

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF NATIONAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (NRDP) FUNDS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES FROM THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA REGION, ROMANIA

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### Abstract

*The rural area has faced and continues to face countless challenges regarding the lack of financial resources, the way to use material and human resources, labor productivity and labor mobility. Although Romania is a rich country in natural resources, the rural environment being predominant and having an old tradition in agriculture, certain factors stop or make rural development quite difficult. The present study aims to identify and analyze these factors that make rural development less than desired, ways to finance human resources through programs dedicated to the rural environment so that people who earn income from subsistence agriculture can also develop in non-agricultural fields, can achieve a performing agriculture and helps the economic and social growth of the Southwest Oltenia region. An important source of financing for the rural environment is funds from the European Union, which also contribute to the development of human resources in the area. To begin with, we considered the statistical analysis of the data on the evolution of the resident population in the region, the employed population, the net monthly salary that people in the region obtain according to the branches of the national economy, but also statistical data related to unemployment. Thus, for an overview of the existing situation, we continued with a SWOT analysis of the regions in order to establish investment priorities. Another important point in the paper, which helps us to observe the contribution of European funds to rural development, is the degree in care of the measures of the National Rural Development Program accessed as well as certain factors that made submeasure 1.1. to be poorly accessed. The conclusions of the study show that the South-West Oltenia region has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, with a population that, living mostly on the income obtained from subsistence agriculture, is in acute need of funds, additional training and development.*

**Key words:** human resources, European funds, rural area

### INTRODUCTION

The rural environment is predominant in the Southwest Oltenia region. Sustainable and sustainable development of the region can successfully deal with the challenges and difficulties that this region is facing. At county level, a series of disparities can be noted at the level of human resources, both in terms of structure and volume, depending on the degree of industrialization of each county and the extent to which the relief allows the

practice of agriculture. The main activities in the countryside are predominantly agricultural, the employed population being the one in subsistence agriculture [1]. The meager financial resources that can thus be obtained from agriculture are insufficient for a decent living. Thus, European funds represent the most important source of financing agricultural and non-agricultural activities and, at the same time, a financial resource that farmers can benefit from [2]. In these conditions, the human resource is of particular

importance, being its number and structure, but also its availability.

The economic and social development of rural areas in our country can be achieved through the National Rural Development Program (NRDP) which grants non-refundable funds in this regard [5].

14 rural development measures can be financed through this program, granting support of 9,363 billion euros, of which 1,347 billion euros are national contributions and 8,015 billion euros are granted by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. All these are based on three strategic objectives [9]:

- The first objective considers restructuring and increasing the viability of agricultural holdings;

- The second objective aims to combat climate change and, at the same time, the sustainable management of natural resources;

- The third objective contributes to diversifying economic activities in the region, creating jobs and increasing employment, creating infrastructure and services related to the quality of life of rural people.

Through the NRDP measures, to achieve specific objectives, the following categories of intervention were financed [3]:

- Improving the quality of equipment at the farm level by expanding it, modernizing or even establishing new facilities that help both the farm infrastructure and the entire technical-economic circuit of the products they obtain;
- Investments in the production of products and their marketing, including activities aimed at contributing to the reduction of energy consumption, the creation of optimal storage conditions and the storage of products or those who take care to refer to the adaptation of products to the standards in force;
- Help to restructure farms of all kinds, with an emphasis on small farms, and support for younger generations of farmers;
- Help to ensure risk management in the agri-food sector;
- Counseling and training activities, carried out including through producer groups.

To achieve the SO2 objective, the following categories of intervention were financed through the NRDP measures:

- Afforestation actions of agricultural and non-agricultural lands;
- Compensatory payments to farmers applying in the field of agri-environment and climate commitments;
- Compensatory payments to farmers who will practice organic farming and implement specific practices and methods;
- Compensatory payments to farmers who voluntarily undertake to continue the activity in areas designated as areas facing natural constraints or other specific constraints.

To achieve SO3, the following categories of intervention will be financed through the NRDP measures:

- Support for making investments among micro-enterprises and their small enterprises in the rural environment operating in non-agricultural fields;
- Financial support for the creation of local infrastructure such as those related to water supply systems, sewage networks, local roads. Support is also provided for educational, medical and social infrastructure in rural areas;
- Support for the maintenance or restoration of cultural heritage;
- Financial support for the development and implementation of local strategies that ensure integrated support for local development.

