

IMPACT OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IMPLEMENTATION ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EVOLUTION OF THE RURAL COMMUNITIES IN CĂLĂRAȘI COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract

Through this study, we have proposed as an objective, an evaluation of the impact that rural development programs have on the economic and social development of the rural environment, carrying out a case study in Călărași county. Thus, we monitored the extent to which the funds accessed by the Călărași County Council corresponded to the objectives assumed by our country through the Partnership Agreement with the European Union, respectively, whether the financing measures corresponded to the rural development needs of the analyzed county, through the portfolio of implemented projects in the programming period 2014-2020. The investigation methods used in the analysis process were, on the one hand, of a theoretical nature - consisting in the study of the specialized bibliography in the field of public administration, of funding programs from European or national non-reimbursable funds, but also of a practical - application nature - consisting of data collection, their analysis and processing in order to identify projects and financing programs from the portfolio of the Călărași County Council for the evaluation of the impact their implementation had on the overall development of the rural area of the county. Through this approach, we appreciate that the county institution is concerned with accessing non-reimbursable funds for the effective development of rural communities, making its mark in the promotion of cultural and natural heritage, in the development of transport and tourist infrastructure, in anchoring rural communities to the European economic and social space. Although in recent years, Călărași county experienced an important development regarding the accessibility, as well as the infrastructure of utilities and public services, the county remaining deficient in terms of port infrastructure, connectivity infrastructure with Bulgaria across the Danube, wastewater collection infrastructure and of waste.

Key words: development, European financing, project management, objectives, strategy .

INTRODUCTION

The collaboration of the Călărași County Council with territorial administrative units and co-financing of their projects has brought huge benefits to local communities, in terms of increasing the quality of local and county road infrastructure, social and cultural-educational services infrastructure [10]. We thus appreciate that the involvement of institutions with responsibilities in accessing and implementing funds with European and/or national funding has a great contribution in solving some local problems of the communities, which cannot be solved from the local budget funds [2].

In addition, in solving the infrastructure problem, Călărași County Council supported the administrative-territorial units in the

county to apply, themselves, to the National Local Development Program, the National Investment Company (C.N.I.) and Anghel Saligny Investment Program to receive funding for the projects of roads, connection to the water/sewage network, rehabilitation/modernization/extension and endowment of schools, as well as those of construction/rehabilitation, modernization, endowment of cultural hostels [6]. Thus, the Călărași County Council created the possibility for administrative-territorial units to access a large part of the sums allocated to the county, the institution appealing to the Regional Operational Program to obtain financing for projects aimed at the energy efficiency of public buildings, road and educational infrastructure [13].

In the project portfolio of the Călărași County Council, environmental and green energy projects have been accessed and implemented, as well as in the field of socio-cultural and educational services, the development of tourism infrastructure. All these project ideas materialized much more easily by accessing European funds, which were adapted to the real needs of local communities.

Both Călărași County Council and the territorial administrative units ensured the citizens the right to participate in the decision-making process through a permanent public consultation process, to participate in economic progress through a perpetual process of social inclusion based on measures that allows disadvantaged people access to employment, to improve professional skills, as well as unrestricted access to health and educational services. Our recommendations aim, in particular, to continue efforts to increase the quality of road and educational infrastructure, as well as social and health services, both for the rural/urban population, but also the orientation towards the development of specific social services for vulnerable persons, with disabled, marginalized people in risk situations [7, 8].

It is appreciable that for the achievement of the project ideas of the territorial administrative units, Călărași County Council through its specialized apparatus and with the approval of the county councilors allocates amounts between 1,469,000 lei and 32,000 lei broken down from the value added tax to balance local budgets and broken down amounts from income tax [13]. Also, Călărași County Council distributes amounts from the fund established at its disposal of 6% of the income tax estimated to be collected from the state budget in 2022 for the co-financing of their investment projects [12].

These amounts allow project ideas to materialize and bring a new breath by relieving the own budget of these expenses. That is why the continuation of the granting process must be perpetuated for the benefit of the citizens of Călărași county.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Through the data collection and analysis process, we had the following objectives in mind: orientation and prioritization of the Călărași County Council in the development of project ideas with European or national funding; the correlation of these project ideas with the county's development strategy and the evaluation of the impact of the implementation of these projects on the development of the county; identification of risk factors in project implementation; the measures taken to increase the added value of the projects and to ensure their co-financing. [2]. In order to demonstrate the proposed objectives, the data collection activity was carried out at Călărași County Council, a public authority of county interest, which carries out activities in the field of local public administration, and which shows a special concern for the improvement of the living conditions of the county residents [5].

