even where M&E is included as an activity in strategies, its actual implementation needs improvement. Without an adequate, well-designed, and enforced M&E system with all necessary indicators, tools, and

processes in place, it is quite difficult to measure the implementation of the strategies and assess whether the targets were achieved or not. The main recommendations are summarized below:

This report includes various recommendations, which could be broadly divided into those for improving the practice of local strategy making and those recommendations around implementation. Included below are the recommendations extracted specifically from the review of strategies in relation to the Danube Delta:

Strategic Planning Process

- The local strategies should also focus on strategic planning, integrity, standardization, capacity building and human resources development rather than infrastructure development;
- The local strategies should be developed in direct dialogue with their local stakeholders and approved under a public debate;
- The local strategies should integrate an adapt the sectorial strategies, at their local specificity;
- The local strategies should be operationalized by strategic planning and operational plans with budgets and performance indicators at all levels (strategic objectives, specific objectives, actions/measures, activities/projects). Efficiency indicators should be part of the operational/strategic plans; and
- The local strategies should include international/national best practices in their territory at all levels (public administration, private business, public/private services, etc.).

Implementation

- In the local strategies, the responsibilities to achieve the outcomes of the strategies, should also be agreed and assigned; and
- The local strategies should be monitored and evaluated, and their M&E reports should be presented yearly to the public.

When considering the review of IUDS and local strategies in the Danube Delta together, recommendations can be summarized in line with the 6-stages expected in good strategy making (see table below). Stages 1 – 4 relates directly to the strategic planning process while stages 5 – 6 relates more towards implementation (although M&E and implementation arrangements are also considered as part of the overall strategic planning process)

Stage	Recommendations
1. Defining a structure of IUDS and present situation analysis (context, methodology and analysis of the present situation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved strategy design Apply an improved strategy design, meeting at least some minimum requirements. Each plan should have a clear strategic development vision, with explicit mission, strategic and specific objectives, targets supported by feasible projects and activities. The document should be able to point where the community is at present, highlight on the existing challenges, and where it should be and what should achieve in the future. • Appropriate Use of strategic planning tools The evaluation of the internal and external environment should be performed by using strategic planning tools. Some useful tools that could be used include PESTEL, SWOT, functional analysis, and initiative matrix.
2. Formulating strategic priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting strategic priorities informed by situational analysis Stakeholders should set a clear vision and realistic strategic objectives, informed by the situational analysis, and linked to the real potential

Stage	Recommendations
	for development of a locality should be set. See also participatory approaches (stage 4)
3. Identifying a project portfolio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining and then prioritizing interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building on the use of the tools above, extract and define local initiatives/measures in order to accomplish the specific and strategic objectives. A much clearer link between choice of interventions (mostly as projects) and the issues these address or goals they assist in pursuing is required. - Next a robust prioritization process of these projects, based on a prioritization methodology, is required. • Include a realistic budget Estimate a realistic budget for each level of the strategic planning, such as strategic objective, specific objective, measure, initiative, and project.
4. Conceiving participatory approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize participatory approaches in Strategy making Local authorities could move beyond publishing draft strategies for comments and involve local communities and key role players in the vision, objective setting and even prioritization process. These could involve public meetings, focus group discussions, establishing working groups, using online platforms (i.e. Facebook), etc.
5. Developing monitoring & evaluation frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A genuine M&E system and performance indicators All strategies should have genuine M&E systems and performance indicators at all levels of the strategic planning as to conduct impact assessments of programs/projects. This process should have a series of indicators, such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) impact indicators for strategic objectives, ii) outcome indicators for specific objectives, iii) output indicators for projects/initiatives/measures, and input indicators for projects and activities, in addition to efficiency indicators.
6. Setting implementation mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic plan monitoring The strategic plans should be monitored and revised at least once a year and evaluate every four years provided no important changes in the internal and external environment have occurred during this period. • Publish the result The strategic plan and the annual monitoring and evaluation reports should be published and made available to the respective community to ensure that local residents and stakeholders are informed on the progress. At the same time, they should be able to provide feedback and make suggestions and observations on the plans.

Further to the recommendations applicable to actual strategy making and implementation, a number of areas of potential support from national government (MPWDA and others) to local authorities have been identified. The key areas of required support are as follows:

- Creating an enabling and supportive regulatory environment for interjurisdictional strategy formulation and implementation (i.e. across administrative boundaries);
- Providing capacity building for authorities and key role players at local level in order to improve strategic planning practices at local level, with a strong need for capacity around project identification and prioritization.

These recommendations are relatively simple and build on basic best practices in the field of strategic planning, but a significant capacity building effort at local level (of administrations, stakeholders and beneficiaries) would be required to improve the practice. The reviews conducted points particularly to capacity challenges in smaller localities. Further, while some evidence of stakeholder engagement in the strategy making process is emerging, this is an area where a stronger focus could yield significant results in ensuring that a) local strategies truly reflect the local needs and b) that those role players responsible for implementation are held to account for results.

1 Introduction

The Ministry of Public Works, Development and Public Administration (MPWDA) has requested technical assistance from the World Bank to provide support on components of a larger project to develop an evidence-based decision-making tool for assessing potential territorial impact of public policies and investment programs. As first output under a Reimbursable Advisory Agreement (RAS), the World Bank conducted a review of a local strategy (the Strategy for Integrated Sustainable Development in Danube Delta (SIDDDD)) in terms of relevant implementation mechanisms and action plans. The review (presented as Output 1a under the agreement) included a quantitative and qualitative assessment and a survey of beneficiaries of funding under the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) mechanism for the Danube Delta. This report represents output 1b under the agreement and is focused on providing recommendations for improving strategic document(s), implementation mechanisms and their associated actions plan, based on the area under study.

While the SIDDDD's implementation mechanisms (ITI and the IDA ITI DD) are at this stage unique in Romania, the area still offers valuable lessons for other localities as well as future ITI designs. The ITI delivery mechanism was set up to ensure a streamlined disbursement of European Funds in accordance with the objectives outlined by the Strategy using an integrated approach. The Association (ITI IDA DD) was established to bring together key institutions and administrative bodies relevant in the Danube Delta region and to manage the collection of projects, to promote the funding opportunities and to facilitate the access to European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to achieve maximum development in the region. Taken together, the strategy, the ITI, and the IDA ITI in the Danube Delta region laid the foundation of an integrated regional development program – the first of its kind in Romania.

Local development strategies are key documents aimed at ensuring a coherent vision of the development of a locality, reflected as such into a list of proposed projects, prioritized accordingly, and implemented through specific funding sources that have been pre-identified. These are development planning tools that must respond to the local development needs, ensuring a long-term continuity of the development vision. They should consider the regional/national/European context, be aligned with relevant national and regional strategies, and reflect accordingly the national and regional priorities. Strategies help government entities and other responsible role players to acknowledge the main problems of the community, formulate priorities for future, identify investments needed, access and allocated funding to implement these.