In this context, the purpose of this article is to analyze and present the extent to which non-reimbursable European funds contribute to the development of human resources in the rural area, leads to an increase in the living standards of the population and helps to the general development of the South-West Oltenia development region.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper makes a two-level analysis: a part that is based on the statistical analysis of the South-West Oltenia region, as a starting point in the further development of the study, and a descriptive analysis of the program that finances the training of human resources in the rural environment as well as the impact

generated by financing human resources through this program. The analysis presents the limits and factors that led to poor access and difficult implementation of the measures from National Rural Development Program, in order to avoid such ineffective practices in the future. The statistical analysis was based on the online tempo data series to observe the evolution over time of the situations relevant to the analysis as well as the structural changes over time of the component elements. The purpose of the statistical analysis is to identify the factors that led to changes in volume and structure of human resources.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The evolution over time of the components that characterize the rural environment in the South-West Oltenia region is of particular importance in the present analysis of development of human resources in the rural environment of the region, as well as in the analysis of its efficiency.

The starting point of the analysis is the presentation of the evolution of the rural resident population in the region analyzed during the period 2015-2022 [8].

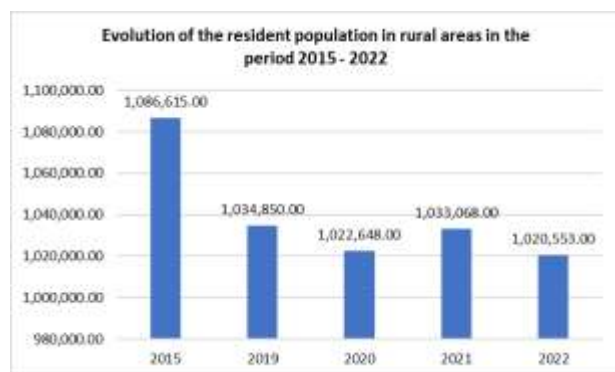


Fig. 1. Evolution of the resident population in rural areas in 2015 – 2022 period (number of people)  
 Source: Personal processing based on the data from Tempo on-line.

As we can see in Figure 1, the rural population was decreasing during the analyzed period, with the exception of 2021 when a slight increase was recorded.

This increase from the year 2021 is due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic when, due to the restrictions imposed by the authorities, economic

activities were reduced, leaving many people without occupation or being sent to technical unemployment.

The only survival solution, for certain people, was to retreat to the countryside and practice subsistence agriculture [6].

Considering the age categories of the rural and urban resident population in the Southwest Oltenia region, we can see that the rural population is more numerous than the urban one, the largest age category being 50-54 years followed by of 45-49 years and 40-44 years, in both areas of residence (Fig. 2).

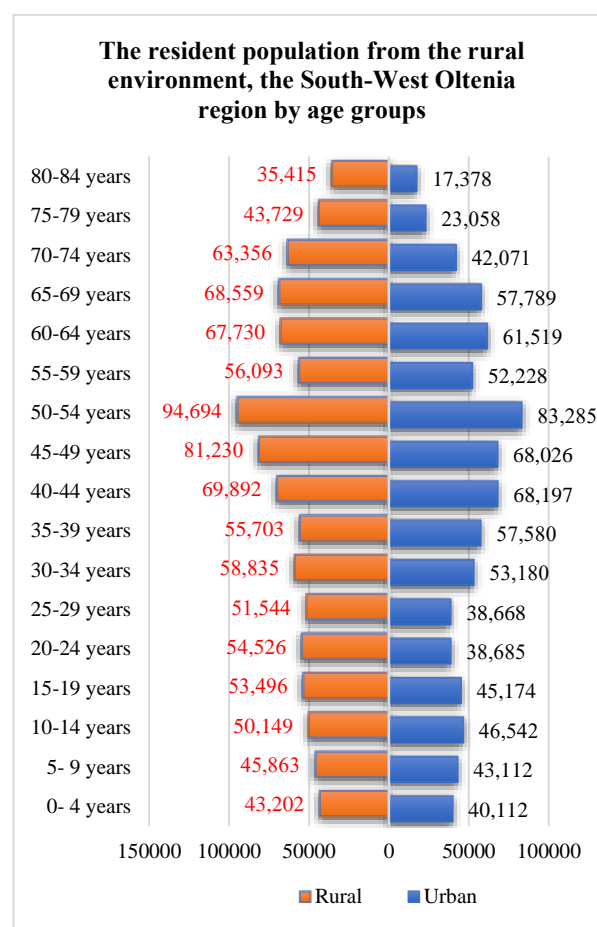


Fig. 2. The resident population of the rural area of SV Oltenia, by age groups in 2022

Source: Personal processing based on the data from Tempo on-line.