In order to identify the impact of accessing European funds and the implementation of national rural development programs on the economic and social development of the county, we consulted the representatives of the county institution involved in this process, who provided us with an analysis of the current situation and facilitated interviews with the mayors of the localities where such projects were implemented, steps aimed at obtaining information to substantiate the objective proposed in this study. The documents analyzed in the data collection process represent the 2014-2020 programming period and followed the Programs, Priorities and Financing Measures that were the basis of the implementation of project ideas in the county under study [12]. The investigation methods used in the analysis process are divided into two categories [1, 9]: theoretical methods - consisting in the study of specialized materials from the field of public administration, of financing programs from non-reimbursable European or national funds; practical - application methods - consisting in the collection of data, a process that proved to be a particularly important one in identifying the projects and funding programs of the

Călărași County Council and their impact on the economic and social development of the Călărași county.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Every approach of the territorial administrative units (municipalities), including the approach of Călărași County Council, is aimed at improving the live and living conditions of the local communities, avoiding disparities and social exclusion.

From the analysis carried out by us, for the purpose of carrying out this work, it follows that there is a lot of interest in the rehabilitation of the road, educational, social and environment infrastructure, through the financing programs intended for these purposes.

Starting from the programs and financing lines accessed, below we present the situation from the point of view of the assumed objectives, risks, constraints and consequences of the actions of Călărași County Council, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The general matrix of the impact of implemented rural development programs

<i>Fields</i>	<i>Impact</i>				
	<i>Stakes</i>	<i>Risks</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Constraints</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
<i>Road infrastructure</i>	Favorable geographical positioning, with good connectivity to the A2 motorway	Lack of financing	Sustainable development of county localities	Fragmentation of properties and the ambiguous situation on the legal regime of land	Deficient road infrastructure
<i>Social infrastructure</i>	Capitalizing on development opportunities	Non-allocation of the participatory budgeting tool	Accessing non reimbursable funds	insufficient allocated funds to national level for social infrastructure development	Poorly developed social assistance infrastructure
<i>Medical infrastructure</i>	Capitalizing on financing opportunities	Lack of professionals in the field	Ensuring some quality services, at high standards	Lack of needed funds	Unsatisfactory medical services
<i>Cultural infrastructure</i>	Development of leisure infrastructure	lack of solutions for spare time spending	Organization of shows and plays	Lack of needed funds	Lack of recreation spaces
<i>Environment infrastructure</i>	Capitalizing on the potential of renewable resources: solar energy, biomass	Lack of infrastructure for selective collection and capitalization of waste	Creation of infrastructure needed for selective collection	Non-application of the provisions of the integrated environment strategy at county level	Inefficient management of municipal waste
<i>Tourism</i>	Capitalizing on the existing tourist potential (leisure, cultural, business, scientific, sports tourism)	Lack of tourist accommodation units availability	Creation of some new accommodation facilities	Tourist offer of the neighbouring areas has a high attractivity degree	Insufficiently exploited tourist potential
<i>Digitalization</i>	Ensuring digital public services for citizens	Lack of financing	Creation of an integrated information system with role of Portal for citizens	Failure to capitalize on funding opportunities on time	Weak interest from citizens

Source: Made by the authors based on information processed from Călărași County Council [2].

As shown in Table 2, a project of interest to Călărași County Council was the project “Modernization and rehabilitation of the county road DJ 306 section Cuza Vodă (DN3) - Socoalele - Ialomița county border km 0+000 - km 36+000”, financed by the Regional Operational Program 2014 - 2020, Priority Axis 6/Investment Priority 6.1 which refers to the increase of road infrastructure of regional importance, respectively, to the stimulation of regional mobility by connecting the secondary and tertiary nodes of the TEN-T

The project will rehabilitate and modernize county road 306, km 0+000 – km 33+360, which runs on the territory of the localities Ceacu (Cuza Vodă commune) - Floroaica (Vilcelele commune) - Dragoș Vodă (DN3A) - Socoalele (Dragoș commune Vodă) - Grădiștea - Independence - the border of Călărași county with Ialomița county.

The total value of the project is 53,815,805.32 lei, of which the amount of non-refundable financing requested is 53,614,940.79 lei.

Table 2. Impact of projects achieved under Regional Operational Program 2014 – 2020

PROJECT TITLE	FINANCING PROGRAM	IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD	RESULTS/IMPACT
Rehabilitation and modernization of the county road in the area Cuza Vodă (DN3) - Socoalele	Regional Operational Program 2014 – 2020	15.04.2017-15.05.2020	Significant improvement of the mobility of rural residents to the main national road networks and the A2 highway. Creation of 36 jobs for the residents of the area.
PROJECT TITLE	FINANCING PROGRAM	IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD	RESULTS/IMPACT
Increasing the energy efficiency of bodies A, B, C and D at the County Emergency Hospital “Dr. Pompeii Samaritan” Călărași	Regional Operational Program 2014 – 2020	05.02.2020-05.03.2024	Ensuring the energy efficiency of the public building "Dr. Emergency County Hospital “Pompei Samaritan” Călărași. Creation of 15 jobs for the residents of the area.