The World Bank is also providing MPWDA with technical assistance in the elaboration of the Urban Policy for Romania. This project (being prepared by the same World Bank team) includes a review of the legislative, regulatory and strategic landscape for towns and cities. One of the studies recently completed is a review of Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDS) and other local strategies of towns and cities (a total of 183 strategies were collected and reviewed). The study makes several findings and recommendations relating to local urban strategies. A summary of these are included here and considered jointly with the review of the SIDDDD and a set of 6 strategies from the area covered by the Danube Delta ITI.

This report consolidates a number of lessons learned and recommendations aimed at improving the practice of local development strategies. The first section defines local development and the use of local development strategies in the EU environment in the context of recent programming periods. The focus then turns to how local strategic planning has evolved and is currently applied in Romania, including a section focusing on Integrated Urban Development Strategies. It provides a summary of the strategies reviewed as part of the SIDDDD evaluation and recommendations flowing from that process. Finally, key high-level findings and recommendations for improved local strategy making and implementation is are presented.

2 Local strategies in the EU

2.1 Defining Local Development

At the EU level, local development is seen as a process that should bring added value in four areas, namely: i) employing new patterns of development by addressing regional development issues; ii) improving governance; iii) contributing to EU cohesion policy, territorial integration and improving financial mechanisms; and iv) promoting inter-territorial cooperation. Local development can bring together economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions, in addition to innovation across these aspects. It is a method to improve quality of life, support empowerment of ordinary people, develop /preserve local assets, overcome market failures, strengthen cohesion, and deliver grass-root development projects.

After 2013, the EU envisioned that each region in every Member State should have a dedicated local development axis within all regional development programs, targeting, on the one hand, social and economic urban development, and on the other, local economic development in small and medium sized towns and their fringes, rather than focusing on rural-urban relationships.¹ EU interventions in local development within the framework of the cohesion policy take into consideration a few aspects. First, they target ownership and visibility as to increase support to EU policies from citizens by giving more prominence to grassroots projects, improve effectiveness by unlocking solutions for challenges in targeting EU funds to cross-sectoral/ cross-sectorial issues through local factors. Second, they improve capacity at the local level by building institutional and management capacities, teach local development methods and improve governance, in addition to social innovation as to make national/regional decision-makers adopt innovative approaches. Finally, local development interventions put forward stable financial resources in the medium/long-term to allow communities access local funds and ease the pressure and improve territorial cohesion by allow more effective targeting of EU funds to where they are the most needed at the local level.

To this end, local development is a dynamic process with inputs, outputs and outcomes. The inputs would include the area of development (community), the stakeholders involved (civil society), and methods employed (partnerships). Outputs would be the economic results (economic structures/new companies) and sectors (agriculture), living conditions (energy savings), and human resources (jobs). Finally, outcomes are economic and social development (increase of GDP), territorial cohesion (comparable living conditions achieved in traditional ways), democracy by empowering people and improving institutional capacities, and enhance policy development and governance.

2.2 EU support to Local Development Strategies

During the programming period 2014-2020, the local development strategies became the very heart of EU policies. The locally led approach stemmed from the formalization of territorial cohesion as an objective for the EU, according to the updated Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), and the subsequent regulations for European Structural and Investment Funds approved in 2013. The role of local institutions in addressing the specific local needs was further emphasized in the preamble of the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR):

“Territorial cohesion has been added to the goals of economic and social cohesion by the TFEU, and it is necessary to address the role of cities, functional geographies and sub-regional areas facing specific geographical or demographic problems. To this end, and to better mobilize potential at a local level, it is necessary to strengthen and facilitate community-led local development by laying down common rules and ensuring close coordination for all relevant ESI Funds. Community-led local development should take into account local needs and potential, as well as relevant socio-cultural characteristics.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/consultation/terco/cp_support_local_dev_en.pdf

Responsibility for the design and implementation of community-led local development strategies should be given to local action groups representing the interests of the community, as an essential principle. The detailed arrangements concerning the definition of the area and population covered by the community-led local development strategies should be set out in the relevant programmes in accordance with the Fund-specific rules". (Regulation EU No 1303/2013, 17 December 2013)

For this purpose (i.e. to achieve the territorial cohesion objective), the CPR introduced two integrating tools that can be used to implement territorial strategies on the ground. These link the thematic objectives identified in the Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes, with the territorial dimension, and are: (1) Community Led Local Development (CLLD) (Article 32-35 of the CRP), a specific tool for use at sub-regional level, based on the LEADER experience; and (2) Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) (Article 36 of the CRP), a tool that allows bundling the funding from several priority axes of one or more Operational Programmes, in any geographical area with similar territorial features.

In addition, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Regulation made integrated urban development a compulsory feature of the ESIF. Urban areas were directly targeted by several of the ERDF investment priorities, which triggered greater opportunities for sustainable urban mobility, regeneration of deprived communities and improved research and innovation capacity. In each EU Member State, a minimum of 5% of the ERDF was earmarked for integrated sustainable urban development, and EUR 371 million was set aside for innovative actions in the field of Sustainable Urban Development over the seven-year programming period.

"Within the framework of sustainable urban development, it is considered necessary to support integrated actions to tackle the economic, environmental, climate, demographic and social challenges affecting urban areas, including functional urban areas, while taking into account the need to promote urban-rural linkages. The principles for selecting the urban areas where integrated actions for sustainable urban development are to be implemented, and the indicative amounts for those actions, should be set out in the Partnership Agreement with a minimum of 5 % of the ERDF resources allocated at national level for that purpose"(Regulation EU No 1301/2013, 17 December 2013).

The local development strategies are expected to play an even greater role during the programming period 2021-2027. One of the five overall policy objectives set at EU level is to have a "Europe closer to citizens, by supporting locally-led development strategies and sustainable urban development across the EU" (Policy Objective 5, CPR Art. 4(1)(e) and ERDF/CF Art. 8-9). Choosing a single dedicated policy objective means fewer specific objectives and simplicity in using indicators. Territorial tools used under Policy Objective 5 can combine activities financed under all other policy objectives – enabling a genuinely multi-sectorial integrated approach tailored to the local context.

The existing programming and implementation structures can be continued, including the Community Led Local Development (CLLD) and Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) established in 2014-2020. However, the CPR introduces a simplified approach to CLLD (with the possibility of naming a lead fund and applying only the rules of that fund) and harmonizes the approach to the territorial tools (with a defined minimum set of requirements for territorial strategies), including the existing ITI.

"To strengthen the integrated territorial development approach, investments in the form of territorial tools such as Integrated Territorial Investments ('ITI'), Community Led Local Development ('CLLD') or any other territorial tool under policy objective "a Europe closer to citizens" supporting initiatives designed by the Member State for investments programmed for the ERDF should be based on territorial and local development strategies. For the purposes of ITIs and territorial tools designed by Member States, minimum requirements should be set out for the content of territorial strategies. Those

territorial strategies should be developed and endorsed under the responsibility of relevant authorities or bodies". (Proposal for CRP COD 2018/0196, 29 May 2018)

With regards to urban development, the 2021-2027 framework creates the European urban initiative, a new instrument for city-to-city cooperation, innovation and capacity-building across all the thematic priorities of the urban agenda for the EU. The urban initiative will be aimed at ensuring a coherent support for cities and strengthening integrated and participatory approaches to Sustainable Urban Development. 6% of the ERDF will be earmarked for investments in sustainable urban development (increased from 5% during the current period). For the first time, existing territorial tools in the Member States can be used and count towards the 6% target for sustainable urban development.

