

The quality of human resources - A determinant of sustainable rural development in Romania -

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Abstract: The evolution of rural areas is a major concern of humanity as it imposes a balance between the requirement of economic, environmental and social conservation of rural areas with a logical modernization trend of rural life. The evolution of human society led to fundamental structural and functional changes of the countryside. In this context, *human resource* is a key factor in sustainable rural development and its security features directly influence the development of rural communities. The quality of human resources determines the sustainable development of rural communities, manifested by the shift from the old qualitative state to a new one, a general increase of the civilization level and improvement of the quality of life.

Keywords: sustainable rural development, human resources, rural communities, economic growth, quality of life

JEL Classification: Q01, O15, E24, I30, J01

Introduction

The issue of sustainable rural development is included in a broader concept, the rural economy as a branch of economics, which encompasses the rural areas and agriculture, the rural population, the environmental and development

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economics. In the World Bank reports, rural development is seen as a growth strategy that addresses that category of population considered as the most deprived from the community, i.e. the poor rural population, dependent on agriculture, with limited access to public jobs and services. The problem of **identifying and promoting rural development** finds its origins at the core of the UN concerns. Emphasizing that rural areas account for the largest part of the territory of the European Community countries, the UN reflected the idea that their social development plays an important role in a rational planning consistent with the overall objectives of a nation. In this context, the question is to identify relationships between the global policies and regional development and the rural development policy. At the same time, given the diversity of endowment with natural resources, the ethnical and cultural traditions, and the different level of technical, economic and social development, the rural areas should not be treated as homogeneous entities, yet the ultimate goal must be a balanced development between regional and local levels. Based on these perceptions, the rural development includes all those actions focused on improving the rural people's quality of life, while preserving the natural and cultural landscape so as to ensure the sustainable development correlated with the specific conditions and specificity of the countryside.

The resources of rural areas

The success of sustainable rural development directly and decisively depends on the existing resources in the countryside. In a generic sense, we are talking about production resources, which are the natural, material, financial and human potential created by the social, economic and environmental context. Since there are connections between the different factors of dependency and mutual conditioning, the knowledge of these connections is of great importance for determining the economic efficiency of their use. The allocation and use of resources is achieved under specific limitations, different in time and space. These also include the environmental restrictions. **The factors influencing sustainable rural development** are classified in different ways in the literature. Thus, we identify: *direct factors* represented by: *human resources*; labor supply; education etc.; *natural resources* (land, subsoil resources, climate); *capital stock* (machinery, equipment, buildings etc.); *technology* (science, management, entrepreneurship, innovation etc.); *indirect factors*: size of aggregate demand; absorption capacity of the internal market; efficiency of the financial - banking system; savings rate and investment rate; international environment; competitive products; capital and labor migration; budgetary and tax policy, etc.

For the development of sustainable rural communities, the optimal use of all resources, in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, is absolutely necessary. Thus, it is important to start to build the future today, because the present shows us that the earth's natural resources are limited. [Zmaranda (2015)]. In the conditions in which we talk about the economic growth limits and the environmental restrictions to development, *the role of human resources* becomes obvious. This paper is a plea for promoting the vital importance of the rural population, both as human resource and labor force, and for developing the **sustainable rural community** concept.

The rural population - social and economic resource

Population is the main resource of the rural areas and the most important production factor, representing an essential resource for sustainable rural development. As regards the population - development ratio, the specialists have diverging opinions. Thus, some authors consider that the economic underdevelopment is primarily the result of accelerated population growth, whereas production is annually distributed to a greater number of people. At the same time, there are contrary opinions according to which the population explosion is precisely determined by low economic growth, which is correlated with the low civilization, education and culture level of the inhabitants from those areas. The reality is that the economic and demographic forecasts have confirmed that underdevelopment was due to population explosion in some areas and that population dynamics declined in the context of a sustained economic development, progress in culture, education and civilization. Hence, the conclusion that underdevelopment needs to be eliminated for the demographic stabilization at national and global level.

