

OPPORTUNITIES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE RURAL AREA AT THE LEVEL OF GALATI COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract

Sustainable development in rural areas can be identified through a series of projects that highlight both economic, environmental, social problems and measures to improve the quality of life. European standards imposed at local level created opportunities for development and modernization of rural life that raised the level of community trust in European funding instruments. From an economic point of view, it is appropriate to create strategies that include measures and methods of transforming the rural economy into a sustainable and performance focused on innovation. To implement these local strategies, the community will need to implement strategic projects in areas such as health, culture, entrepreneurship, agriculture and education. In the context of the presented ones, the paper constitutes a theoretical and practical analysis of the manner in which the opportunities, phenomena and economic and social processes from the rural area of Galati County must be approached.

Key words: sustainable development, strategies, European funds, opportunities

INTRODUCTION

The economic, environmental, social as well as the quality of life aspects of rural areas have a complex nature and have consistent implications in consolidating strategies for sustainable development of rural areas, starting with theoretical and practical ideas.

The sustainable development of the rural area is one of the most problematic and complex topics of the current situation, due to the fact that it implies achieving a balance between the desire to conserve the rural economic, educational and socio-cultural environment of the country, on the one hand, and the tendency of modernization of the rural environment, on the other hand. At the same time, this process of rural development is at the confluence between the tendency to expand the urban environment, the rapid development of the industry on account of the rural space and the requirement to maintain, as far as possible, the rural to its current dimensions. The totality of the measures and policies for the sustainable development of the rural environment, which tends to be modernized and aligned with European standards as an area, has as main

objective the maintenance and conservation of the national character of the rural space and culture. The opportunity created by this trend of modernization can create some strategies that include measures and methods of transforming the rural economy into a sustainable and performance-focused innovation. The urbanization process that takes place in Galati County has become one of the national problems, due to the disparities created between the rural environment and the city, which are materialized in cultural, economic and social factors, which are summarized in terms of urban and rural settlements, which define the different realities of the geographical space. On the other hand, there have been profound changes in the rural environment, which is why the traditional image of the rural environment with its specific cultural ensemble, undergoes a transformation, related to the contemporary technical process that influences the rural economy, but also elements of the rural economy. comfort, civilization, cultural traditions, education, spiritual life in the rural world. The practical implications of the notion of rural area are related to the legal elements, to the strategic

and operative actions related to the implementation of regional development policies, which involve the preferential use of resources to achieve economic social cohesion and other priority objectives of the European Union [4].

The rural area holds an important place in the history, civilization and national identity of European countries, both by the means of spatial and demographic dimensions and the economic, social, cultural and ecological dimensions. That is why, the important role the rural development policy has in the European policies, comes to us as natural. The future of Europe depends greatly on using the rural area development potential on sustainable principles [10].

Therefore, the purpose of our work is to evaluate the current situation of opportunities, phenomena and economic and social processes in rural areas at Galati County level.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the objective of the paper, we used a descriptive analysis based on the use of information on the demographic indicators of sustainable development in the rural areas identified in a series of reports, studies, works, statistics and publications Eurostat, INS - County Department of Statistics Galati and at the National Institute of Statistics of Romania, which should establish the level of economic development and quality of life in the rural areas of Galati County. From a technical point of view, the technique of indirect research was used, with various articles and specialized studies published until now.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the development point of view, the rural areas register a significant gap compared to the urban areas and are characterized by: persistent structural deficiencies (large number of the population employed in agriculture, aging of the population, a large number of subsistence farms, etc.); low added value of agri-food products; low labor productivity and productivity especially in semi-subsistence agriculture; weak entrepreneurial spirit for the

development of economic activities, reduced access to credits; a non-functioning land market; a modest export orientation; insufficient investments in research and development; access to services and infrastructure far behind urban areas; the continuous increase of regional disparities; a high share of the population exposed to the risk of poverty and social exclusion; an inefficient public administration; a series of risks for people and the environment exacerbated by climate change and which pose a threat to rural areas [12].