The EU's outermost regions will continue to benefit from special support. In line with the new Strategy for the Outermost regions, these regions will be given the means to develop their assets, such as blue growth, space sciences and renewables. They will keep receiving an additional EU funds allocation and will get special support under the new Interreg programmes to deepen their integration into their regional space and intensify cooperation among themselves or with neighbor countries.

2.3 EU requirements and guidelines for Local Development Strategies

At the beginning of the current programming period (2014-2020), the EU Regulations provided limited guidance for the development of local strategies. As per CSF and CRP Regulations, the local development strategies were defined as *"a coherent set of operations to meet local objectives and needs, which contributes to meeting the Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and which is implemented in partnership at the appropriate level"*. For the community-led development strategies, some mandatory elements were stipulated by the CRP Regulation (see paragraphs below); however, for the integrated territorial investments, and sustainable urban development, the approach was rather flexible.

2.3.1 Community Led Local Development (CLLD)

The CRP Regulation for the 2014-2020 period, Art 26, set the minimum elements to be included in community-led development strategies. Most elements are also maintained during the 2021-2027 period (with the exception of point (e), which was removed from the new Regulation). The minimum elements are

- a) The definition of the area and population covered by the strategy;
- b) An analysis of the development needs and potential of the area, including an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats;
- c) A description of the strategy and its objectives, a description of the integrated and innovative features of the strategy and a hierarchy of objectives, including measurable targets for outputs or results;
- d) A description of the community involvement process in the development of the strategy;
- e) An action plan demonstrating how objectives are translated into actions;
- f) A description of the management and monitoring arrangements of the strategy, demonstrating the capacity of the local action group to implement the strategy and a description of specific arrangements for evaluation;
- g) The financial plan for the strategy, including the planned allocation from each of the ESI Funds concerned.

Furthermore, in 2018, the European Commission published a guideline for developing "quality" community-led development strategies in the context of ESI Funds. Considering the timeline of publication, this can be rather used for the next programming period. Based on EC guidance, when designing local strategies, managing authorities should take in consideration the following points: (1) The strategy has to serve the local purposes; however, the coherence and consistency between local

strategies and existing national, regional or sub-regional strategies including sectoral ones, must be ensured; (2) The local development strategy should be drawn up based on a SWOT analysis and the identification of local needs, with concrete measurable objectives; (3) Local development strategies should promote linkages between local development actions, rather than presenting a list of disconnected projects; (4) Local development strategies should be 'integrated and multi-sectoral'; (5) Strategies should have an innovative character, aiming at introducing new ideas or approaches to the area and not simply defend 'business as usual'; (6) Cooperation and networking with other areas can be a key component of the strategy; (7) Networking in a broad sense can be a tool to enable local partnerships to share experiences and learn from each other; (8) Member States and/or regions need to ensure that the budgets available for CLLD are appropriate for achieving the goals set in the local strategies. Although there are risks of inappropriate spending if the budgets are too large, experience has shown that the main danger is that managing authorities try to spread the budget too thinly as a result of political pressure from applicant areas.

2.3.2 Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI)

With regards to the Integrated Territorial Investments, the guidance fiche published by the European Commission in 2014 is mainly focused on clarifying the scope of the instrument and requirements set in the EU Regulations. The fiche presents only the elements that need to be taken into consideration within the Partnership Agreement and national Operational Programmes; without guiding the actual writing of the local strategies.

"The Partnership Agreement should outline the main territorial challenges and the main elements of the territorial strategy, including the means to achieve an integrated approach at regional and sub-regional level, identifying, inter alia, the implementation arrangements to be used, including the arrangements for the use of it is. [...] The operational programmes for the ESF, ERDF and the Cohesion Fund should outline the approach to the use of the ITIs (other than those used for the purposes of integrated urban development). [...] ITIs are setup by the Member State and regions (by bodies and authorities at different levels of administration) – there is no specific procedure for the assessment or approval of ITIs by the Commission. Nevertheless, the decision to make use of ITIs is a part of the overall intervention logic and thus can be a relevant part of the programmes submitted to the Commission."
(Guidance Fiche for ITI, 28 January 2014)

For the 2021-2027, the CRP Regulation, Art. 23, sets some minimum elements to be included in the territorial strategies. At the time of this report the guidance fiche for the new programming period was not yet published. The relevant CRP regulation includes these minimum elements:

- a) The geographical area covered by the strategy;
- b) An analysis of the development needs and the potential of the area;
- c) A description of an integrated approach to address the identified development needs and the potential; and
- d) A description of the involvement of partners in the preparation and in the implementation of the strategy.

2.3.3 Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDS)

As for integrated urban development strategies, the 2014-2020 EU Regulations (i.e. CRP and ERDF) required member states to specify the selection of urban areas, delegation and methods of implementation. However, the Regulations set no specific requirements in terms of the structure of the local strategy. The guidance fiche published in 2016 for Integrated Urban Development Strategies provided what can be considered recommendations or best practices, including a possible structure of the strategy. More recently, the *Handbook of Sustainable Urban Development strategies* published

by the Joint Research Centre states that from an operational point of view, a strategy should then contain the following elements:²

- a diagnosis of the urban area and a selection of the target area(s);
- a description of the governance model;
- a definition of the general strategic framework, which should include a long-term vision, strategic goals, specific goals, and lines of action, and should specify the intervention logic and plan for periodic review. This requires deep reflection on how goals and lines of action are integrated;
- prioritization of actions to be supported by European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF);
- a monitoring system which links Operational Programme indicators with strategy-specific indicators (see Monitoring chapter); and
- an action plan that translates the long-term strategy and goals into investments with a budget and a schedule referring to the programming period of the ESIF.

For the 2021-2027, the elements included in the CRP Regulation, Art. 23, should be considered in IUDS drafting and structures (see section above).

² European Commission (2020) Handbook of Sustainable Urban Development Strategies, Joint Research Centre, available on: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/communities/sites/jrccties/files/handbook-of-sustainable-urban-development-strategies.pdf>

3 The practice of local strategies in Romania³

Most local development strategies and plans in Romania broadly follow the same structure. They follow a model which dates back from the first EU programming period (2007-2013), which prompted perhaps the first coherent and wide-spread local planning efforts. Cities and towns were then conditioned on accessing EU funds of having an Integrated Development Plan in place. At that time, the central government had given some recommendations on how to draft county capital strategies and what information to include. This model was endorsed and used ever since by most cities, towns and communes in putting together their local development plans. The current application of CLLD and IUDS are discussed in more detail in the section below.

3.1 CLLD and Local Strategies

The new CLLD concept proposed by the European Commission was introduced in Romania during the 2014-2020 EU programming period, and it is reflected in the ROP (axis on CLLD) and the National Rural Development Program (axis on LEADER). A World Bank report from 2013⁴ focusing on integrated intervention tools recommended to introduce the CLLD approach for the marginalized communities in Romania, with a focus on urban marginalized areas as affected by all three criteria of marginalization, namely - low human capital, low employment, and poor housing conditions.

