

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RURAL SPACE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA – ESSENTIAL FACTOR FOR THE PURPOSE OF PERFORMANCE REGISTRATION BY THE MANAGEMENT OF THE LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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### *Abstract*

*The knowledge, research and continuous development of the rural space is of increased interest for the academic environment in a country with imposing dimensions of the countryside such as the Republic of Moldova, dimensions marked both by the areas belonging to the rural environment and by the share of the population from villages. Despite a rapid urbanization, caused by the unprecedented industrialization of the second half of the 20th century, which generated not only a reduction in the share of the population employed in agriculture, forestry, fish farming, but also significantly decreased the share of income collected from agricultural activities in GDP, the importance of the rural space does not decrease, it is imposing itself more and more, including through the global trend of protecting the environment and capitalizing on the picturesque places available to the countryside. Humanity has set as its objective the greening of social and economic life, and the rural environment is of crucial importance in achieving it.*

*Key words:* management, Moldova, public administration, rural space

### INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Doga argues that "the countryside, in the banal but real sense of the term, appeared on the surface of the earth with the decentralization of man and the appearance of the first settlements for agricultural production. In historical time, a series of enduring relationships were created between rural societies and the land they took over, reinforced by traditions, customs and interests, expressed in the landscape through different types of rural spaces" [1, pp. 36].

Hence the etymology of the word "rural", which originates from the Latin "rurs" or "ruris", which implies the cultivation of fields or land occupied, inhabited, managed and processed by man.

Rural means land, land predominantly occupied by forests, seedbeds, green spaces,

and the community in particular being an agrarian one.

Nowadays, "under the impact of urbanization, the countryside has undergone obvious structural changes, improvements and improvements to increase the productive capacity of the land, to modernize the rural habitat. The expansion of urban space, the development of communication routes, the establishment of non-agricultural activities, the introduction of techniques and technologies have led to the loading of rural space with new relationships, enriching it qualitatively and quantitatively" [8, pp. 36].

In this context, the aim of this research is to present the general characteristics of rural areas in the Republic of Moldova, in order to identify interconnections and points of convergence destined to improve the performance of local public administration management.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this purpose, a combined qualitative and quantitative research was used with the aim of describing both the basic characteristics of rural areas and the way of life and living standards of the population in rural areas. In order to identify the specific characteristics and analyze the level of development of rural areas in the Republic of Moldova, the monographic method, induction, deduction, questionnaire and, last but not least, the analysis and synthesis of available statistical data were mainly used.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The term countryside has many approaches. In France, for example, it is considered to be the area where agricultural production predominates. In Belgium, the countryside is considered to be the territory cultivated by man and having a certain type of landscape. In Germany, all areas outside high-density areas are referred to as rural areas, and in the USA the basic criterion for referring to rural areas is the proportion of the total population" [10, pp. 104].

From the multitude of definitions given to the countryside we would like to review the following:

- "the countryside is not an abstract and ordinary area, but a human-geographical and heterogeneous one;
- the countryside includes the plains, farmers and all their activities, as well as non-urban areas;
- rural areas are socio-economic structures of greater diversity and complexity, including villages, small towns, farms, forests, production areas, small shops, commercial and tourist areas, with natural landscapes and diverse traditions;
- the countryside is considered as a concrete method of land use, which is characterized by low population density, natural landscapes, economic activities, especially related to agriculture, forestry and grazing" [5, pp. 29-30].

The vast majority of researchers clearly define the boundaries of the countryside,

emphasizing that the countryside encompasses everything that is not urban. Usually, the rural area interacts with the urban area, because "it is precisely under the impact of urbanization that the rural area has experienced obvious structural changes related to the industrialization of rural spaces, mechanization, chemical processing, widely applied in agriculture, which has contributed significantly to the increase in production capacity and obviously led to the modernization of the rural habitat" [4, pp. 13-14].

"Another terminological confusion concerns 'rural area' and 'agrarian area'; 'rural activity' and 'agrarian activity' or, simply put, 'rural-agrarian'. It is important to note that the two concepts, although relatively similar, cannot be confused or considered synonymous. The scope of the notion of 'rural area', 'rural activity' and even the meaning of the term 'rural' in general is broader, more extensive, encompassing within it the notions of 'agrarian area', 'agrarian activity' or simply 'agrarian'. Controversy over a clear and precise definition of the countryside arises because the countryside itself is the subject of research for many sciences, such as economics, history, geography, sociology and even politics" [1, pp. 165-166]. Multidisciplinary approaches to this concept (Figure 1) reflect the specificity of the emergence and development of rural formations, and are a natural and, at the same time, necessary approach, considering the complexity of this term.