Due to the existing industry in the region, the civilian population in the South-West Oltenia region is employed in the manufacturing industry, followed closely followed by that employed in agriculture [7].

The third branch of the economy in which the population of the analyzed region has a job is trade, followed by construction.

The least represented branches of the economy are financial intermediation, information and telecommunications, and production and supply of electricity and heat (Fig. 3).

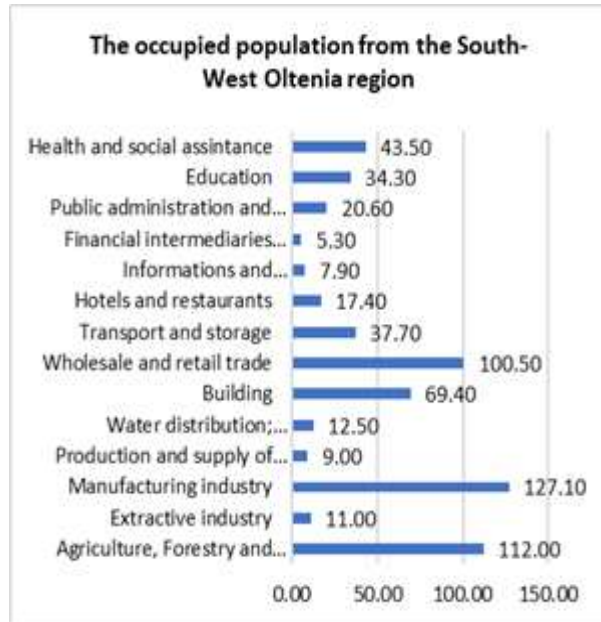


Fig. 3. The civilian employed population of South West Oltenia in 2022 (Thousand persons)  
 Source: Personal processing based on the data from Tempo on-line.

Although the population employed in agriculture is large, the net salary earned in this field is low, of only 2,552 lei compared to public administration and defense where the highest average net salaries are (4,868 lei), production and energy supply (4,811 lei) and the extractive industry with 4,503 lei. This explains the fact that, although in rural areas the population is larger, the fact that they are employed in fields with lower average net wages, the standard of living is lower and the degree of poverty is higher (Fig. 4).

The data from Figure 5 show that the most unemployed belong to the 25-54 age category (unemployment rate 23.8 in rural and 15.8 in urban) years and the fewest in the 55-64 age category (unemployment rate 2.7% in the urban and with 5.5% in the rural areas). As a result of the fact that the number of jobs is lower than in the urban environment, there is a greater number of unemployed in the rural environment, the jobs being predominantly those occupied in agriculture and animal husbandry [4].

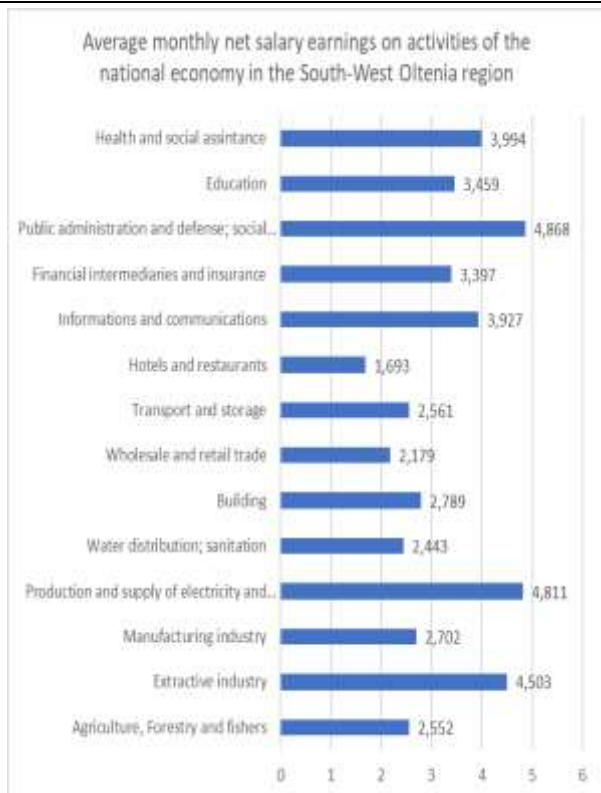


Fig. 4. The net salary gain on activities of the national economy in the South-West Oltenia region in 2022  
 Source: Personal processing based on the data from Tempo on-line.