In order to be genuinely community-led, CLLDs require intensive communication efforts and information exchange between community members and different stakeholders. This would include a range of issues like priorities, objectives, sequence of activities, desired impact and possible risks for the projects selected for funding. This should be done through full transparency, while the community should be involved in all stages in the project preparation and the decision-making process. Mobilization of marginalized communities requires a few key elements, including mobilizing resources, people and leaders from the communities, involving an external facilitator (coach or mediator), developing community-building activities, involve media, and implementing community-based monitoring.

The WB report also recommended that Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) should play the role of Intermediary Bodies (IBs) under the CLLD axis. This is based on the previous experience with the ROP that has showed that these entities function effectively as IBs and have the capacity to support applications and beneficiaries. To this end, the key role for IBs was seen in offering customized support to Local Action Groups (LAG's) throughout the programming cycle (from project design through the implementation and monitoring of the intervention), ensuring that technical assistance is fully aligned with specific beneficiary needs and helps deliver the highest possible impact.

In a WB report about enhancing coordination among state budget and EU funds for infrastructure investments⁵, the CLLD and Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) were seen as optimal instruments to ensure effective coordination in the 2014-2020 programming period. In addition, they can give potential beneficiaries the necessary tools to ensure coordination on their own. The two

³ As the only functional ITI for the 2014 – 2020 programming period was the Danube Delta ITI, and this report forms part of a larger review of the strategy underpinning the ITI, it is not discussed in this section. Various other World Bank reports as part of the "Catching up Regions" initiative has considered the ITI instrument and its potential broader application in Romania in detail. Reports available here: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/romania/publication/romania-catching-up-regions>

⁴ Integrated intervention tool. Integration strategies for urban poor areas and disadvantaged communities. 2013. World Bank <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/24492>

⁵ "Coordination of strategies and programs from state budget and EU funded investments in Romania's infrastructure". 2015. World Bank. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/636961468179072206/pdf/Coordination-of-strategies-and-programs-for-EU-and-state-funded-investments-in-Romania-s-infrastructure.pdf>

tools are meant to enable local authorities and other stakeholders to design their own integrated interventions from the beginning, based on multiple sources of EU funding to fulfill the objectives of the respective interventions.

For purposes of this report, the World Bank did not conduct any in depth studies on the implementation of the CLLD approach and will not elaborate in detail on the implementation of the approach. Some basic information around the implementation through the Operational Program for Human Capital (POCU) has however been obtained through other World Bank teams supporting implementation.⁶ POCU was allocated EUR 201 million for financing CLLD interventions with the aim of reducing territorial unbalances through the involvement of local communities in the 2014-2020 programming period. POCU's Priority Axis 5 support CLLD interventions that aim to achieve two specific objectives (SO):

SO 5.1 targets the reduction of marginalized communities in urban areas *with more than 20,000 inhabitants*, with a specific focus on Roma communities. By funding CLLD interventions of this type POCU aims to reducing the risk of poverty and exclusion, decreasing the number of people living in poverty, and increasing the number of people gaining professional skills upon graduating from EU-funded operations.

SO 5.2 includes the same target but focuses on *communities under of 20,000 inhabitants* and measures designed to attract investments into Romania's rural areas that may increase employment and education opportunities.

POCU funding for CLLD is conditioned on the submission of a detailed Local Development Strategy (LDS) by Local Action Groups (LAGs). POCU financing of CLLD under SO 5.1 includes three key phases. In phase I, municipalities interested in participating in the CLLD process established LAGs and develop a Local Development (LDS) in accordance with CLLD requirements. During phase II, 49 LAG submitted their proposed LDS⁷ to the POCU MA, and went through an evaluation process that resulted in the selection of 32 LAG (and LDS) to benefit from POCU funding. The third and final phase requires the LAG to act as an independent financing body and identify interventions that help them achieve the objectives they committed to in their LDS.

The LDS submitted by the LAG included:

- an analysis of the development needs and development potential of the area;
- a description of the strategy and its objectives, including integrated and innovative features and measurable targets;
- a description of the community involvement process;
- an action plan to translate objectives into actions;
- a description of management and monitoring arrangements at the LAG level; and
- a financial plan, including a planned allocation from each of the ESIF involved.

CLLD implementation requires a strong partnership and effective coordination of interventions among local stakeholders, namely municipalities, NGOs and private sector. This has been difficult to accomplish in the Romanian context, for a variety of reasons: lack of a culture of dialogue among public and nongovernmental actors, lack of coordination among jurisdictions and various state institutions, lack of integrated planning and project design and implementation, etc. Marginalized communities have proven to have weak mobilization and administrative capacity, particularly in the

⁶ World Bank Reimbursable Advisory Services Agreement on *Supporting the Implementation of Romania's Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) 2014-2020*. (P162775)

context of following complex and bureaucratic procedures required by the EU funding process. As a result, those communities that require financial support the most, are less likely to receive it due to capacity constraints. POCU has launched various initiatives and capacity building interventions to start addressing these challenges.

3.2 Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDS)

Although initially introduced as a requirement to access EU Funds, the practice of preparing Integrated Urban Development Strategies (IUDS) is now widely embedded with towns and cities.

Considering the absence of regulatory requirement to elaborate these strategies, this points to the value of these strategies for local government planning. Strategies help local governments acknowledge the main problems/issues of the community, formulate priorities for future and, especially, identify the investments they need to do in order to access external funding and to develop. Global experience shows that in municipalities where there is coordination between spatial and economic development planning and public finance, thoughtful and strategic investments can be visible and generate positive results for economic performance.⁸

As part of support to MPWDA to elaborate the Urban Policy, the World Bank conducted an analysis of 183 strategies and frameworks for urban municipalities in Romania with a population over 10,000 inhabitants⁹. The purpose of the analysis was to identify the main aspects covered by these strategies and identify the main shortages and challenges for cities in the elaboration and implementation of urban strategies. The quality of strategies in Romania varies greatly, and investment priority lists suffer from opaque prioritization processes – still mostly aimed at accessing available EU funds. Overall, main findings from the review include:

- a) EU Funds play an overwhelming part in how cities in Romania structure their strategies and set their strategic priorities;
- b) Capacity to develop quality development strategies is mainly lacking in smaller and medium municipalities;
- c) In all municipalities (including county capitals) there is still a lack of transparency for the prioritization of processes and taking into account ideas from stakeholders;
- d) There is a generally lack of good M&E practices and a disconnect due to lack of clear division of responsibilities to move from strategy to project implementation,
- e) While other planning instruments (SUMP, SEAP and spatial plans) have all found traction in the urban environment, true integrated planning which brings together infrastructure, land use and transport planning has not yet materialized.
- f) Cities also rarely plan at metropolitan or peri-urban level, even with an enabling legislative framework in place. This is attributed to the lack of incentives for and sanctioning of the lack of strategies required by law.

The strategies were assessed against six broad stages expected in good strategy development, the more detailed findings per stage is depicted in the table below.

⁸ “Farvacque-Vitkovic, Catherine; Kopanyi, Mihaly. 2019. Better Cities, Better World: A Handbook on Local Governments Self-Assessments. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁹ Full report available on request: Companion Paper 3: Analysis of strategic documents regarding urban and spatial development at local level.