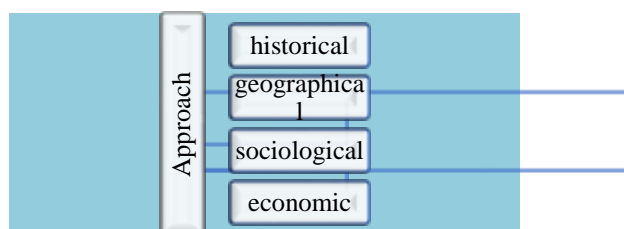


Fig. 1. Typology of approaches related to the definition of the concept of "countryside"

Source: Prepared by the authors on the basis of [5, pp. 31].

According to the *historical approach* "the countryside is an expression of long-standing human endeavor, designed to put the physical

and natural components of space at its service; it is a space that man has shaped over time according to his needs, which he has created through his work, and is thus a true rustic masterpiece of mankind" [4, pp. 13].

From a *geographical science perspective*, the term "countryside" is used to designate a well-defined geographical area characterized by a smaller population relatively isolated from the influence of large urban settlements.

*Sociology* bases rural areas on traditions, i.e. inter-human relations, a certain political and moral-spiritual life.

*The economic view* of the concept of 'countryside' once again underlines its key role in the economic development of a country.

All these approaches reveal numerous characteristics which, in sum, and presuppose all that is rural (Table 1).

Table 1. Specific characteristics of the approaches to the concept of "rural areas"

**Specific characteristics of the approach:**

historical	geographical	sociological	economic
The emergence of rural areas.	Geographical position.	Traditions and customs.	Rural economy.
Historical development and evolution of space rural.	Climatic conditions.	Lifestyle.	Basic production forces.
National specificity.	Occupations in rural areas.	Population number and density.	Agricultural and other types of industrial activities.

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on [5, pp. 31]

Thus, through the elements it contains, the rural space is identified as a special space, different from other spaces that extend over a territory. The most important differences are in aspects such as economic structure, population density, dominant occupations, culture and cultural buildings, spiritual life, human relations, customs, etc.

According to the definition given in Recommendation No 1296/1996 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the European Charter for Rural Areas, "rural areas comprise an inland or coastal area including villages and small

towns, where the majority of the land is used for:

- agriculture, forestry, aquaculture and fisheries;
- the economic and cultural activities of the inhabitants of these areas;
- development of non-urban leisure and recreation areas (or nature reserves);
- other purposes, such as the construction of housing" [10, pp. 104].

In our view, a clear, scientifically based definition of the countryside should draw on all of the above approaches. In addition, we would like to point out that it is also of interest that in European countries small towns are considered to be part of the countryside, which should be taken into account when formulating a definition.

Taking all these findings and statements into consideration, the authors come up with their own definition of the countryside, which they identify as *"a geographical area well determined by its authentic natural components, made up of small settlements populated by a small number of people united over time by common traditions and customs who make their living mainly from economic activities such as agriculture, forestry, grazing, crafts, handicrafts, practiced in a conscientious manner with a view to protecting the environment"*.

If we take into account the fact that the specific forms of human settlement in rural areas are villages and communes, the definition given by Romanian legislation in 1968 to these types of habitats becomes curious. Thus, the Law on the Administrative Organization of the Territory of the Socialist Republic of Romania states that a commune is an "administrative-territorial unit comprising the rural population united by a community of interests and traditions, consisting of one or more villages, depending on economic, socio-cultural, geographical and demographic conditions" [6, art. 5].

The legislation of the Republic of Moldova, under the influence of the directives developed by the EU through the European Charter for Rural Areas, completes the definition taken from the Romanians and identifies the village as "an administrative-

territorial unit comprising the rural population united by territory, geographical conditions, economic, social-cultural relations, traditions and customs, in which the majority of the labor force is concentrated in agriculture, forestry, fishing, providing a specific and viable way of life for its inhabitants, and which, through modernization policies, will preserve its rural specificity in the future" [7, art. 5].

Analyzing the definition given by the law, the question arises involuntarily how will peri-urban rural areas manage to preserve their rural specificity (areas bordering large cities and industrial centers), when these areas already have a significant urban footprint? The authentic countryside is increasingly absent here, being replaced by the foundations of urban life and culture, thus leading to the urbanization of villages. Another confusion arises when we refer to peripheral villages, whose recent decline is so serious that they are becoming rusticated. It follows that the definition given by Moldovan legislation is valid only for the intermediate rural area.

There are also question marks over who is responsible for implementing "modernization policies". Who is ultimately responsible for modernizing rural areas while preserving the rural character: the rural population, local public administration, state administration? All these inaccuracies mean that the law is not always easy to handle, which is why it needs to be supplemented by clearly stating who is responsible for the modernization policies implemented in rural areas and the obligation to preserve the rural character.

However, "in the context of a rural environment which, although it persists, is radically transformed compared to the traditional autonomous or semi-autonomous rural environment" [9, pp. 8], it is necessary to "allow human activities to take root, provided that they are not aggressive, promoting their degradation" [2, pp. 12].