As economic resource, the population is important in terms of total population, population structure by age, genders, educational level, etc., active population, employment, unemployed population, structure of labor force by sectors (primary, secondary and tertiary), domestic and international migration etc. Recent studies on the changes in population and employment level emphasized the existence of a demo-economic crisis in numerous European countries, including Romania.

The essence of this crisis resides in the imbalances that have emerged between population, on one hand, and labor resources, food resources, raw materials, environmental resources and investments, on the other hand. Solving this demo-economic crisis requires well-targeted actions, applied locally and nationally, for accelerating economic development, improving education, habitat, food, increasing the standard of living, etc.

The Romanian rural area covers the largest part of Romania's territory, accounting for 87.1% of the total area, according to statistical data [NPRD 2007-2013]. The importance of the Romanian rural areas can be also revealed by the numerical stability of the rural population over the last 80 years, even though its share in total population has steadily decreased (from 78.6 % in 1930 to 45.0% in 2011 – Table 1). The year 1985 is noteworthy, when in Romania the rural and urban population had equal shares (50%). It can be also noticed that after 1985, the evolution of the rural population share was very low and uniform, with variations ranging from - 0.9% to + 0.7%.

Table 1 - Romania's population by residence areas

Year	Number of inhabitants			%	
	TOTAL	URBAN	RURAL	Urban	Rural
1930	14,280,728	3,051,253	11,229,476	21.4	78.6
1948	15,872,624	3,713,139	12,159,485	23.4	76.6
1956	17,489,450	5,474,264	12,015,186	31.3	68.7
1960	18,403,414	5,912,011	12,491,403	32.1	67.9
1965	19,027,367	6,417,124	12,610,243	33.7	66.3
1970	20,252,541	7,464,811	12,787,730	36.9	63.1
1975	21,245,103	8,339,229	12,905,874	39.3	60.7
1980	22,201,387	10,171,618	12,029,769	45.8	54.2
1985	22,724,836	11,370,092	11,354,744	50.0	50.0
1989	23,151,564	12,311,803	10,839,761	53.2	46.8
1990	23,206,720	12,608,844	10,597,876	54.3	45.7
1991	23,185,084	12,552,407	10,632,677	54.1	45.9
1992	22,788,969	12,367,358	10,421,611	54.3	45.7
1993	22,755,260	12,406,204	10,349,056	54.5	45.5
1994	22,730,622	12,427,612	10,303,010	54.7	45.3
1995	22,680,951	12,457,195	10,223,756	54.9	45.1
1996	22,607,620	12,411,174	10,196,446	54.9	45.1
1997	22,545,925	12,404,690	10,141,235	55.0	45.0
1998	22,502,803	12,347,886	10,154,917	54.9	45.1
1999	22,458,022	12,302,729	10,155,293	54.8	45.2
2000	22,435,205	12,244,598	10,190,607	54.6	45.4
2001	22,408,393	12,243,748	10,164,645	54.6	45.4
2002	21,794,793	11,608,735	10,186,058	53.7	46.7
2003	21,733,556	11,600,157	10,133,399	53.4	46.6
2004	21,673,328	11,895,598	9,777,730	54.9	45.1
2005	21,623,849	11,879,897	9,743,952	54.9	45.1
2006	21,584,365	11,913,938	9,670,427	55.2	44.8
2007	21,537,563	11,877,659	9,659,904	55.1	44.9
2008	21,504,442	11,835,328	9,669,114	55.0	45.0
2009	21,469,959	11,823,516	9,646,443	55.1	44.9
2010	21,462,186	11,818,670	9,643,516	55.1	44.9
2011	21,413,815	11,778,195	9,635,620	55.0	45.0

Source: Chirițescu Vergina, 2013, Integrated economic development in Romanian rural communities. Case Study on Macroregion 2, PhD Thesis, Institute of Economic Research "Costin C. Kirițescu", Romanian Academy, Bucharest.