“From an administrative point of view, the Romanian rural area comprises 2861 communes, which includes 12,957 villages, taking into account the changes that have occurred in the last years in the administrative-territorial organization at the basic level of the UAT”[1]. Taking into account the synthesized information, we can make an analysis of the main demographic indicators that reflect the situation in which Galati County is in terms of rural development. If we consider the administrative-territorial structure of Galati County, in 2019, it comprised a number of 61 communes and 180 villages. During the years 2010-2020, there was no change in the number of communes / villages in Galati County. From the demographic point of view, the localities in the rural area of Galați County have, on average, 4,315 inhabitants, most are at a distance of less than 100 kilometers from the municipality of Galați, and the average area of the communes is 6,241 hectares. The population in the rural area has a tendency of continuous diminution due to the aging process that leads to a negative natural growth of the population, to which is added that more and more people choose to migrate to the countries of Western Europe. The rate of internal migration from urban to rural area in Galati County is positive in recent years, but it cannot balance the fall caused by the two trends and is representative for the population over 45 years. As for the younger population, it is rather attracted to the urban environment. The factors that influence this decision to migrate to the urban area are strictly related to the slow process of economic, cultural, health and educational infrastructure development.

Stabilizing the population in the rural region is one of the fundamental problems of sustainable development. From this point of view, according to NIS data (2019), over 620,000 people lives in the Galati county and from those over 260,000 lives in rural area [11].

The rural population from Galati County recorded an involution during the entire reference period (Table 1). The number of people registered in 2019 was 7,862 people

lower than in 2015. The ratio between male and female population at county level in the rural area is quite close, registering 136,306 male and 131,853 female. The same proportions are also maintained in the South-East region, the male population being slightly larger. The percentages are reversed at national level, where 49.9% of the people are male and 50.1% are female [5].

Table 1. Population of Galati County

Years	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Urban	363,411	361,422	359,737	358,699	359,342
Rural	271,952	271,491	271,094	269,577	268,159
Total	635,363	632,913	630,831	628,276	627,501

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from Tempo on line data base for 2019, NIS.

An important factor in the economic development of the rural environment is the business environment. Therefore, in Galati County, the commerce sector has a share of 40.83% of the sector of industries operating throughout the county. Regarding the field of agriculture, it represents only 4.11% of the total of companies operating in this field from Galati County. The companies activating in the area are mostly concerned with commerce followed by manufacturing, construction industry, transport and agriculture. Of the total of those present in the county of Galati, in the

rural area are found most of the companies active in the agricultural field. Companies in the field of commerce, construction and transport are operating in the urban environment.

If we do an analysis on the companies that carry out their activity in both the rural and urban areas, we will see that most are represented by micro-enterprises (Table 2). It seems that entrepreneurs in rural areas face a major problem in terms of workforce and prefer to set up small companies and then develop them.

Table 2. Structure of companies of Galati County

Structure of companies according to the number of employees	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Micro (0–9 persons)	10,337	10,477	10,870	11,257	11,432
Small (10 – 49 persons)	1,086	1,111	1,063	1,066	1,074
Medium (50–249 persons)	186	207	198	181	195
Large (>250 persons)	40	39	39	37	37

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from Tempo on line data base for 2019, NIS.

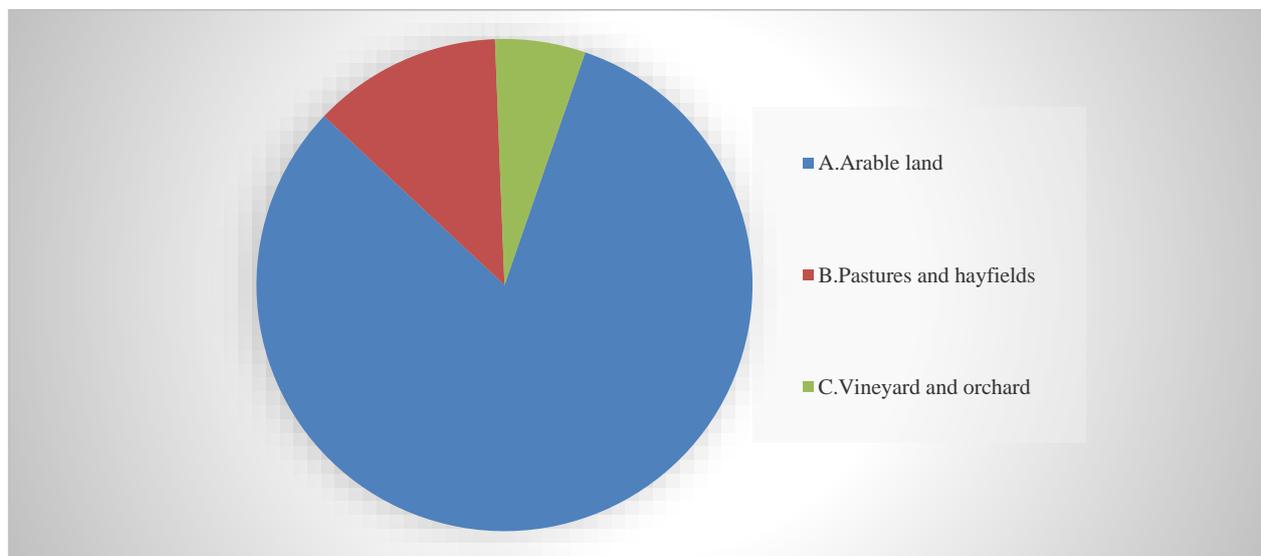
Most of the active population from the rural area work in agriculture where there is a low productivity and, consequently, the incomes are lower than in the urban environment. This factor influences the desire of the population from the rural area to migrate to the urban area where the fields of activity are diverse and the