The activities carried out predominantly in rural areas favor the identification of the functions of the countryside (Figure 2), functions which are based on the specific characteristics of the countryside and are also

set out in the European Charter for Rural Areas.

*The economic function* of the countryside "is considered to be the basic, primary function, the main objective of which is the production of agricultural products and other material goods produced by productive branches such as agriculture, forestry, forestry industry, handicrafts" [2, pp. 12].

*The socio-cultural function* refers to relations within rural communities, which, unlike those in urban areas, are open, based on trust and friendship.

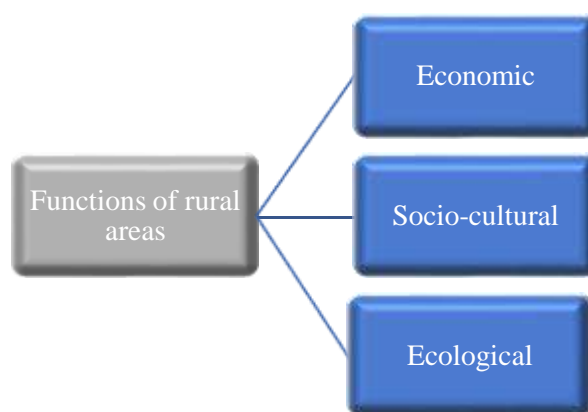


Fig. 2. Functions of rural areas  
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on [4, pp. 16].

*The ecological function* calls for the rational and sustainable use of natural resources, the protection of the landscape and the specific features of the countryside, given the excessive industrialization in some areas which has led to "pollution of the countryside, deterioration of the agricultural and forestry landscape, an alarming reduction in flora and fauna and an imbalance in many ecosystems of the countryside" [2, pp. 13].

Starting from the functions of rural areas, the author aims to assess the level of development of rural areas through the analysis of official statistical data, although we are well aware that the consequences of pandemics and droughts have left their mark on the rural environment of the Republic of Moldova, which, at the moment, is experiencing acute economic and social problems, which are strongly connected to the socio-economic framework of rural life. Statistical data and specialist studies illustrate the insufficient

development of the country's rural areas, the general state of the village world in the Republic of Moldova being characterized by an inefficient economy, poor infrastructure and a low standard of living for the population.

The assessment of the level of development of rural localities should be analyzed from the perspective of the population's standard of living, including access to health services, education and culture. Last but not least, the author aims to analyze the degree of perpetuation of elements of natural capital.

To this end, we initially intend to analyze the share of land used for agricultural purposes in order to get a general impression of the proportions of the countryside. Subsequently, we will examine the standard of living of the rural population by taking into account the main sources of income, average wage level, average monthly income and expenditure. Particular attention will be paid to the analysis of the number of unemployed and the number of emigrants. Aspects of socio-cultural life will be analyzed in terms of the number of schools and high schools in the villages, the number of cultural and medical institutions, and investment in natural capital - by areas covered by forests and those tended and rebuilt.

The role of agriculture in rural life is explained by the fertility of soils, as well as by the continuous increase in the share of agricultural land in the total land area, thus, in 2020 their share was 61.81%, which exceeds the share held in 2019 by 0.56 percentage points (table 2). In general, the share held by agricultural land has shown an upward trend in the last 6 years, which gives hope for the possible revitalization of agriculture.

Although agricultural land comprises 2.09 million ha, the area sown by agricultural enterprises and peasant households in 2020 comprises only 1,538 thousand ha, of which 53.77% is sown by agricultural enterprises. We would like to point out that the size of the sown areas is constantly increasing, and since 2015, these areas have increased by 35 thousand ha.

Despite an increase in sown areas, the contribution of agriculture, forestry and

fisheries to GDP formation is 2.0 percentage points lower in 2020 than in 2015. The statistics published for the first two quarters of 2021 also speak of the negative impact of agriculture, fisheries and forestry, which led to a 0.6% reduction in GDP. In this context, we would like to point out that in 2020 the contribution of agriculture, forestry and fisheries to GDP formation is practically equal to the contribution made by the construction branch. Here we would like to express our agreement with the position of Elena Timofti, according to whom "a problem in the management of the economic development of agriculture in the Republic of Moldova is the poor diffusion of innovations" [3, pp. 57].

Table 2. Estimated share of agricultural land in the total land area for the period 2015-2020

Indicators	Year					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total land, thousands ha.	3,384.6	3,384.6	3,384.6	3,384.7	3,384.7	3,384.7
Agricultural land, thousands ha.	2,026.5	2,028.3	2,039.8	2,041.6	2,073.0	2,092.0
Share of agricultural land in total land area, %	59.87	59.93	60.7	60.32	61.25	61.81

Source: Own calculation.