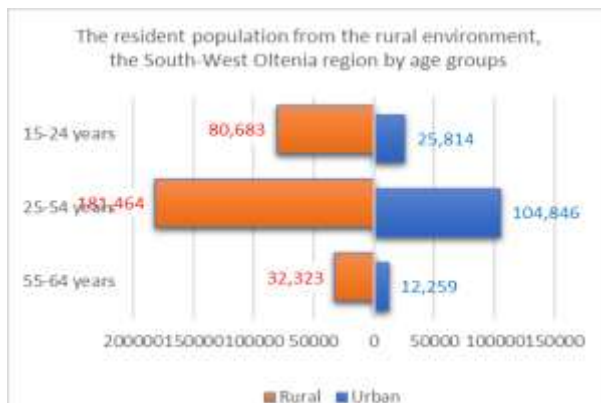


Fig. 5. Number of unemployed people by age group and residence in the South-West Oltenia region in 2022  
 Source: Personal processing about Tempo on-line data

Although the situation of unemployed people in the region is worrying, the unemployment rate being quite high, there are, however, some strong points that can be exploited in order to reduce unemployment: the existence of qualification centers within the County Employment Agency; the existence of the Regional Center for Professional Training of Adults; the improvement of the job offer, the existence of accredited providers of

professional training and counseling/labor mediation.

Occupying a place on the labor market in the region is quite difficult to achieve due to the high share of the population employed in subsistence agriculture, an inflexible workforce due to lack of training, or due to low access and poor adaptability of the population to high-performance technologies. In addition, we have identified other problems such as: the professional offer is not correlated with the labor market, the labor force shows poor flexibility between sectoral activities, insufficient facilities for the continuous professional training of the active population and the poor insertion on the labor market of the young population from the environment rural.

However, a good distribution of European funds in the key areas of the rural economy and in the labor force can mitigate, on the one hand, the migration of the population from the rural to the urban environment, the reduction of school dropouts, the creation of new jobs and the maintenance and modernization of existing jobs.

The evolution of the volume of labor in agriculture in the period 2018-2022, in Oltenia is shown in Figure 6.

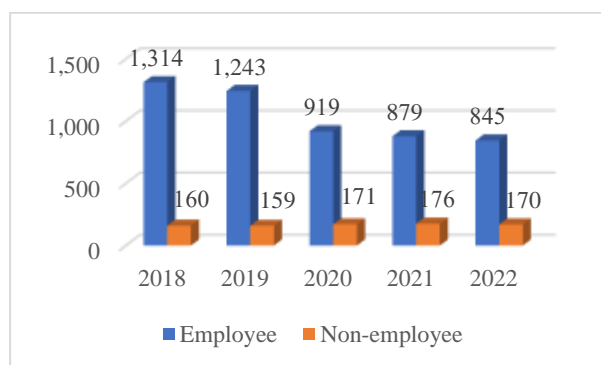


Fig. 6. Evolution of the volume of labor in agriculture in Oltenia in the period 2018-2022 (UM: 1,000 annual work units).

Source: Tempo on-line data.

As can be seen, in agriculture, the largest workload is for the unemployed to the detriment of the salaried. It is worrying that this volume of work is decreasing year by year (by 35.69% unpaid work decreased in 2022 compared to 2018).

The people from rural area who benefited from PNDR funding through professional training programs on M01 - Actions for the transfer of knowledge and information actions in the period 2014-2022 are shown in table 1:

Table 1. The situation of training actions through NRDP

Measure	Intervention area	Supported Actions	Training days	Training persons	Public expenditure
M01.1	2A	61	2,305	10,498.00	3,568,727.71
M01.1	2B	33	1,025	4,634.00	1,424,510.17
M01.1	4C	8	357	3,192.00	546,180.94

Source: National Rural Development Programme.