The 12,956 villages - the basic units of rural area organization - grouped into 2,860 communes (the basic administrative - territorial units), located in the plains, hills and mountain areas, reveal the geographic diversity of the Romanian rural area, the historical conditions of the formation and organization of economic and social relations. The average size of a village is 800 inhabitants, ranging from a few households (less than 50 families) to over 10,000 inhabitants. Overall, the villages with less than 1,000 inhabitants account for three-quarters of total villages. The village density averages 5.5 villages / 100 km², being higher in the hills (8-9 villages / 100 km²) and the lowest (3 villages / 100 km²) in the mountain areas. The average size of a commune is 3,800 inhabitants, those with 2000 - 5000 inhabitants prevailing (63% of total). Inside the communes, the population is mainly concentrated in the main village of the commune (more than 50%), especially in the plain areas [www.insse.ro].

Human resources in agriculture

Another negative situation in the rural areas is *the phenomenon of population decline, together with the demographic aging of the population*. The active population in rural areas totals 4.6 million people, mostly working in agriculture. About 1 million people are involved in part-time agriculture, with jobs in the urban economy. The decrease of rural population has been almost a general characteristic in Romania; population decline can be noticed in 80% of communes. At present, the share of the active population in agriculture in the rural areas is also very high (35%) compared to the other EU countries (5% on the average). Most agricultural activities are meant to ensure the family subsistence, while the population is involved in the agro-processing or placing the produced products on the market only to a low extent. The non-agricultural activities, represented by various crafts of local interest or specific services, are less developed. *Human resources in agriculture* are involved in performing agricultural works, technical guidance, business management, marketing of products, making decisions, directly participating to the production activity. These resources are productive, getting directly involved in production and decision making, under the background of the diversity of regional natural resources, climate and other categories of resources. Human resources have had the highest dynamics both in terms of quantity and quality. In Romania, the great diminution of manpower in agriculture occurred in the period 1960 - 1989, followed by the increase of these resources; after the year 2000, a stabilization process followed, and then decline (Table 2).

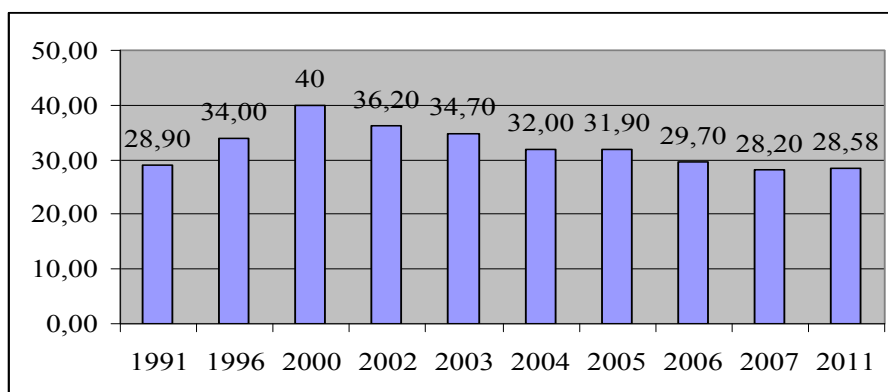
Table 2 - Evolution of labor resources in agriculture

Year		1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Active agricultural population	thousand persons	6233.1	4848.6	3048.1	3056.4	3523	2762
	% of total labor resources	65.4	49.1	29.4	28.2	37.6	29.5

Source: Romanian National Institute of Statistics, www.insse.ro.

Romania is confronted with the existence of numerous agricultural population and a low employment rate. With an agricultural population of over 3.3 million, accounting for about 56% of EU-15 agricultural population and 32% of the agricultural population in EU-25, the accession shock was strongly felt by the rural population. Support measures for rural economy diversification and stabilization of the young people in rural areas are of great importance now and in the years to come. With the modernization of farms, the agricultural population will have to find jobs in other fields of activity [Gavrilesco (2010)].

In Romania, the *population employed in agriculture* has similar shares to those in the developing countries. At the same time, since 1989 the trend has been contrary to the normal decreasing tendency, this share increasing from 28.9% in 1991 to 34% in 1996, to reach 40% in 2000. After this year, a decreasing trend could be noticed in our country; however, a slight increase followed after 2007 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The share of employment in agriculture in Romania

Source: Romanian National Institute of Statistics, www.insse.ro.