Analyzing the employment level of the rural population (Table 3), we find that it is predominantly engaged in agriculture - 167.2 thousand people in 2020. However, we note a significant reduction in this indicator recorded in 2019 compared to 2018, when the number of rural populations engaged in agricultural activities decreased by 254 thousand people, people, who at best opted for another field of activity or remained without a stable job. One explanation for this phenomenon could again be the 2020 drought and the pandemic.

At the same time, we identify that the number of rural people who have opted for a job in the construction sector, since the period of 2017, is continuously increasing, reaching in 2020 a number of 35.2 thousand people, this is the only branch of the national economy in which the number of employed populations in rural

areas is increasing. If a comparison is to be made with the urban environment, there is a reduction in the number of people employed in all areas of activity.

In the following we aim to identify the average salaries offered to employees by field of activity in order to identify the most attractive branch. The statistical data presented in Figure 3 identifies the industrial sector (9,493.1 lei in 2020) as the sector with the highest average wage payment, which is the essence of the industrial-centric theory of economic development. According to this view, agriculture cannot develop without industry.

Table 3. Dynamics of the employed population by type of economic activity and average for the period 2015-2020, thousands of persons

Population employed by economic activity	Year					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Agriculture, forestry and fisheries, total	381.9	410.9	390.5	452.0	182.8	175.9
Urban	23.5	26.7	22.3	24.9	9.7	8.6
Rural	384.2	368.2	427.1	173.1	167.2	
Industry, total	143.8	148.1	144.4	147.3	128	121.4
Urban	93.8	97.1	92.5	92.6	60.6	57
Rural	54.5	51.0	51.8	54.7	67.5	64.4
Construction, total	65.4	60.9	56.6	59.5	61.4	60.4
Urban	36.1	33.5	30.5	30.4	27.8	25.3
Rural	29.2	27.4	26.1	29.1	33.6	35.2
Trade, hotels and restaurants, total	189.6	199.6	208.8	194.4	163.8	148.4
Urban	139.0	150.1	154.1	137.8	107.1	56.7
Rural	50.6	49.5	54.7	56.6	95.7	52.7

Source: Own calculation.

Thus, industry is the driving sector and agriculture is the sector to be set in motion. It is hard not to recognize the advantages of this theory, given that industry provides agriculture with the most modern production methods, the fruit of mechanics and especially chemistry, as well as supplying primary demand through the processing of agricultural products. But, however, it is regrettable to acknowledge that agriculture is the worst paid branch, with employees in this sector earning on average 6,072.6 lei in 2020, which is below the average wage forecast for the same period - 7,953 lei. Moreover, agriculture is the only branch whose remuneration does not

reach the level of the average remuneration in the Republic.

Also, here we would like to note that the wages offered in construction are not much lower than those offered in industry. In 2020, an employee in the construction sector earns an average salary of 9,389.1 lei, which is only 104 lei less than in the industrial sector. This explains the migration of rural employees from agriculture to the construction sector.

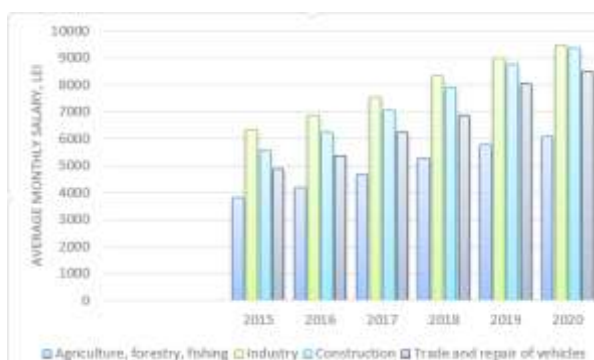


Fig. 3. Average monthly wage level by economic activity in dynamics

Source: Own calculation.

The importance of population in the development of any country is undeniable, but the role of the rural population is particularly important, especially since it accounts for 56.9% of the total number of people registered in 2019 (Table 4). However, we are forced to acknowledge that the number of rural populations per country in the period 2015-2019 shows a significant decrease of 32.7 thousand people. If we are to analyze the annual reductions in the rural population, we see that they occur regularly, thus in 2016 compared to 2015 the rural population decreased by 5.9 thousand people, in the period between 2017 and 2016 the villages lose another 7.9 thousand people, which is a 34% over the level of 2015-2016. In 2018, compared to 2017, the rural population decreases by another 8.5 thousand people, to lose another 10.4 thousand in 2019. Unfortunately, we cannot analyze the statistics for 2020 because the Statistical Yearbook no longer publishes the number of populations by environment, but the figures published by country for 2020 and January 2021 are alarming in the sense of a catastrophic reduction in the number of populations.

However, the number of people living in urban areas continues to grow, increasing by 20.2 thousand between 2015 and 2020.