The human resource is the one that contributes to the greatest extent to the development of the area and to the well-being of the population. Therefore, it is the investment in the human resource that ensures a healthy and sustainable living environment. However, serious investments are needed in the training and improvement of human resources in the rural environment.

Given this general picture of the area, the funding obtained through the National Rural Development Program is the most appropriate opportunity for funding human resources and for the development of agriculture in this region.

The measure through which funds are allocated to increase the quality of the human resource is Measure 01 "Knowledge transfer and information actions" which meets the needs of target actors, farmers and people active in the agri-food sector, financing activities such as professional training, demonstration activities and information actions. These will contribute to the creation and implementation of an efficient management of exploitations and will participate in the adoption of environmentally friendly practices. The measure will lead to the development of the technical and economic skills of farmers, will bring to the fore practices specific to the management of agricultural and food activities, will contribute to the realization, by farmers, of the fact that they must contribute to the sustainable development of the area. could adopt an efficient management of natural resources.

Also, the measure will contribute to informing farmers about the introduction and implementation of innovative technologies in their business.

Through the actions related to the transfer of knowledge and information actions, it is possible to contribute to the increase of competitiveness and diversification in agriculture and, at the same time, it is possible to contribute to the restructuring and modernization of the agricultural sector. At the same time, the actions will encourage businesses to be oriented towards the needs of the market, towards modern and sustainable methods of processing and marketing agricultural products, they will contribute to product games, to the diversification of economic-financial and management skills. Achieving the objective of sustainable land management and environmental protection can be achieved with the help of this measure through the application of environmentally friendly technologies and practices, good agricultural production practices, and the use of renewable energy, as well as the application of technological and practical agricultural solutions, which offers alternatives to fight drought through irrigation methods [11]. The measure supports professional training and the acquisition of skills, demonstration activities and information actions, which have contributed to the creation and implementation of efficient farm management and the adoption of environmentally friendly practices.

The measure aims to:

- improving farmers' knowledge through short-term professional training courses (eg: initiation, improvement), with differentiated training periods, depending on the training level of the final beneficiaries, as well as the subject of the professional training program.
- improving basic knowledge among farmers/small processors operating in the agri-food sector by extending the scope and supporting other short-term actions such as demonstration activities and information actions.

The purpose of the support granted through submeasure 1.1. is to contribute to:

- Improving specific technical and economic knowledge for the practice and management of farmers' agricultural and agri-food activities, as well as the general management of the farm. As a result, young farmers supported by sub-measure 6.1, smallholder farmers and supported by sub-measure 6.3 are expected to implement agricultural techniques and technologies, including research results.

- Acquiring and improving knowledge and skills regarding environmental aspects, climate change, effective management of natural resources, as well as the implementation of agri-environment and climate commitments and ecological agriculture. As a result, the beneficiaries of the agri-environment and climate measures are expected to acquire production methods compatible with the maintenance and improvement of the landscape, i.e. the protection of the environment, compliance with the conditions of eco-conditionality and adaptation to the effects of climate change and the reduction of the concentration of GHG in the atmosphere.

The measure supports professional training and the acquisition of skills, demonstration activities and information actions, which will contribute to the creation and implementation of efficient farm management and the adoption of environmentally friendly practices and aims:

- improving farmers' knowledge through short-term professional training courses (eg: initiation, improvement), with differentiated training periods, depending on the training level of the final beneficiaries, as well as the subject of the professional training program.
- improving basic knowledge among farmers/small processors operating in the agri-food sector by extending the scope and supporting other short-term actions such as demonstration activities and information actions.

Also, Measure 1, submeasure 1.1 Support for professional training and the acquisition of skills, aimed at:

- Call no. 1/2016 - Professional training for farmers who have commitments on measure 10 - Agro-environment and climate, in order

to carry out short-term professional training courses, 3 days (24 hours)

- Call no. 2/2016- Vocational training for farmers, especially beneficiaries of support of sub-measures 6.1 "Support for the installation of young farmers" and 6.3. "Support for the development of small farms" in order to carry out short-term vocational training courses, 5 days (40 hours) addressed to farmers, especially the beneficiaries of support of sub-measures 6.1 and 6.3.