Although nearly 30% of the population is working in agriculture, this is the second largest sector of the Romanian economy, after industry; the actual performance of this sector is far from the soil and climate potential of our country and far away from the agricultural vocation of our nation. At present, the real problem is that agriculture "accommodates" a large number of workers (mainly temporary employment), and these workers are too many compared to the sector's ability to increase local and regional welfare. These people still represent a potential source of development for the rural areas, but they need appropriate training in order to improve the productivity and competitiveness of their work. In today's economy, *the increasing role of agriculture in national economies* is a phenomenon characteristic to all European countries, although the share of agriculture contribution to the gross domestic product declines, while the share of active population in agriculture is lower and should be further reduced. This phenomenon becomes understandable if we analyze the role of agriculture in the national economy not only in strict terms according to certain shares in the structure of macroeconomic indicators, but also by analyzing the functions of agriculture in overall economic growth and sustainable development of rural areas. One of the great advantages of agriculture is that it is a branch of the national economy that mainly relies on renewable resources (land, water, soil, etc.), unlike other industries that are using non-renewable, exhaustible natural resources (oil, coal, minerals, etc.). Agriculture modernization will contribute to increasing labor productivity or efficiency of work in agriculture. This will have a positive influence on the growth of agricultural productivity as a whole. The individual management (farmers) and the collective management (on the agricultural organizations and companies) have turned to be the human factor with decisive role in increasing agricultural performance in modern times.

Priorities of sustainable rural development in Romania

The concrete and complex challenges facing the rural communities in the current context, according to experts in community development and rural development, as well as to members of the rural communities - beneficiaries, practitioners and community development promoters, who participated in the processes of consultation and evaluation of rural development programs and policies in the period 2007 – 2013, should target the following priority areas:

- (1) *The social capital of rural communities.* The rural communities have a great social capital potential, which does not seem sufficiently used. Thus, in many rural communities, especially small and isolated, or in the Roma communities, we can notice a low self-confidence level, as well as low confidence in other

people and in institutions / organizations / authorities. In general, people are not convinced that they can change things for the better, this distrust being caused mainly by the lack of dialogue between citizens and public authorities, lack of participatory democratic exercise and of a coherent framework created by the authorities to stimulate participation. In addition, it is not unimportant that qualified human resources - teachers, doctors, agronomists, villagers, etc. have a low level of involvement in solving community problems; they lack a sustainable linkage with the community and, therefore, are not valued as role models or community leaders. At the same time, the initiative and leadership spirit in the rural communities is rather latent or unilaterally oriented towards solutions for individual problems. These issues make it difficult to recognize local resources and their outstanding value, while community mobilization to find the most efficient solutions for their use and regeneration, leading to increased community welfare seems an elusive ideal; individualism and egocentrism also seem to have reached the Romanian villages;

- (2) *Human resources in rural areas.* When referring to both the community members and the representatives of institutions, the human resources in rural areas have a low level of education and information in all fields (legislation, funding opportunities, European citizenship etc.). This situation is maintained because the young people who accede to higher education studies (even from high school), do not come back to the countryside. Basically, it is a vicious circle: the young people who continue their studies in urban areas do not come back in the countryside, because of the few options / opportunities, as they cannot find jobs here. The situation described above is even worse in the isolated rural communities, with an old population, as young people and adults, regardless of their education level, leave their native land for work. The identity of these lands is endangered, out of the lack of intergenerational dialogue (the elders in the community cannot transmit the intangible heritage to young generations). At the same time, the human resources from the Local Public Administration in the rural areas are not financially and professionally motivated, being often under-professionalized (specific jobs in the local government are occupied by people with less training or no training at all in specific areas) or overloaded at work (e. g. social referent dealing with the evidence of population as well as with other administrative duties at the local council);
- (3) *Policies developed at national level for rural areas.* The measures relating to economic development (including agriculture) and social development (including education) of rural areas lack coherence and coordination, maybe

because of the general lack of vision on rural development in Romania. At the same time, these measures are not sufficiently adapted to the real facts that the local communities have to face. The authorities responsible for formulating public policy measures do not sufficiently know the benefits of the participatory approach to community development and its potential results and benefits, or they lack continuity in supporting the participatory community development process, which can lead to the loss of the small gains accumulated during some specific actions and limited in time (trust, leadership, knowledge and skills, etc.);