The same situation can be seen if we analyze the share of the population by environment. The country, which recently boasted a significant proportion of rural population, risks reaching the point where these two values will be equal or the proportion of urban population will exceed the proportion of rural population. Thus, over 5 years the rural population share has decreased by 0.7%, while the urban population share has increased over the same period by 0.9%. Analyzing the rate of decline in the rural population, we dare to assume that in 25-30 years the rural will give way to the urban in terms of total population.

Table 4. Dynamics of demographic indicators recorded in the Republic of Moldova in the period years 2015-2020

Indicators	Year					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total population, thousands pers.	3,555.2	3,553.1	3,550.9	3,547.5	3,542.7	2,640.4
Population in urban areas, thousands pers.	1,507.3	1,511.1	1,516.8	1,521.9	1,527.5	-
Share of urban population, %	42.4	42.5	42.7	42.9	43.1	-
Population in rural areas, thousands pers.	2,047.9	2,042.0	2,034.1	2,025.6	2,015.2	-
Share of rural population, %	57.6	57.5	57.3	57.1	56.9	-
Urban employment rate, %	42.0	42.3	41.9	40.9	47.0	44.4
Rural employment rate, %	38.9	39.7	39.3	42.8	36.6	35.1

Source: Own calculation.

The continuing decline in the rural employment rate is also disappointing, with a reduction of 3.8% over the period 2015-2021, which is well below the same rate in urban areas. If the employment rate in rural areas is 35.1% in 2020, it is 44.4% in urban areas.

Under these conditions, it is curious to note the reduction in the number of unemployed in rural areas, which in 2020 will be 15.5 thousand people, i.e., 10.5 thousand fewer than in 2019 (Figure 4). The same can be seen in the situation of the unemployed in cities, whose number has also decreased in the same period by 3.3 thousand people. Here again we are forced to note the effects of the pandemic in that until 2019 the number of unemployed registered in rural areas was constantly below the number of unemployed in urban areas, in 2019 it recorded a significant increase, and in 2020 - an equally significant reduction. If it is natural that the largest share of the unemployed should go to people with no schooling (10.6% primary school or no schooling), then why should 1.2% of the unemployed with higher education in rural areas in 2020 and 2.5% of the unemployed with secondary education?

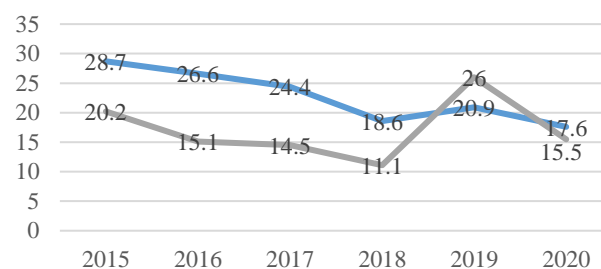


Fig. 4. Dynamics of the number of unemployed by background during 2015-2020

Source: Own calculation.

It is clear that qualified staff, rather than taking low-paid work, would rather join the ranks of the unemployed. The current situation is increasingly dissatisfying the rural population, who are leaving in droves to go abroad in the hope of making a decent living. Statistics for 2020 show that most people leaving in search of work are aged 25-34 (327 people), followed by people aged 35-44 (319 people), i.e. mainly young, employable people are leaving the country.

The year 2019 is marked by a significant wave of migration, a year in which the population, driven by the socio-economic problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, chose the foreign route. Thus, a total of 3,660 people emigrated this year (Figure 5),

including 2,463 people aged between 15 and 54, with the largest share of people aged between 15 and 44.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were felt particularly strongly on the living standards of the population, highlighting poverty more and more, leaving more and more people without a stable source of income, as well as without the basic foodstuffs that people in the villages used to grow in their gardens, for the simple reason that the pandemic did not come alone, it was followed by a dry summer that caused significant damage to farmers, literally bringing them to their knees and demonstrating once again their helplessness in the face of the challenges of nature. We would like to support the scholar Elena Timofti's statement that "even if human safety remains the priority, the economic costs of the pandemic are enormous and unprecedented" [11, pp. 113].



Fig. 5. Number of emigrants from the Republic of Moldova in dynamics for the period 2015-2020, (persons)  
 Source: Own calculation.

In order, however, to establish the objective level of living of the population in rural areas and to elucidate the reasons for accepting unskilled work abroad at the expense of skilled work at home, we will now analyze the income and expenditure of the population by residence (Figure 6).

Thus, the largest share of income recorded by the rural population in 2020 is accounted for by wage income - 40.5%, followed by income from social benefits - 20.7% and remittances - 16.1%. It is curious, however, that in an agrarian country the share of income from individual agricultural activity is lower than the share of income from remittances, which in 2020 is 15.2%. In this context, we can say with certainty that the rural population earns

its living either from wage income or from income from social benefits and remittances, their joint share being 36.8%, which is only 3.7 percentage points below the share of wage income.