At the level of the South West Oltenia region, the situation of projects on Measure 1 was as follows:

**Call for projects no. 1**

80 submitted projects, of which 55 are eligible  
Total value of submitted projects:  
6,590,496.15 Euro

Total value of eligible projects: 4,506,898.63 Euros

- South-West Region - 6 projects, worth 480,887.29 Euro

- Trained persons: 15,132

**Call for projects no. 2**

174 submitted projects, of which 138 are eligible

Total value of projects submitted:  
12,755,405.02 Euro

Total value of eligible projects: 10,080,985.74 Euro

- Dolj - 4 projects, worth 391,606.41 Euro

- Gorj - 4 projects, worth 297,614.32 Euro

- Mehedinti - 3 projects, worth 215,333.77 Euro

- Olt - 5 projects, worth 357,364.92 Euro

- Vâlcea - 4 projects, worth 266,237.78 Euro

- Trained persons: 3,192.

Sub-measure 1.1 Support for professional training and the acquisition of skills is appreciated as being to a large extent relevant, and that this measure corresponds in a high way to the needs of potential beneficiaries. This sub-measure was included in the Program from the beginning, but along the way it underwent some adjustments, in the sense that, in the fifth amendment of the program, a new type of support was introduced – unit costs standard - an aspect that contributed to an efficient use of European funds. By reducing the administrative tasks, the human resources

involved in the management of European funds will be able to focus with priority on achieving the objectives of the measure, thus reducing the time lost with the collection and verification of financial documents, thus achieving a simplification of the payment methods for the eligible expenses for the projects deformation [10].

A series of impediments determined the poor access to the sub-measure, namely the contracting of only 38 projects (29%) out of the 130 selected, out of a total of 324 submitted projects, within 3 calls for project proposals:

- Call for project proposals no. 1/2016 - Professional training for farmers who have commitments on measure 10 – Agro-environment and climate.

- Call for project proposals no. 2/2016 - Vocational training for farmers, especially beneficiaries of sub-measures 6.1 and 6.3.

- Announcement regarding the registration of vocational training providers in order to be registered in the "Register of vocational training providers" as well as the selection of funding applications submitted under sM 1.1 "Support for vocational training and skills acquisition", using the standard unit cost starting from 14.02.2018. The call was launched on 29.12.2017 – Support for vocational training and skills acquisition using standard unit costs.

The factors that contributed to poor access to submeasure 1.1 are, on the one hand, the difficulty of identifying the target group covered by the documentation of the 3 calls, and on the other hand, the failure to meet certain eligibility conditions and criteria for granting support. In addition, the interviews conducted with some of the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries highlighted the fact that the period of evaluation, selection and contracting takes quite a long time, an aspect that implicitly leads to difficulties in identifying the potential final beneficiaries of the trainings, who reorient themselves towards other training providers (for a fee). Thus, among the main factors identified that determined the poor access to sM 1.1 are:

- Identifying the target group was a frequent problem among training providers. Although

there was a database with them, at the time of the implementation of the projects, many people from the target group had already attended training courses within the Agricultural Directorates or at different professional training providers on the market (for a fee), so that, can respect the commitments within the contractual terms.

- Maintaining the target group in the project throughout the duration of the training sessions was another problem that influenced the way the projects were implemented, as there were no specific mechanisms in this regard.

- The length of the evaluation - selection - contracting period, which definitely influenced the identification of the target group.

- Non-compliance with the deadline for uploading documents according to the Applicant's Guide. Another element is represented by the non-uploading in the platform of any participant in the courses proposed by the project and none of the mandatory documents related to each participant in the courses.

- Training providers either had difficulty identifying the target group in the time available or had to terminate contracts due to low ability to identify the minimum target group provided for in the funding applications.

- Certain eligibility criteria for granting support could not be met by the vocational training providers who applied under calls 1 and 2. The lack of relevant experience of the applicants, the lack of qualified staff, led to a poor access to these funds for training.

- It was quite difficult to involve some educational institutions as partners in the project, and, implicitly, their staff. The low involvement of teaching staff is mainly due to the unattractive/low cost in terms of trainers' salaries, correlated with the trainer's offer to implement the project.