3.2.1 Main findings by stage of strategy development - 2020 review of IUDS

Stage	Key findings	Comments
<p>1. Defining a structure of IUDS and present situation analysis</p> <p>(context, methodology and analysis of the present situation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than half of these strategies don't present a clear methodology that was followed to elaborate the strategy • Less than half of the strategies have a section on main problems/challenges, out of which 59% offer also solutions for these problems and only a third prioritized the problems, but without offering clear prioritization criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No standard structure (no guiding official document imposing formats) • For county capital cities, the MA-ROP gave some recommendations on the minimum information that should be included and analyzed within the strategies. Some smaller cities or towns followed the model • Some strategies clearly identify the main problems or challenges, but not every municipality has a list of priority problems, which should justify the priorities in the strategy. • Aspects that are usually included in all strategic documents: description of the present situation, SWOT analysis; definition of objectives/priorities/measures; list of projects (interventions); some information on monitoring and evaluation of the strategy (sometimes only theoretical aspects); information on implementation of the strategy; information on participatory approach.
<p>2. Formulating strategic priorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 10% present an assessment of the previous strategy. • Over 80% of the strategies took into consideration other relevant strategies (EU, national, regional, county, local). • 85% established a vision, mainly for this programming period (targeting 2020/2023), 12 strategies that propose a long-term vision (targeting 2030). • 15% of the analyzed strategies targeted all EU thematic objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process of setting objectives/priorities/measures is very different among municipalities. Some clearly describe the methodology and the process that led to the results obtained in the present situational analysis, including the involvement of the main stakeholders in this process. • In many strategies there is no evidence on how the objectives/priorities/measures were identified. • Objectives are not defined as SMART¹⁰ with no clear targets or timeline. • Objectives are usually defined taking into consideration the priority axes of ROP or other operational programmes in Romania, that offer financing to urban beneficiaries.

¹⁰ SMART: Common acronym in project management for best practice objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Reasonable and Time Bound.

Stage	Key findings	Comments
3. Identifying a project portfolio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Size of project portfolios varies greatly: from a list of 10 projects to very long lists of over 500 projects 39% of the analyzed strategies provide project fiches with detailed information Less than 15% had a clear list of priority projects and included clear prioritization criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some take into consideration their capacity to finance and implement these projects, also estimating their budget and responsible institutions, while others just mention a list of projects, sometimes being defined in very general terms and resembling more measures rather than projects or interventions. Usually lack prioritization, even county capital cities have priority projects that are eligible for financing under Axis 4 of the ROP.
4. Conceiving participatory approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 66% had a dedicated section on consultation process, but only 60% provide information on the used instruments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most used instruments are population surveys and workshops. The official webpage of the City Hall is widely utilized to make the documents (mainly the final document) available, with opportunities to comment, but it is not clear how or if comments were incorporated in the final document. Many strategies mention that no comments were received, which suggests inefficiency of the chosen instruments.
5. Developing monitoring & evaluation frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 58% of the analyzed strategies that presented monitoring and evaluation system Of these only 76% included a list of indicators to be monitored but only a third set targets and mention the institutions responsible for monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small municipalities and towns tend to only mention the definition of monitoring and evaluation and commonly utilized methodologies, but without defining clear indicators or targets. Apart from county capital cities, there is almost no institutional framework or responsibilities defined within the strategies. The strategies refer more to the monitoring process, and to a lesser extent to the evaluation process.
6. Setting implementation mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less than 20% identified risks in the implementation of the strategy and measures to reduce or avoid these. Just over half offer information on the implementation system and present an action plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confusion between project implementation and strategy implementation. Usually a correlation presented between the project portfolio and the process of implementation, in that beneficiaries of the projects are the responsible actors for implementing the strategy. Better-quality strategies mention that the implementation is the responsibility and under the coordination of the City Hall and City Council, and there is an action plan proposed for this process. In best case examples this includes deadlines for each type of implementation activity.

3.2.2 Recommendations for improving the practice of IUDS in towns and cities

Most recommendations from this review are focused on the strategic planning process (and less on implementation) as it relates to IUDS in towns and cities. The recommendations made to MPWDA are:

Strategic Planning Process

- In terms of supporting the practice of strategic planning at city level, developing a framework that outlines a few critical sections recommended for inclusion (including examples of statistical data or other type of information that should be analyzed), rather than a rigid structure, is proposed;
- Given that most municipalities/towns seem to have a relatively recent development strategy in place, it is recommended that local administrations focus on updating those strategies rather than preparing completely new documents;
- To mitigate the dominant focus on EU funding for projects in the current strategic planning process, and as the Romania Urban Policy 2020 – 2035 takes shape, updated strategies should reflect both the new EU programming period priorities, and the framework to be designed in the Urban Policy. Although it is expected that the Urban Policy process will inform the design of the SUD component in the programming period, there are various other national programs that could support development and funding for projects at local level;
- Participatory approaches that allow stakeholder involvement at all stages of the elaboration process should be encouraged;
- In general M&E of actions and results achieved against these strategies are severely lacking and the system could benefit from a unified set of defined indicators (output, outcome and impact indicators) that are easy to understand and measure at local level by the public administration; and
- Support is needed for more local administrations to prepare strategies that span administrative boundaries and that would require inter-jurisdictional coordination mechanisms.

Implementation

- Capacity building in terms of strategic planning at city level is required, particularly for smaller and medium sized towns and cities, some of the areas for capacity building are listed further below but include M&E systems, project prioritization, the use of participatory processes, etc.
- Support could be provided to cities to do more appropriate project prioritization with clear timelines, budgets and financing sources identified;

3.3 Regional Planning and Regional Development Agencies

During the current programming period 2014-2020, the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) aimed to contribute to the sustainable and equitable development of the eight Romanian Development Regions. They oversaw: (1) regional planning, through the eight Regional Development Plans; (2) management of the EU Structural Funds, as Intermediate Bodies for the Regional Operational Programme; and (3) contributed to the development of regional projects. The World Bank has not conducted any exhaustive review of the RDA's or regional strategies, and this assignment did not allow for such an assessment either. The review here is therefore short and not presented in much detail.

As regional planning organizations, the RDAs mobilized local and regional stakeholders in the elaboration of realistic and comprehensive socio-economic analyses and strategies for the eight

development regions, encompassing all the relevant fields for the development of the territory. The Regional Development Plans (RDPs) 2014-2020 represented the main planning and programming documents elaborated at regional level and assumed by decision makers from the eight Development Regions of Romania.

As Intermediate Bodies for the Regional Operational Programme (ROP), the RDAs managed the funds allocated in the fields of transport infrastructure, tourism, business support infrastructures and services, social services and urban development. RDAs become Intermediate Bodies for the ROP since 2007, based on the Agreement signed with the Ministry of Public Works, Development and Administration, which was renewed in 2014.

As far as the regional projects are concerned, the RDAs acted as leaders or partners in large scale projects, aiming at the socio-economic development of the regions as a whole. The RDAs are actively involved in the development of the eight Development Regions, through their own projects, financed from various resources.