- (4) *Deficient operation of institutions and authorities at local level.* We must firstly talk about the non-transparent allocation of resources from the local budget, in the absence of community consultation. These resources do not address the most pressing problems of the community members and are often poorly managed. For instance, school toilets are being built for which incredible amounts of money are used, new flooring, of poor quality, which gets deteriorated in one year, etc., which contribute to increasing suspicions about the possible corruption of local authority representatives and to the lack of confidence in them implicitly. At the same time, there is a condescending attitude of the employees of state institutions towards citizens, without being focused on solving the real problems they are facing. Racist and discrimination attitudes can be noticed when the citizens who are addressing the institutions belong to minorities, particularly the Roma minority. In addition, ignoring legislation is a common practice in many rural communities.
- (5) *Legislative framework.* In the current context of Romania, integrated into the European structures, a legislative framework is needed to accommodate the realities of the Romanian countryside and facilitate the best use of human potential in rural areas. We can talk about the lack of legislation facilitating the development of rural areas, the inadequacy of existing legislation to the concrete situation of rural communities, as well as about the specific practice of Local Public Authorities that ignores the current legislation, be it good or bad. When we talk about the legislation inadequacy to the situation of Romanian rural areas, we can think, for instance, of the legislation on entrepreneurship, which is still too complicated for the rural areas. For instance, for an Authorized Natural Person to be registered, this needs to go to the Trade Registry several times, instead of being registered at the local council, and its management is even more difficult. Another disadvantage that created difficulties both to the members of the rural communities and to the potential investors interested in these areas is the unclear situation in terms

of land legislation – uncompleted registration of (agricultural or urban) land areas in the Land Book at national level. The lack of certain facilities, including tax facilities, for the economic operators who work in the rural communities, increased the lack of interest of the economic operators or potential investors in the rural areas.

Considering the facts mentioned above, the most important goal of the **EU rural development policy**, which is in line with the recommendations of the Europe 2020 strategy, is to include the knowledge stock of local communities in the design of policies for these communities. This can be achieved by creating “grass root” participation mechanisms of rural people and of all stakeholders to initiate community actions based on their own needs, as identified on a participatory basis, and to help develop customized public policies that take into account the particularities of each category of beneficiaries.

In this context, the proposals addressing this challenge that are based on expertise, experience and lessons learned by beneficiaries, practitioners and promoters of community development in rural areas, who participated in the consultation process for drafting the White Charter 2012, include the creation of a mechanism for the design of public policies that should take into account the following aspects: to have a participatory basis, to be based on studies and statistical data; to be implemented at national level; to provide specific tools; to be monitored and evaluated and subject to regular assessment and review process.

These measures will contribute to the design of public policies adapted to the concrete situation existing in the Romanian countryside and will lead to the best use of knowledge and information, of the initiative and self-help spirit of community members, strengthen the social capital and participatory democracy. The period of application of those sets of measures must be of minimum 1 year and maximum 5 years in order to ensure the predictability of results.

Conclusions

The premise of *sustainable development of Romanian agriculture* is the efficient exploitation of existing resources by removing obstacles to development. The inventory of the main obstacles in the transition period, which constrained the reform and development of the Romanian agriculture and countryside, revealed that:

- although *the agricultural labor force* has a high share in agriculture as a whole, the skilled agricultural workforce has a low share. Although this is a well-known

phenomenon, no sustained measures have been taken for the qualification of human resources. The Romanian agricultural legislation has not introduced the professional farmer certificate yet and has not established the structures and mechanisms to promote them. At the same time, the financial - banking legislation does not link the bank loans for farmers to their qualification level (similarly to EU farmer green certificate), but only to the system of collaterals;