- Another criterion that created problems in project implementation refers to the principle of efficient and accelerated project implementation. To obtain a score of 10 points, some of the providers/beneficiaries committed to implement the project within a

maximum of 75% of the maximum implementation time set for a project.

- The necessary (bulky) documentation that must be submitted to prove the qualification requirements, especially in the case of public educational institutions, which have submitted projects, either as a project leader or in partnership with other companies.

- The project audit is also a potential cause that contributed to the unattractiveness of this sub-measure.

- The lack of pre-financing was another cause that negatively affects the attractiveness of this sub-measure. The training providers had to, in the first phase, ensure the expenses generated by the identification of the target group, the payments regarding the rental of the rooms for the organization of the first training sessions and other expenses.

- Technical problems regarding the online platform (functional for projects that provide for the option of standard unit costs) led to poor access to the measure.

#### **The impact of the use of non-reimbursable funds on human resources**

The research followed the impact of the use of non-reimbursable funds allocated through the PNDR on human resources in the Oltenia Region in the current economic and social context. The main objective of the research was to identify the extent to which people from the South West Oltenia region participated in activities in the projects financed by PNDR (during the programming period 2014-2021), as well as the degree to which they managed to implement the knowledge and skills acquired to training programs or information activities.

The work tool used to collect the data necessary for the research was a prospective questionnaire placed in the field, distributed to 384 people aged 15-64 from the rural environment of the SV Oltenia region. 62.24% of them were male and 37.76% female. Among them, 173 have primary education, 139 people have secondary education, and 49 people have no education. Only 23 of those surveyed graduated from a university or college. From the point of view of occupation, the majority of respondents, 225 people, are farmers/farmers, at the



opposite pole are unemployed or unemployed people. Among the people who benefited from professional training courses are self-employed (49) but also workers (53) or employees with higher education (32). Out of the total number of people surveyed, only 296 participated in the activities of the projects with non-reimbursable European funding, and only they were asked to continue answering the questions of the questionnaire. From the total of 296 people who stated that they participated in activities in projects with non-reimbursable funding, 158 people participated in HCOP projects, 114 in NRDP program projects and only 24 stated that they participated in the activities of other types of projects (Programs of cross-border cooperation in particular). Selecting only the questionnaires of the beneficiaries of the activities from the NRDP projects, we find that all 114 respondents participated in information activities within the projects, and 77.19% participated in various professional training programs. The training programs they took part in were refresher courses, in the areas of competence of the measures financed by NRDP. The usefulness of these training programs and other activities financed by the NRDP in which the beneficiaries participated will be reflected in the quality of human resources in the region, in the correct use of technologies, in the number of agricultural workers who access European funds. Beneficiaries who took part in the activities financed through the NRDP were useful to the extent that: 47% accessed further funds for the development or modernization of the farm or for agricultural crops, 10% used the certificates obtained at the workplace, and for 34% they were beneficial in the sense that they performed agricultural activities more correctly. However, about 9% of respondents said that they did not use the information for anything and that they attended the courses because they had some short-term advantages.

## CONCLUSIONS

The economic situation of the South-West Oltenia region is one that requires quality human resources, trained from a professional

point of view in accordance with agricultural specifics.

The declining population of the rural environment, high unemployment, low incomes and the rate of risk of poverty and social exclusion of the area according to the statistical analysis of the region, bring to the fore the need for investment in human resources, in the agricultural activities of the population of the region.

Thus, the NRDP represents a "breath of air" for the population of the region and especially for the rural population, providing financing both for the agricultural and zootechnical activities that the population carries out and for the training of human resources in the region.

The low degree of technology in the sector, the lack of professional training and the application of the latest technologies or a high degree of employment in subsistence agriculture, make the branch of agriculture, one with extremely low productivity, the 30.66% of people employed in agriculture in the region in 2021, contributing only 7.37% to the formation of VABR (Regional Gross Value Added). Human resource training can contribute to increasing labor productivity, to the use of new technologies in the activities carried out and to increasing the incomes of the rural population by accessing new jobs.

The rural population of South-West Oltenia accessed European funds through the Rural Development Operational Program for the training and development of human resources through specific measures. The impact of the use of these funds is a positive one, the funding leading mainly to the opportunity to access. further, European funds for the development and modernization of farms, for the purchase of machinery and agricultural equipment, for better productivity at work or for finding a new job.

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