facilities offered can bring an additional income to the families from the rural area. Agriculture is the main source of income in the rural area, but the incomes of the households of the rural people are regularly lower than those registered in the rural households that also have income from wages, obtained by carrying out

other activities (trade, tourism, construction). In order to have a sustainable development, their involvement in the activities that bring income is a problem that needs to be solved. The strategies created at central level with an impact on the rural environment will have to be focused on creating a favorable environment for the development of small businesses in other areas that reduce the migration of the population to the urban environment. A dynamic agricultural sector is an important foundation of rural development, generating strong links with other economic sectors. The rural living environment is improved by the effective participation of people and communities in managing their own social, economic and environmental goals through the involvement of people in rural areas [11]. The agricultural area of Galati County has a share of 80.23% of the land fund. Therefore, out of 446,632 ha as the total county area, in 2014, the agricultural area was 358,311 ha.

From 2000 until now, there has been a decrease of the agricultural area by 443 ha. The agricultural area of Galati County, by categories of use, is divided as follows (Fig. 1): 81.75% is occupied with arable land (292.926 ha), 12.35% with pastures and hay (44.268 ha), and 5.89 % with vineyards and orchards (21,117 ha).

As the society develops as a whole, the analysis of agricultural productivity has gained increasing interest, now it is simply essential in the planning of any activity in the economic environment. Increased productivity has allowed food to become less limited, and therefore cheaper. However, the question arises whether this can be done to become constant, because productivity is considered a prerequisite, in order to face the challenge of feeding the population at national level. The agriculture and the environment in which they operate may differ substantially between Member States.



A - 81.75% B - 12.35% C - 5.89%

Fig. 1. Structure of the agricultural area in Galati County

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from Tempo on line data base for 2019, NIS.

Thus, the question of how productive agriculture is and how the gaps between developed and least developed countries can be reduced remains relevant. As a result, the agricultural sector is challenged to achieve more, with less. Starting with 2010, the Romanian agricultural sector has registered consistent productivity accumulations, marking an average annual growth of 3.1%,

higher than the one registered at the level of the European Union (about 1%). The average advance of the productivity of the domestic agriculture was more alert compared to that of Hungary and Poland, similar economies in terms of the characteristics of the agricultural sector. In the last 10 years, Romanian agriculture has recorded productivity gains, significantly higher than those registered in

Hungary and Poland. However, from the level perspective, the efficiency of the utilization of the production factors by the local farms is placed on a lower level compared to these countries, a situation that can be largely attributed to the excessive degree of fragmentation of the agricultural holdings, which is reflected in the dominance of the small farms. Therefore, encouraging, for the time being, timid steps for the association of local producers is likely to contribute to recovering the productivity gap between indigenous agriculture and the other European economies [8].