For the programming period 2021-2027, the World Bank's Catching-up Regions reports suggests leveraging the experience of the RDAs as Intermediate Bodies. The recommendation was made regardless of the selected implementation model for the regional policy (e.g. dedicated Priority Axis under a national OP, dedicated OP for multiple urban area, dedicated OPs for single urban areas). It seems clear, at this stage, that the Regional Operational Program will be split into 8 Regional Operational Programmes, allowing for decentralization to regional Management Authorities¹¹. It is likely that the revised structure will require an extensive regional strategic planning effort prior to the start of the new programming period.

¹¹ On June 10, 2020, the Chamber of Deputies adopted the draft Law on some measures in the field of European non-reimbursable funds, which aim to ensure the general framework for the implementation of projects financed by European funds both for the 2014-2020 programming period and for the next programming period, 2021-2027. This included a decision that the Agencies for Regional Development will become Managing Authorities for the Operational Programs for Regional Development in the 2021-2027 programming period

4 Results from the review of SIDDDD

4.1 General findings from the overall evaluation

The Strategy for Integrated Sustainable Development in Danube Delta (SIDDDD) managed to set the directions for a future development of the area. The SIDDDD established the higher-level vision and strategic objectives, as well as the priority sectors and related sectorial specific objectives and interventions. Both strategic and implementation documents were designed based on a participatory approach, incorporating feedback from all relevant stakeholders, public and private, including civil society, which ensured a high relevancy for the societal needs.

A good external consistency was identified in relation to all analyzed local strategies (Tulcea county and Tulcea municipality, Sulina, Baia and Isaccea cities, and Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve). More precisely, the local strategies have similar objectives as SIDDDD and are expected to contribute to the overall results of the SIDDDD. In particular, the projects implemented by the Tulcea county are in line with the priority sectors of the SIDDDD, and they can support the progress towards the final targets of the SIDDDD.

The financial allocations for the first phase of implementation (amounting to 1.1 billion EUR) were concentrated towards a very limited number of sectors, based on the availability and eligibility of EU Funds, in particular transport infrastructure and rural development. While the prioritization and concentration of resources are generally considered a good practice, and even a requirement when using EU Funds, the owners of the strategy should ensure that all sectors are sufficiently funded by the end of the second implementation phase.

The pace of financial and physical progress of the strategy was rather slow during the first years of implementation, for all pillars and sectors. This can be justified by the novelty of the ITI instrument, which required intensive preparatory activities at the beginning of the programming period – developing and approving the local Danube Delta Strategy, setting the institutional framework for the implementation of the strategy and of the ITI instrument, developing inter-institutional agreements and procedures, promoting the strategy and the financing mechanism.

For the second implementation phase, it is recommended to further leverage the already created institutional arrangements and local human capacity (i.e. Inter-Community Development Association). What is required could be better implementation guidelines, tools and procedures: updated needs assessment, with quantifiable targets; financial planning, with needed and available budget, split by pillars and sectors; relevant result and output indicators, with baselines, targets, sources of information, and computation methodologies; and monitoring and evaluation plans and procedures, with clear responsibilities and deadlines.

As a general conclusion, the SIDDDD, as well as the ITI mechanism, created the prerequisites for a sustainable development in the Danube Delta, with the involvement of all national and local stakeholders. High efforts were made to create a functional framework, including strategic planning, institutional arrangements and implementation documents and procedures; and the interim results of the implemented projects are already well perceived by the local society. However, some areas of improvement were identified, with regards to planning and monitoring function, which can be addressed in the context of the new programming period 2021-2027.

4.2 Overview of 6 local strategies reviewed in direct relation to SIDDDD

Below is a short presentation of the six local development strategies reviewed to determine consistency with and contribution to the SIDDDD. The focus here is on highlighting structure, vision, priorities, and areas of interventions.

The Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of the Tulcea County for the 2014-2020 period¹² is a very large document of hundreds of pages, of which 200 pages list the project portfolio. The strategy articulates a vision to diversify the county economy based on areas of potential combined with regional development, in which the city of Tulcea has the greatest touristic, commercial, and industrial potential and the Turcoaia-Cerna region the largest agriculture and fishery assets. For strategy purposes, this 240,000-population county was split into six development regions. The document has two strategic objectives, three development areas, and several objectives. The strategic objectives aims to develop a sustainable community by channeling resources in the priority areas and in those with economic potential to foster prosperity, social cohesion and environment protection throughout the county, on one hand, while preserve the environment and develop a sustainable, green economy with improved services in the ITI area, on the other hand. The three focus areas - development of administrative and operational intervention capacity, sustainable economic development, and social sector development - are linked to 14 priority areas covering, among others, operational capacity for emergencies, transport infrastructure, and tourism development. The strategy has a 12-page section on M&E, mentioning the institutional process and a list of indicators.

Only 10 percent of the 350-page strategy for the Tulcea Municipality represent a development plan, while the rest is deemed a diagnostic analysis with detailed description of the local socio-economic situation and municipal services. The document includes a SWOT analysis which is the basis of the strategy. The general objective is to turn Tulcea, the main city in the Danube Delta region, into a development hub with a competitive economy, flexible human resources adjusted to the social-economic realities, and a local administration responding to the community's needs. The eight priority areas, such as administrative capacity, local infrastructure, environment protection, and sustainable development are connected to 73 activities targeting issues like energy efficiency, transport, public services, and education. The project portfolio lists 240 interventions with potential funding sources, e.g., local, state budget and EU funds. The strategy has a list of 116 output indicators by measures, but no outcome or impact indicators. There is a section on M&E, referring to the tools and institutions that should be involved in the process.

The Isaccea Integrated Local Development Strategy for the period 2014-2020¹³ is a 96-page document of which the actual plan is laid out in only six pages. The strategy has several SWOT analyses on issues like environment, health, social assistance, tourism, and economic potential. Without having a vision, the strategy outlines the strategic objective - the efficient use of human and physical resources aimed at ensuring prosperity and quality of living for city residents -, in addition to intervention areas and priorities based on EU programs. The development plan for this 5,000-population city has seven local priorities, including sustainable urban development (infrastructure and public services), environment protection, and a number of sectorial objectives, like agriculture and tourism. They are all reflected in an action plan comprising 23 interventions linked to specific EU programs and investment priorities, such as environment, energy efficiency, and agriculture.

Almost three quarters of the Sulina Local Development Strategy for 2018- 2035¹⁴, a 240-page document, is about the city profile, with a few pages on SWOT analysis, while the rest is about priorities and activities. Projected as an integrated urban policy for the revival of Sulina, a city of 4,000 people, the plan sets forth the strategic vision of building a dynamic city based on tourism development, with activities in agriculture and fishery, while taking advantage of its multicultural features. The general objective of turning Sulina into a touristic and leisure center is reflected through four objectives, namely i) making Sulina the regional economic engine, ii) environmentally friendly, iii)

¹² Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of the Tulcea County is available at: <https://www.citulcea.ro/sites/citulcea/Informatii/Pages/programe.aspx>

¹³ Isaccea Integrated Local Development Strategy is available at: <https://www.isaccea.ro/images/2018/sdl.pdf>

¹⁴ Sulina Local Development Strategy is available at: https://www.primaria-sulina.ro/files/SDL-Sulina_2018-2035_v1.pdf

enabling access to public services and natural & public heritage, and iv) enhancing connectivity while preserving the unique features as the easternmost point of Romania, which are further expanded into 19 specific goals (e.g., developing jobs in tourism, expanding access by water/roads). The plan lists 91 interventions that would require EUR 294 million investments, with details about implementation period, potential partners, funding sources, and in some cases, even specific EU programs and axis.