Source: Made by the authors based on information processed from Călărași County Council [2].

In the Development Strategy of Călărași County for the period 2021 - 2027, the construction of 250 km of roads connected to the TEN-T network, to be rehabilitated or modernized, and which lead, at least partially, to solving the problems related to transport, which represents one of the key socio-economic aspects of the county.

From the information collected, 93 km of roads were connected to the TEN-T network through rehabilitation and modernization, and action will be taken in this regard in the following period as well.

The county administration, as well as the administrative-territorial units (municipalities of the county) aim in the next period to facilitate quick and safe access to all areas and localities of Călărași county, in order to increase labor force mobility, improve living conditions and expand the environment business [4].

From our analysis it results that, up to this moment, 93 km of roads connected to the TEN-T network have been rehabilitated or modernized, the goal being that their value will increase in the next years. The county administration, as well as the administrative-territorial units (municipalities of the county) aim in the next period to facilitate quick and safe access to all areas and localities of Călărași county, in order to increase labor force mobility, improve living conditions and expand the environment business [4].

The actions foreseen in order to achieve this objective, as presented in Tables 3 and 4, aimed at:

- Achievement of Tourist leisure port;
- Achievement of Promenade;
- Achievement of bridge over Borcea branch;
- Achievement of ring road for Călărași municipality
- Achievement of ring road for Oltenița municipality;

- Achievement of connection DN4 – DJ301 as a pass by Budești town;
 - Construction of railway crossings on DN 21 in Drajna area, DN 3 in the Lehliu Gară area, on DJ 301 and Călărași municipality -

Sloboziei street. An achieved objective was the rehabilitation, in the period 2014-2020, through the National Local Development Program (P.N.D.L.) of the ring road - the Ring Road.

Table 3. Impact of the projects achieved under Investment program the National Road Infrastructure Administration Company

PROJECT TITLE	FINANCING PROGRAM	IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD	RESULTS/IMPACT
Construction of railway crossings on DN 21 in the Drajna area, DN 3 in the Lehliu Gară area, on DJ 301 and Călărași municipality - Sloboziei street.	Investment program National Road Infrastructure Administration Company	30.09.2021-30.04.2023	Streamlining of traffic by creating an overpass on DN21 with a length of 2.739 km. Creation of 48 jobs for the residents of the area.

Source: Made by the authors based on information processed from Călărași County Council [2].

Table 4. Impact of "Anghel Saligny" Financing Program

PROJECT TITLE	FINANCING PROGRAM	IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD	RESULTS/IMPACT
Building a bridge over Borcea Branch	Anghel Saligny	18.11.2021-18.12.2024	Ensuring the possibility of crossing Borcea branch by creating leisure facilities. Creation of 25 jobs for the residents of the area.

Source: Made by the authors based on information processed from Călărași County Council [2].

The interest of Călărași County Council was also manifested regarding the modernization and rehabilitation of roads of regional and local interest, from the desire to bring as many roads of regional or local interest in Călărași County into good condition, so that they are created the premises of a sustainable economic development, including by exploiting the tourism potential of the area and the traditions of local communities.

The conclusion drawn from our analysis is that, during the period under evaluation, the total length of rehabilitated or modernized county roads was 149.85 km. In parallel, Călărași County Council supported the administrative-territorial units in the county to submit projects through the National Local Development Program, CNI, programs of national interest, which focused on road, sanitary, social, educational infrastructure and connection to the network of water/canal, as well as through the Regional Operational Program.

These actions were designed to support the development of road networks by

modernizing alternative traffic safety systems, by creating alveoli and parking lots, roundabouts, traffic lights at congested intersections and making appropriate road markings.

Thus in the period subject to evaluation, there were achieved:

*Refuges on narrow or congested road sectors;

* Construction of parking lots and sidewalks in urban and peri-urban areas;

*Achievement of markings and road signs in accordance with the identified needs;

*Achievement of roundabouts in the agglomerations inside the localities, as well as at the crowded intersections of the external roads;

* Traffic lights at busy intersections in towns and cities.

Another notable objective of Călărași County Council was the modernization of the railway transport infrastructure by creating the premises for intermodal transport.

Thus, Ciulnița Station and the railways that cross the county, as well as those that connect

the most important railway node in the area, are being rehabilitated. The purpose of the approach is to facilitate the access of people and goods, from the railway system to the naval system, by establishing a railway route to the Danube in Călărași municipality, as well as by rehabilitating the railway that connects Oltenița municipality with Bucharest.