Analyzing the situation from the point of view of the agricultural productivity at Galati County level, the average production expressed in tons, did not register significantly different values for the two forms of ownership (total and private). In the county of Galati, in 2018, higher quantities were obtained for each

of the main crops compared to the quantities at national or regional level. The total average grain production for grains in Galati County was 881,848 tons, that of wheat and rye 179,704 tons, barley and barley was 58,620 tons, and corn maize 639,398 tons. For the sunflower a total average production of 147,179 tons was obtained, for the sugar beet 7,423 tons and for the potatoes 15,887 tons. The total output of the agricultural sector was calculated based on the income generated by the four major activities, namely plant, animal, services and secondary activities (Table 3). At European level, the EU is down in this respect, among the countries with the largest decreases, with Lithuania (-33%), Latvia (-29%) and Germany (-18%). According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Romania registered a 2.3% increase over last year, with wheat harvesting more than 10.2 million tons.

Table 3. Agricultural production of agricultural goods and services (thousands lei current prices)

Galati County	Total	Vegetable	Animal	Agricult. services
2014	2,289,934	1,785,614	466,660	37,660
2015	2,134,227	1,628,712	482,613	22,902
2016	2,389,740	1,909,518	462,237	17,985
2017	2,449,293	1,988,903	446,618	13,772
2018	2,695,443	2,695,443	2,695,443	2,695,443

Source: Own calculation on the basis of data from Tempo on line data base for 2019, NIS [7].

And the production of barley was affected by the dry air wave that swept over Europe, harvesting this year by 4%. However, the decrease also contributed to the fact that the area dedicated to barley crops decreased in winter by over 11%, not being compensated by the spring growth, by only 4%. In contrast to the evolution recorded at EU level, initial estimates show that in 2018, Romania obtained a substantial 9.5% increase in barley harvest. As a result of these developments at EU level, grain prices reached a high during August, reaching levels higher than last year: 50 euros/ton for wheat and 60 euros/ton for barley. Sugar beet production recorded the smallest decrease at EU level of only 1.7%, after the elimination of quotas in October 2017, favored a record production of + 27% in 2017/2018. But the excess production has led

to a rapid decrease in the purchase price, but also the sugar price, which is also felt in our country [2].

Regarding the level of education of the population in rural areas, it is lower than that of the population in the urban area. This is a factor that can influence the desire of young families to ensure a better future for their children through a much better education in the urban environment. At Galati County level, according to NIS data, 170 educational units have been identified, out of which 17 having a private character in which they study a number of 94,549 persons. Another identified problem that slows down the process of sustainable development in the rural area is the infrastructure. Considering all the measures implemented through national development programs and the efforts made by the public

administration, there are still areas where infrastructure is still poorly developed in the rural region at the level of Galati County. The length of the roads in counties and townships that were modernized was 589 km in 2017, which represents about 37,78 % from the total. The public infrastructure which ensures the water, sewage and marsh gas supplies is still very rare in the rural area. In 2017 from a total of 61 townships, only 28 (45.90 %) were connected to public sewerage, 10 to the natural gases (16.39%) and 59 (96.72 %) had running water.

Sustainable development in the rural environment means first of all the improvement of the quality of life, the diversification of the economic activities of the rural environment, as well as the attainment of the proposed economic indicators to increase the productivity level. At the level of Galati County, for the rural area, it is proposed to diversify the areas in which jobs can be created (outside agricultural activities), to make the access and links between the urban and rural areas more efficient, to allow the transmission of information and create synergies between the environment. urban social with rural. Also for the rural development it is important to support the entrepreneurs in the agricultural field and to support the diversification of the products, to combat the risk in the agricultural field and to develop the infrastructure of roads and buildings (for education or vocational training). For such actions, organizational tools have been created that allow quick and easy access to certain financing programs with local impact, called LAGs (Local Action Groups). Local action groups represent public-private partnerships made up of various representatives of the socio-economic sector in the respective territory. They may be the representatives of the various fields, including representatives of civil society. The LAGs elaborate an integrated local rural development strategy and are responsible for its implementation. Regarding the development of the rural environment, in Galati County there are the following local action groups that are involved in projects of sustainable development of the rural environment: the Local Action Group "Tecuci Development

Association", "Covurlui LAG Association", Local Action Group Association "The Low Meadow of Siret", Association of Local Action Group "Siret Barlad Est" and Association of Local Action Group "Eremia Grigorescu 1863" Galati [3].