The Baia Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy for 2015-2020¹⁵ is outlined over 72 pages of which a third is about the general development context set by national and European strategies and the description of the locality, while the rest is the SWOT analysis, priority development areas and the action plan. Baia, a commune of around 4,500 inhabitants, does not have a strategic vision, but five strategic development directions, namely) i) development and modernization of infrastructure, ii) increasing quality of life and environment protection, iii) revival of cultural and sports activities, iv) private sector development, and v) improving institutional capacity. Each direction has a few specific development measures – totaling 25 actions that include rehabilitation and modernization of communal streets & roads and water supply system, modernization and endowment of schools, and supporting agriculture and animal husbandry. Each action mentions an implementation period and potential funding sources.

Finally, there are two key documents with regard to the Delta Danube Biosphere Reserve (DDBR) - a protected area of 580,000 hectares comprising 27 urban and rural localities with about 14,000 people - namely the DDBR Management Plan for the 2015-2020 period and the DDBR Visiting Strategy. A 300-page document of which only half is the actual scheme, the Management Plan¹⁶ is based on nine principles and actions targeting a sustainable tourism development in the Danube Delta through an integrated monitoring system of environment (e.g., surveillance, warning), sustainable use of resources, and enabling NGOs and communities to participate in drafting and implementing development plans. It calls for the removal of polluters that endanger the health of people and for conserving the biodiversity and specific ecosystems, and emphasizes on “the polluter pays” principle – under which whoever is responsible for the damages caused to the environment should bear the costs associated to it. In the Visiting Strategy¹⁷, a 113-page document drafted in 2009, the DDBR is divided into nine areas, each having their individual plans. The strategy is based on a few key concepts, like drawing visions and objectives for each of nine areas, using key tools to promote specific tourism, and encourage slow tourism together with fast tourism¹⁸ where this would not harm the nature.

4.3 Summarized key findings regarding local strategies

Most strategies indicate similar problems in terms of design and content, including lack of a clear vision, realistic priorities, prioritized projects connected to objectives/priorities, and no budgets.

- *Lengthy descriptions of local issues vs. little focus on actual strategy and priorities*

About 80 percent of the strategies reviewed focuses on general context and local socio-economic issues (including an overview of local utilities, like water or street lighting) and SWOT analysis. For example, only six pages from Isaccea’s 100-page local strategy focus on the actual development plan and priorities, while three quarters of Sulina’s 240-page plan is about local description and only one

¹⁵ Baia Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy is available at:

http://www.paginadestart.com/comon/resurse/baia/Strategia_comunei_Baia_2015_2020.pdf

¹⁶ The DDBR Strategy is available at http://www.ddbra.ro/documente/admin/2015/1_ANEXA_HG_763_PARTE_I_pag_1_-_149_.pdf

¹⁷ The DDBR Visiting Strategy is available at [http://www.ddbra.ro/media/9-%20Strategie%20de%20Vizitare\(1\).pdf](http://www.ddbra.ro/media/9-%20Strategie%20de%20Vizitare(1).pdf)

¹⁸ Slow tourism: activities performed over a longer period, using less resources, with limited impact on environment and positive economic effects on communities. Fast tourism: it takes less time, more energy and resources, and nature/ local culture are only the venues for the activities, not the actual target. A four hour-trip in a wooden boat uses zero fuel (slow tourism), while the same trip by a power boat requires up to 160 liters of fuel (fast tourism).

quarter touches on relevant development issues. Most development plans have a SWOT analysis, although these do not employ any strategic tools (e.g., PESTLE) to assess the external environment or generate targeted initiatives. Moreover, while strategies in general describe the main problems or challenges, there is a tendency to not have a prioritization of issues to address.

- *Lack of (realistic) visions and objectives*

Even though most strategies have a development vision and set strategic objectives, they do not use the SWOT findings to build upon some realistic interventions and actions. The strategic vision or key target is completely missing in some plans— as it is the case of Baia commune - while in others, like in Isaccea, this is highlighted only at the very end of the document. Also, at times, the strategic objective could be slightly too ambitious comparative to the local potential and financial resources available. For example, the general objective of turning Sulina into a touristic and leisure center might seem quite ambitious for a small town whose local economy is relying mainly of fishery and agriculture, and much less on tourism, despite of having a port and an economic free zone.

- *Limited connection between strategies, actual needs, and project proposals*

Except for Tulcea county and Tulcea city, there is little connection between the local development plans and interventions. And that is because there is limited or no relation whatsoever between strategic and specific objectives, proposed projects, areas of interventions, and measures. Local authorities tend to view project proposals more like opportunities to attract EU funds. As explained earlier, local development strategies are part of requirements for accessing structural funds, and often time local administrations tend to match interventions to the EU operational programs and priorities. This could also explain the loose, vague definition of objectives, as they are mostly defined in general terms, without clear targets or timeline, and without much consistency among them.

- *Wishlist of projects with no budget attached*

Some strategies outline a long list of projects which, in the absence of clear budgets, look more of a wish list rather than realistic interventions aimed at achieving the local/regional targets and objectives. Also, the interventions are just randomly listed based on sectors, without any prioritization. For example, the strategies of Tulcea County and Isaccea have long lists of projects but with no budget figures attached to them. Tulcea county is listing hundreds of projects over 200 pages, with only the names of interventions and potential 14 funding sources. The funding sources are all the same all activities, namely all EU funds/ programs, county, local, national, government budgets, and transnational and international funding.

Tulcea city has 240 interventions but most of them are on paper only since they do not have budgets nor have been prioritized. Other localities, like Sulina, made at least some efforts to come up with some numbers and put together an overall budget figure, with project cost and indication about funding sources (local or EU) – some even mentioning specific EU programs and axes. However, this does not necessarily mean that all priorities are connected to the targets and objectives from the respective strategies, but rather they present more as opportunities given the availability of EU funds. Since most strategies did not allocate funds for the planned objectives, this makes interventions quite difficult to implement and nearly impossible to monitor and evaluate.

- *Lack of M&E system*

Like many strategies in Romania, the local development plans from the Danube Delta region do not have M&E systems. Usually, M&E is a small section at the end of the strategy, and this covers more the theoretical part, with no practical aspects. In many local plans, the system is mentioned but not enforced. Although some strategies refer about setting up a dedicated M&E unit at the local level, there has been no evidence that this process was put into practice, therefore the monitoring unit seemed to likely remain on paper only. Also, sometimes a monitoring committee is mentioned as responsible body for monitoring the implementation of the plan. At the same time, the plans lack a

good performance monitoring system. The list of indicators is missing, and there are no baseline, targets, or intermediate targets. In many cases, there is no clear reference to the institutions that should be responsible for collecting and analyzing different indicators.