- *the rural labor force* has remained relatively stable at a high level (3.2 -3.5 million persons), as the SMEs upstream and downstream of agriculture have absorbed a small number of qualified people (skilled workers). In other words, industry and services from the upstream and downstream sectors still create few jobs that require skilled labor, having a low absorption capacity of the labor force potential in the rural areas;
- the enterprises that process *agricultural products* are technologically obsolete, with poor technical and economic performance, at the limit of, or most often, below the limit of profitability. Many of these companies, not having the financial capacity for technological reshaping and not being attractive for privatization, are in bankruptcy, liquidation and closure, continuing to generate rural unemployment. The situation of the rural labor force and the unsatisfactory management of households (farms) are largely due to the absence or inadequate operation of agricultural advisory services. Although the central authorities (the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) and the local authorities (municipalities, county councils) are competent structures for agricultural consultancy, due to the lack of qualified staff, the consultancy, extension and technical assistance mechanism is still inadequate in the agricultural practice in terms of effectiveness;
- *the agricultural market*, especially in the sales component of primary agricultural products (wheat, barley, maize, sunflower, soybean, milk, live animals, etc.) to the processing industry (storage centers, wholesalers ,etc.) is not properly operating, having a quasi monopolistic character, with clear trends of "spoliation" of farmers.

According to the statistical data used by the national legislation, the Romanian rural area covers 87.1% of the country and 45% of the population is living here, i.e. about 9.6 million people. In the mid-June of 2012, the Research Institute for the Quality of Life (www.iccv.ro) and the Institute of Social Economy (www.ies.org.ro) made public the results of a representative field survey of the farmers' associations, forest owners' associations and compossessorates from Romania, which shows that 75% of rural people are living in poverty. According

to the same survey, over 1,000,000 Romanian people living in the rural areas are unpaid family workers, people who have no wages, whose existence is based on the self-consumption of products obtained on their own households.

However, the statistical data provided by the study "*Romania in figures 2011*" of the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) reveal that the employment of people in rural areas follows a slightly increasing trend, even though Romania was seriously affected by the crisis in 2009 - 2010. Paradoxically, the employment rate had a 5.4% peak in 2009, which was the most difficult year of the economic crisis for Romania, up by 0.5% compared to 2007. At the same time, the long-term unemployment in rural areas decreased by 2% in the average, even among young people, the group that was mostly affected by unemployment. This could be a signal to decision makers about the ability of poor rural communities in Romania to respond to crisis situations. According to the same NIS study, in rural Romania, the employment opportunities are almost null, and the access to services, not always of good quality, is rather difficult. These are the reasons for people's migration from the rural to urban areas, mainly in the case of young people, 8.3 per thousand inhabitants in 2010, compared to 6.8 in 2007 and 6.0 in 2009. There is also a migration phenomenon from urban to rural areas, 13.8 per thousand in 2010 to 12.2 in 2007 and 10.0 in 2009; but it is not the young people who migrate in this case, and thus the population from the rural areas features demographic ageing.

However, the **Romanian rural area** has a huge potential that has to be put into value and exploited in sustainable terms, in order to revive the Romanians' identity and to increase their quality of life. The community development targets exactly that, mainly in the rural areas; this is a formative process that aims to increase the quality of life for all members of the community and involves capacity building for community members to be proactive.

The values underpinning community development and that are at the same time, promoted to the members and actors of the rural community are the following: civic participation; initiative spirit; voluntary participatory approach; social equity and cohesion; equal opportunities; the bottom-up development approach; social responsibility of all community members; the latent potential of the community (locally existing knowledge) and confidence in the community members that they are the best to find solutions to the problems they are facing.

The new focus on rural development, according to the European Charter of Rural Areas, highlights that rural areas in Europe are a precious landscape, fruit of a long history whose maintenance in good conditions is a vivid concern for the

society. The rural area can fulfill its functions of supply, relaxation and equilibrium, which are mostly desired by the society, only if it remains an attractive and original living space endowed with: good infrastructure; viable agriculture and forestry; local conditions favourable to business; an intact environment and a neat landscape.

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