The transport infrastructure was and is a priority for Călărași County Council, in view of the fact that it ensures the mobility of the labor force from the rural environment to the urban environment to the county municipality.

For this category of beneficiaries, Călărași County Council has taken steps to create bicycle paths that serve all areas of the city, by implementing the project “Promoting eco-tourism in Călărași Danube area through cycle tourism and the use of non-motorized fishing boats for the purpose of conservation the environment”.

Another important objective of Călărași County Council and the administrative-territorial units in the county was the improvement of the critical technical-building infrastructure for the county: public utility networks by increasing the quality of life of the county's residents. At the level of the communes in the county, multiple interventions were carried out aimed at the

modernization and expansion of public utilities [11].

Through this objective, one of the most important weak points identified in SWOT analysis was and is being tried to be treated, which reflects the communities reduced access to water and wastewater infrastructure, the inadequate quality of drinking water and the lack of sewage and sewage treatment facilities of wastewater in certain areas (especially rural). In Călărași county, there is a large regional operator in the field of water management, which has expanded its activity to the territory of Ialomița county. The final goal is to cover all towns, communes and as many component villages as possible with complex and modern public utility services. The development of tourism through an integrated approach involving a high quality of services, accommodation conditions, labor force, transport, environment and general ambience is also a priority [3].

Through its development, tourism contributes to the economic, social and environment well-being of the county, and through its geographical location, with a particularly attractive landscape, created by the presence of the Danube, with its wild forests and its rich fauna, with strong historical resonances and ethnographic, Călărași county offers an incredible potential for tourist development, insufficiently exploited.

Table 5. Parallel between the program and the financing lines related to the periods 2014-2020, respectively 2021-2027

Programele și liniile de finanțare aferente perioadei 2014-2020	Programele și liniile de finanțare aferente perioadei 2021-2027
Regional Operational Program (POR)	National Recovery and Resilience Program (PNRR)
Large Infrastructure Operational Program (POIM)	Operational Program Sustainable Development (PODD)
Administrative Capacity Operational Program (POCA)	Operational Program Transport (POT)
Interreg VA RO-BG	Operational Program Smart Growth and Digitalization (POCID)
National Local Development Program (PNDL)	National Health Program (multifond) (PNS)
The National Investment Program of the National Investment Company (CNI)	Operational Program Human Capital (POCU)
The National Housing Program of the National Housing Agency (ANL)	Integrated Territorial Development Operational Program (multifond) (PODTI)
Tourism action funding program of the Ministry of Tourism (MT)	Regional Operational Programs – implemented at region level (8 POR)

Source: Made by the authors based on information processed from Călărași County Council [2] .

The comparative situation of the Operational Programs through which economic and social development projects were financed in Călărași County, respectively, the period 2014-2020, with the period 2021-2027 is presented in Table 5.

Based on the eligibility conditions of Călărași County Council and the administrative-territorial (commune) units, there is still the possibility of accessing them for the development of the communities of Călărași county.

Analyzing the situation, it is further observed that the concerns of Călărași County Council were also aimed at improving the institution capacity to provide transparent services, by carrying out an institutional-level analysis through which vulnerabilities were identified and corrected, as well as by improving the knowledge and skills of employees, local elected officials/officials in this area.

CONCLUSIONS

From this analysis, it resulted that special emphasis was given to the Regional Operational Program 2014-2020 (33% of the implemented projects), through which problems related to road, health and social infrastructure were solved. In addition, in continuation of this approach, the institution appealed to national funding sources (PNL, CNI, ANL, Ministry of Tourism, representing, in total, 35% of the implemented projects). Another concern of Călărași County Council concerned the integrated solid waste management system in Călărași County by creating a selective waste collection platform in Ciocănești commune through the Large Infrastructure Operational Program (POIM 20% of implemented projects). The project continues, in stage II and in the current programming period.

The conclusion that emerges is that the approach of Călărași County Council was that its interventions cover as wide an area as possible of the investment priorities accessed. Starting from the conclusions drawn and taking into account the particularities specific to the local context of the county, we propose

that the Strategy of Călărași County Council for rural development includes:

(i) Continuation of digitization of public services intended for citizens and for administrative-territorial (commune) units in the county

(ii) Stimulating and supporting agriculture and animal husbandry, the local business environment, thus offering a good potential for growth and development of local communities

(iii) Investments in human capital, as the main condition for obtaining economic performance through actions in the area of education, actions reflected in the quality of education, which is closely linked to the job market

(iv) Increasing the quality of housing and reducing the gaps between communities by stimulating investors and creating the necessary jobs

(v) Accessing non-refundable European funds for the integration and empowerment of Roma citizens.

(vi) Capitalizing on the tourism potential of local communities by investing in *creating recreation and leisure facilities.

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