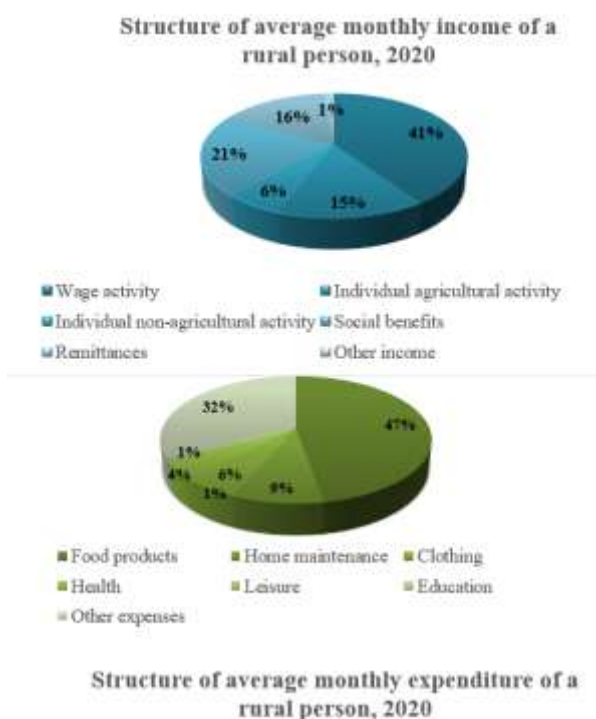


Fig. 6. Structure of average monthly income and expenditure of a rural inhabitant in 2020, %  
 Source: Own calculation

At the top of the expenditure incurred by rural people in 2020 is obviously expenditure on food - 47.2%, followed by clothing - 9.3% and housing maintenance - 5.7%. Naturally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is still valid. Further proof of the viability and validity of this theory is the fact that for health care, the countryman, having no choice but to make do with what he does not have, spends about 4.1% a year, while for education he spends less than 1%, or 0.5%. We are astonished to see that the rural population spends more money on leisure (1.2%) than on education. The list of curiosities, which we allow ourselves to consider paradoxical, does not end there. If we compare the level of income and expenditure recorded annually by environment, rural and urban, we see a striking discrepancy, regardless of the fact that the rural population exceeds the urban population. Analyzing the figures presented in Figure 7, we see a slight increase in the



dynamics of the population's income in 2020 compared to 2019, but also a significant difference between the level of this indicator in cities and villages. For the year 2020 the income recorded in urban areas exceeds the income in villages by 1,238 lei or 50.38%. Analyzing the income dynamics for the years 2015-2020, we can see a more pronounced increase in the income received in urban areas in 2019 compared to 2018, when the income of the population in cities increased by 25% and that of the population in villages by 6.7%. For people in villages a more significant increase in income was recorded in 2020 compared to 2019, a year in which the income of the rural population increased by 20.16%.

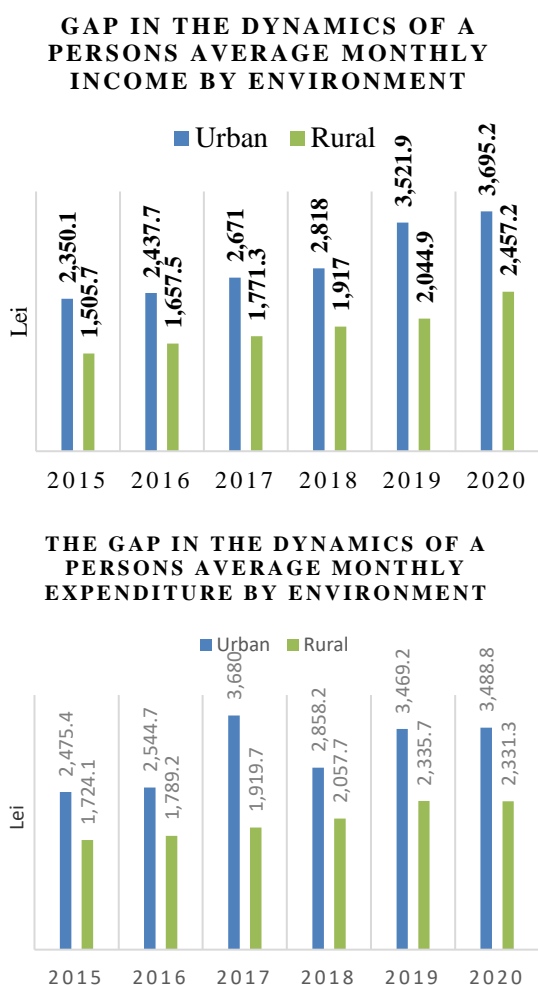


Fig. 7. Dynamics of monthly income and expenditure per inhabitant by residence for the years 2015-2020, lei  
 Source: Own calculation.