These newly created structures only facilitate the relationship of public administrations or private organizational structures to develop projects that solve the problems identified at local level in areas such as: education, culture, infrastructure, tourism, business environment, agriculture, social services, etc. The great chance for the development of rural localities seems to be represented, after accession, by the European funding programs. The manner in which these structures can develop certain projects at rural level, is the basis of the financing obtained through two financing programs: LEADER and NPRD (National Program for Rural Development). The LEADER program it is part of the European Union's Community initiatives. This initiative was born on the occasion of the reform of the Structural Funds in 1989. The purpose of the LEADER program is to provide support and to encourage the inhabitants of the rural area to evaluate the long-term development opportunities of the micro-region. The intention is to support the implementation of integrated strategies, with innovative solutions and that ensure the sustainable development of the region through: protecting the local cultural and natural heritage; strengthening the rural economy, which means first and foremost job creation; improving the administrative capacity of local communities.

"The National Program for Rural Development 2014-2020 is the program that grants non-reimbursable funds from the European Union and the Government of Romania for the economic - social development of the rural area in Romania. NPRD is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The EAFRD is a financial instrument created by the European Union to support the Member States in implementing the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). NPRD (funded from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) supports the strategic development of the rural area through

the strategic approach of the following objectives: OS1 Restructuring and increasing the viability of agricultural holdings; OS2 Sustainable management of natural resources and combating climate change; OS3 Diversification of economic activities, job creation, improvement of infrastructure and services for improving the quality of life in rural areas. Considering these instruments that can have a major impact on the sustainable development of the rural environment, we can say that there are equal opportunities for the economic growth of the rural environment as well as the urban one, but based on the analysis of the statistical data we observe an asymmetrical development of these environments” [9].

Most of the 61 localities of Galati County that currently make up the rural area, face a low degree of basic infrastructure development, but they are eligible for investment projects. However, the existing human resources are not uniformly distributed among the territorial administrative units. The first measure in ensuring the efficient use of the funds allocated through the NRDP 2014-2020 is the identification of the areas where the realization of investments in infrastructure would register the highest levels of the effect / effort ratio from the perspective of socio-economic development [6].

The measures that are required at the level of the local public administrations must take into account a concrete strategy that involves the involvement of both the private and public environment regarding the absorption rate of the European funds for the sustainable development of the rural environment. Development solutions need to be looked at with different measures for each locality, because there is a different character and a specific degree for each of them. As a result, it can be concluded that for each locality there must be a development strategy with an efficient medium and long term impact, as well as a well structured local action plan, in order to benefit from the advantages offered by the specificity of the area.

Strengthening and developing the local economy by attracting new investors and supporting local entrepreneurs will contribute

to increasing the quality of life of the population both directly and indirectly. Directly by creating diverse and well-paying jobs and indirectly by increasing the local budget. “In this way the local public authorities will be able to support the development of services in the field of education, health, culture, social services and will be able to launch works of modernization and development of the infrastructure. The support of the agricultural sector is one of the most feasible variants at the local level, considering the resources owned by the localities of Galati County”.

CONCLUSIONS

Galati County needs a radical transformation in terms of sustainable development of the rural environment. This involves highlighting the cultural, economic identity and creating a favorable business environment both in the agricultural sector and in various fields of services. The basic functions of rural, economic, ecological and socio-cultural areas are the key dimensions of sustainable development. The theoretical analysis presented in this article emphasizes the socio-economic data and the current and future characteristics for creating tools suitable for sustainable rural development directions.

Thus, we can say that the sustainable development of the rural region is a concrete objective of the rural policy that aims at its conservation and development, the development of the economic environment and the improvement of the quality of life. This objective can be achieved by outlining some appropriate policy options and strategies that will meet the agreement of the involved territorial administrative units, economic agents and the population. The development of basic infrastructure and local services in rural areas are the essential tools in any activity to exploit the growth potential and to promote the sustainability of rural areas. Infrastructure development is the first step in the local development process. Facilitating the access of the population from the rural area to utilities (running water, sewerage, natural gas and electricity) will increase the interest of the

population towards the rural area, acting as an “adhesive” for the potential investors. It is the creation and support of the economic environment thus creating a competitive, stable and diversified space, in order to ensure the continuous economic growth and the increase of the quality of life of the inhabitants.

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