The poor design of M&E component is quite common feature to most strategies in Romania as they lack relevant elements, such as reference values, source definitions and targets. Even for strategies with M&E systems (like Tulcea city), the evaluation mechanism follows only a mathematical model for the territorial evaluation of the strategy's impact, as there is only a list of M&E indicators which are not assigned by projects or interventions. Without an adequate, well-designed, and enforced M&E system with all necessary indicators, tools, and processes in place, it is quite difficult to measure the implementation of the strategies and assess whether the targets were achieved or not.

4.4 Recommendations for local strategies based on SIDDDD review

The main recommendations for improving the local strategies and implementation systems include:

Strategic Planning Process

- The local strategies should also focus on strategic planning, integrity, standardization, capacity building and human resources development rather than infrastructure development;
- The local strategies should be developed in direct dialogue with their local stakeholders and approved under a public debate;
- The local strategies should integrate and adapt the sectorial strategies, at their local specificity;
- The local strategies should be operationalized by strategic planning and operational plans with budgets and performance indicators at all levels (strategic objectives, specific objectives, actions/measures, activities/projects). Efficiency indicators should be part of the operational/strategic plans; and
- The local strategies should include international/national best practices in their territory at all levels (public administration, private business, public/private services, etc.).

Implementation

- In the local strategies, the responsibilities to achieve the outcomes of the strategies, should also be agreed and assigned; and
- The local strategies should be monitored and evaluated, and their M&E reports should be presented yearly to the public.

5 Recommendations for local strategy making and implementation

For the sake of consistency, the findings from the IUDS review and the review of the Danube specific strategies are combined and summarized here into a single table, structured around the 6 stages expected in good strategy making. Recommendations for improving strategic documents and action plans are also included in the table. Broadly stages 1 – 4 relates directly to the process of drafting a strategy, and stage 5 – 6 (M&E and implementation Mechanisms) relates to both the planning for implementation and actual implementation practices).

Further to the recommendations applicable to actual strategy making and implementation, a number of areas of potential support from national government (MPWDA and others) to local authorities have been identified. The key areas of required support are as follows:

- Creating an enabling and supportive regulatory environment for interjurisdictional strategy making and implementation (i.e. across administrative boundaries);

- Providing capacity building for authorities and key role players at local level in order to improve strategic planning practices at local level, with a strong need for capacity around project identification and prioritization.

Finally, local administrations should apply the strategic planning cycle to their local development plans. This would enable to develop and improve the planning capabilities at the local level. Hence, the local strategy should be put into practice and operationalized through a strategic plan over a four-year planning period together with annual operational plans. The strategic planning issue and related processes are included in the General Secretariat of the Government Order 1054/2019 and the methodological norms - the section on internal managerial control (Standard no.6 on strategic planning).¹⁹

¹⁹ GSG Order 1054/2019 and methodological norms available at: <https://sgg.gov.ro/new/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ORDIN-nr.-1.054-din-2019-norme-metodologice.pdf>

Stage	Key findings	Recommendations
<p>1. Defining a structure of IUDS and present situation analysis</p> <p>(context, methodology and analysis of the present situation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are often large volumes of work around descriptions of local issues included in strategies, with little focus on interpreting these towards a coherent strategy, this also results in a lack of realistic visions and objective setting • Strategies often don't include a clear methodology that was applied in the elaboration process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved strategy design Apply an improved strategy design, meeting at least some minimum requirements. Each plan should have a clear strategic development vision, with explicit mission, strategic and specific objectives, targets supported by feasible projects and activities. The document should be able to point where the community is at present, highlight on the existing challenges, and where it should be and what should achieve in the future. • Appropriate Use of strategic planning tools The evaluation of the internal and external environment should be performed by using strategic planning tools. Some useful tools that could be used include PESTLE, SWOT, functional analysis, and initiative matrix.
<p>2. Formulating strategic priorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies seem to be overwhelmingly motivated by and oriented towards accessing EU Funds • Visions and strategic objectives are often too ambitious comparative to the local potential and financial resources available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting strategic priorities informed by situational analysis Stakeholders should set a clear vision and realistic strategic objectives, informed by the situational analysis, and linked to the real potential for development of a locality should be set. See also participatory approaches (stage 4)
<p>3. Identifying a project portfolio</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project lists tend to be long and often more like wish lists (disconnected from actual needs), with a notable absence of realistic budgets being attached to these lists. • Where prioritization has taken place there is often little clarity around the actual process adopted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining and then prioritizing interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building on the use of tools above, extract and define local initiatives/measures in order to accomplish the specific and strategic objectives. A much clearer link between choice of interventions (mostly as projects) and the issues these address or goals they assist in pursuing is required. - Next a robust prioritization process of these projects, based on a prioritization methodology, is required. • Include a realistic budget Estimate a realistic budget for each level of the strategic planning, such as strategic objective, specific objective, measure, initiative, and project.

Stage	Key findings	Recommendations
<p>4. Conceiving participatory approaches</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While many strategies mention participatory processes, these tend to only mean a strategy was published for comment on a local website, often resulting in no comments being received; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize participatory approaches in Strategy making Local authorities could move beyond publishing draft strategies for comments and involve local communities and key role players in the vision, objective setting and even prioritization process. These could involve public meetings, focus group discussions, establishing working groups, using online platforms (i.e. Facebook), etc.
<p>5. Developing monitoring & evaluation frameworks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a generally lack of Monitoring and Evaluation systems, and even where M&E is included as an activity in strategies, it is often theoretically described and actual implementation needs improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A genuine M&E system and performance indicators All strategies should have genuine M&E systems and performance indicators at all levels of the strategic planning as to conduct impact assessments of programs/projects. This process should have a series of indicators, such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> iv) impact indicators for strategic objectives, v) outcome indicators for specific objectives, vi) output indicators for projects/initiatives/measures, and vii) input indicators for projects and activities, in addition to efficiency indicators.
<p>6. Setting implementation mechanisms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There tends to be an absence of consideration for an implementation system as well as action plans, with no clear roles and responsibilities assigned. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic plan monitoring The strategic plans should be monitored and revised at least once a year and evaluate every four years provided no important changes in the internal and external environment have occurred during this period. Publish the result The strategic plan and the annual monitoring and evaluation reports should be published and made available to the respective community to ensure that local residents and stakeholders are informed on the progress. At the same time, they should be able to provide feedback and make suggestions and observations on the plans.

6 Conclusion

While most local level strategies in Romania broadly follow the same structure, the quality of local strategies vary greatly. Strategies tend to be heavily oriented towards accessing EU funds, and at times there is a certain disconnect between visions, objectives and proposed projects to implement towards achieving these objectives. Strategies often include long lists of projects (“wish lists”), without any clear prioritization (or opaque prioritization processes) or realistic budgets.

The absence of proper Monitoring and Evaluation systems are of concern. This includes the absence of a division of responsibilities to move from strategy to project implementation, and virtually no requirements for monitoring whether results have contributed towards achieving goals.

A significant capacity building effort at local level (of administrations, stakeholders and beneficiaries) would be required to improve the practice of strategic planning at local level. Further, while some evidence is emerging of stakeholder engagement in the strategy making process, this is an area where a stronger focus could yield significant results in ensuring that a) local strategies truly reflect the local needs and b) that those role players responsible for implementation are held to account for results.