Strangely, the average monthly expenditure of a rural person in 2020 compared to 2019 was reduced by 4.4 lei, which is not significant,

but in comparison with the 20% increase in income it raises unintentional questions.

We note, however, that the level of income barely exceeds the level of expenditure incurred in 2020 (by 125.9 lei), and people in the countryside can afford to spend on average 328.5 lei more than the subsistence minimum (2,002.8 lei for 202). The question arises involuntarily: what do people live on in the Republic of Moldova? How does it manage to exist when it can afford nothing more than 328.5 lei? Moreover, looking at the minimum subsistence level for the year 2020, one wonders what a family with 3 children lives on, which according to statistics requires an income of 10,061 lei, if the average maximum salary level in industry is 9,493.1 lei and in agriculture only 6,072.6 lei. And here we should mention that 2020 is the only year in the period analyzed (2015-2020) in which the income of the rural population exceeds expenditure. Again, we assume that these are the effects of the pandemic that has taught the population to live or, rather, to exist with nothing and from nothing, limiting themselves to the consumption of goods and/or depriving themselves of other necessities such as education, culture, health, and this is unacceptable, but nevertheless genuine for the harsh reality that Moldova is facing at the present stage. In this context, we support the statement of the scholar Elena Vaculovschi according to which "the inequality and inequality that persists in the distribution of income remains, for the time being, an unresolved problem that risks becoming a permanent feature of the Moldovan development model" [3, pp. 62].

It is natural that the population of the Republic of Moldova primarily satisfies its physiological needs, but it is curious that in the list of so-called "physiological needs" that the population of our country cannot do without, alcoholic beverages and tobacco are also included. And if the population can limit to the maximum its financial resources invested in education and other necessities, it cannot do without these vices. Statistics show that in 2020 the country's population will invest 3.5 times less in education than it spends on tobacco and alcohol (Table 5).

Table 5. Dynamics of average monthly expenditure per person on alcohol, tobacco and education for the period 2015-2020

Year	Average monthly expenditure per person on alcohol and tobacco, lei		Average monthly expenditure per person on education, lei	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
2015	31.4	26.7	18.3	9.4
2016	37.6	27.1	20.7	9.7
2017	38.4	29.5	14.4	10.1
2018	41.9	35.3	17.2	7.6
2019	57.0	46.0	54.9	15.9
2020	76.5	41.3	35.0	11.9

Source: Own calculation.

If we compare the same indicators in urban versus rural areas, we are astonished to see that the urban population also prefers alcohol and spends twice as much on it. We would point out that expenditure on alcohol and tobacco in rural areas has a positive dynamic, falling only in 2020, presumably as a result of the pandemic, and that investment in education is both increasing and decreasing. In such circumstances, we can only see how right Dimitrie Bolintineanu was when he said that "the country will be what the school is". It is distressing to see how the authorities are forced to reduce the number of educational institutions which simply become useless for lack of financial resources to invest and, basically, to maintain, for lack of desire to receive a quality education and for lack of pupils (Figure 8).

Thus, in the school year 2020-2021 compared to 2019-2020, the number of primary schools will increase only by 3 units, a situation imposed by the demand to reopen primary schools in some rural localities, as well as by the fact that the number of primary school students has increased by 113 students. The number of secondary and high schools in rural localities is dramatically decreasing in the school year 2020-2021 compared to 2019-2020.

The number of high schools in rural areas has decreased by 10, and the number of secondary schools by 14. The number of pupils attending these institutions is also falling dramatically: for secondary education by 330 pupils and for high school by 2,490 pupils.

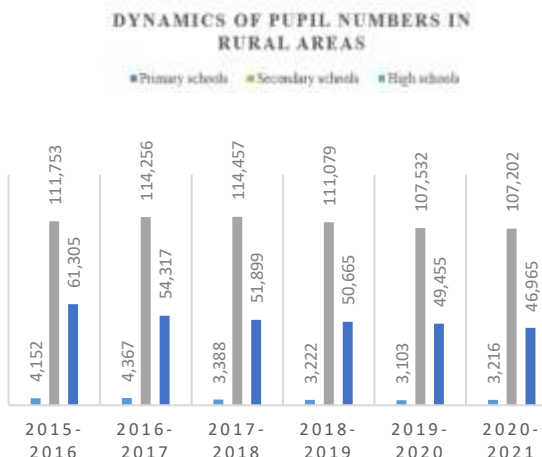
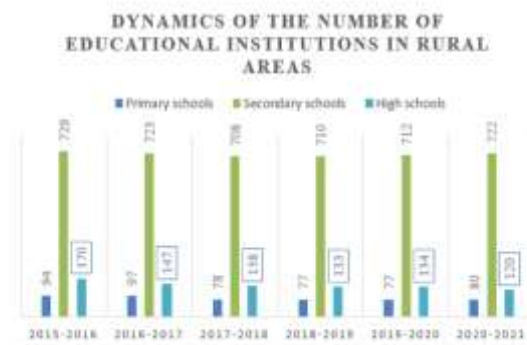


Fig. 8. Dynamics of the number of education institutions and scholars in the rural area for the period of the education years 2015 - 2021

Source: Own calculation.

With no investment in education, we are not surprised that the number of cultural buildings and libraries in both rural and urban areas is falling. Analyzing the number of cultural buildings, we can mention that in the last six years it has been reduced by 10 units in urban areas and by 11 units in rural areas (Table 6), only in 2020 compared to 2019 in rural areas 8 houses of culture were closed.

Table 6. Dynamics of the number of cultural institutions and libraries according to the environment of residence for the period 2015-2020 (number)

Year	Number of cultural institutions		Number of libraries	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
2015	80	1,138	158	1,195
2016	81	1,138	155	1,188
2017	80	1,139	154	1,184
2018	80	1,136	155	1,179
2019	81	1,135	156	1,170
2020	70	1,127	154	1,165

Source: Own calculation.

No less dramatic is the fate of libraries, which in the same six years have been reduced by 4 units in urban areas and by 30 units in rural

areas. And again, 2020 compared to 2019 resulted in the closure of 2 libraries in urban areas and 5 libraries in rural areas, which is a significant loss of the value of culture in a society.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of health care institutions providing primary and specialized health care (Figure 9), which in 2019 compared to 2018 increased by 26 units. We would like to mention that in 2020 this number has decreased by 2 units compared to 2019, but this cannot be seen as negative simply because the pandemic is subsiding thanks to the fact that a significant number of people have been immunized.

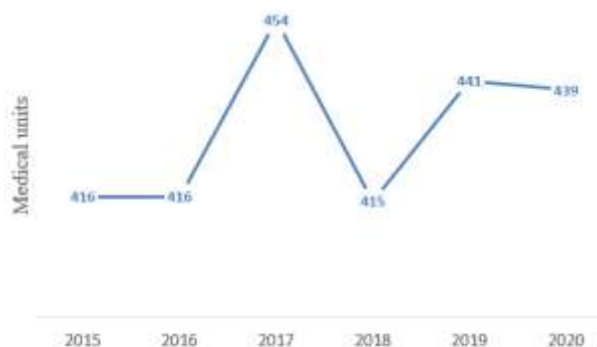


Fig. 9. Dynamics of the number of health care institutions providing primary and specialized care in the period 2015-2020  
 Source: Own calculation

The pandemic has also made us appreciate more what we have, placing a high value on the quality of our environment.

Thus, in the period 2019-2020, special attention is paid to the planting of forests, the areas covered by them in 2020 making up 381.8 thousand hectares. Unfortunately, however, the planted areas still need to be cared for, and the secular forests - to be rebuilt, a chapter in which there is a negative dynamic. Thus, the areas tended and reconstructed are decreasing, with a negative dynamic of 2.7 hectares in 2020 compared to 2019. But, as mentioned earlier, rural areas are undergoing a process of massive depopulation, in which case particular attention should be paid to forest care by combating unsanctioned and unpunished deforestation or, if it is punished, then with minor fines, which will certainly not eradicate poaching.

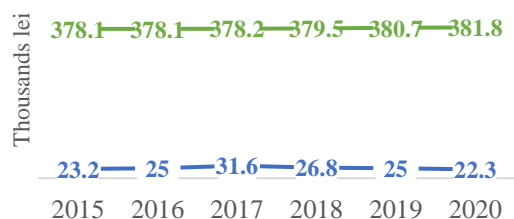


Fig. 10. Comparative dynamics of areas covered by forests and areas tended and restored in the period 2015-2020

Source: Own calculation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Under these circumstances, instead of continuing to publish scathing statistics, to trumpet loudly and clearly on all the TV channels about the desolate situation in which rural localities have found themselves, the need to intervene, as little as possible, with concrete measures for the development of rural areas is even more felt.

"In such a context, it is the state that must protect the countryside from the increasingly powerful and complex aggressions coming from outside, by providing facilities to discourage its depopulation, and the task of sustainable development must fall primarily to local authorities, because the peculiarities of each rural settlement require special visions and different ways of achieving performance in the process of developing rural localities" [9].

On the other hand, there is a "particular intellectual resource, the latent state of which can be changed by identifying local catalysts that would ensure a more active involvement in making the implementation of rural development policy more effective by using all available modalities - experience, promotion, implementation of regional and international best practices, support for capacity building and institutional strengthening.

This particular intellectual resource is the local public authority" [2, pp. 230-231].

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