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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROMANIAN RURAL AREAS WITHIN THE PRESENT EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The present concept of rural sustainable development is based on the European model and implies a multifunctional agriculture. The LEADER programme (a part of NRDP) represents an approach that offers new development opportunities for the rural areas. The rural development objectives can be fulfilled both by the locally available financing, and by accessing national and European non-refundable financing, on the basis of real projects.*

Key words: *sustainable development, rural areas, European financing, LEADER+ programme.*

1. Rural Development in the European Union

Almost 60% of the UE population lives in rural areas, which means about 91% of the UE27 territory. In Europe, the rural areas are varied and diversified; for this reason, it is not possible to apply the same development programmes in all the areas. Although in many regions agriculture is still considered to be the base of the rural area, they represent in fact more than a space where foods are produced. The present concept of rural sustainable development is based on the European model and implies a multifunctional agriculture.

The multifunctional agriculture, even if it is less effective from the production and profit points of view, has many advantages from the tourism, landscape, ecological and social ones.

The functions of the multifunctional agriculture are the following: producing

food raw materials and foods necessary for population supply; producing raw materials for the non-food processing industry; producing raw materials as energy sources (a new function, of utmost importance in the regions with overproduction of food); developing the tourism potential by maintaining and increasing the natural beauty of the landscape patrimony; preserving the environmental factors (soil, air, water, flora, fauna) through a sustainable exploitation within an ecological agriculture that would ensure the stability of the agricultural ecosystems; harmonizing the rural area in a tight connection to a healthy and diverse agriculture [4].

The Commune Agricultural Policy (CAP) is one of the oldest policies of the EU. It consumes almost half of the European common budget. CAP is based on two pillars: direct subsidies for land and

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rural development programmes. CAP has undergone some changes since the date of its implementation, in 1960. The first stage of CAP development took place between 1960 and 1975 (1980) and was concentrated upon the family farm policy, thus laying the foundations of agriculture modernization. The second stage was carried out between 1975 (1980) and 1990, when production diminished and actions were taken against the depopulation of rural areas. The main measures aimed at: introducing quotas in the case of sugar market, duties for milk market, protection of nature and natural landscapes etc. During the third stage, which began in the '90s, the environmental protection measures, the maintaining of the rural population and the production diminishing were continued, then appearing the concept of multifunctional agriculture.

The rural development policy became a separate policy (it is a pillar of CAP) by Agenda 2000.

The main objectives of the rural development policy are the following: solving the issues that the European rural areas are facing, exploiting the potential of these areas, a new approach in the Eastern part of Europe, changing the mentality – regarding agriculture, funds, partnership, community etc.

2. Sustainable Development of Rural Areas

The contemporary world has to solve new problems related to the need of economic and social development, while its resources are limited. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly define the goals, so that they might allow the economic development, the solving of the social problems, at the same time maintaining and preserving the natural environment equilibrium. For this reason, the concept of “sustainable development” emerged, proposing solutions, alternative

development models, “clean”, non-polluting techniques, the change of the present manufacturing and consumption models, in order to avoid the ecologic disequilibria on our planet. Although the market economy system and lifestyle tend to create a homogeneous environment, the cultural traditions that are strictly related to the local resources and the actual needs imposed by the natural factors play an important role in preserving the identity and “health” of the society and of the diversity of the local ecological parameters [1].

The public policies aim at restoring and maintaining a long-term rational equilibrium between the economic development and natural environmental integrity in forms that are understood and accepted by the society. In the present context, when Romania is a EU member state with full rights, applying the doctrine of sustainable development is not only necessity but it becomes mandatory, so that the objectives of the sustainable development, namely increase of welfare and prosperity, both of the individual and society, should be based on such an economic development that might be tolerated by the ecosystem; thus the life quality of the future generations is guaranteed. The concept of sustainable development determines a permanent revaluation of the connections between individual and nature, and pleads for the solidarity between generations, as being the only viable option for a long-term development, ensuring “that development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations respond to their own needs” (Brundtland Report).

A viable alternative of sustainable rural development is the EU programmes having among their characteristics co-financing, innovation, quickening the execution, medium- and long-term programmes,

transparency and equal chances for everyone. These characteristics are inseparably related to the local strategies of sustainable development.

The local strategies of sustainable development are participative instruments, and their purpose is to ensure the economic progress, socially equitably, at the same time protecting the resources and the environment for the future generations. These strategies are based on an assembly of participative processes, which allow society to progress, through analysis, debates, consolidation of capacities, planning and mobilization of resources. The local strategies of sustainable development have to concentrate upon a limited number of major objectives. These objectives should be clear and realistic; of economic, social and environmental nature; complementary and interdependent, and they will be included in a sustainable development strategy. It is about the vision regarding the community future, a vision that is locally accepted and transposed in strategic objectives and concrete action plans. The local strategies of sustainable development represent a reference framework meant to facilitate decision making. They are neither an action plan only, nor a plan that cannot be modified, but it includes flexible systems of continuous improvement (for example: continuous evaluations allow the establishment of impediments and mistakes, and also improvements or change direction). Coherence among various levels – national, regional and local – is also a must

The 2007-2013 National Rural Development Plan centres on four axes [5]: increase of competitiveness of agri-food and forestry sectors; improvement of environment quality in the rural area; encouragement of rural economy diversification and improvement of life

quality in the rural areas and the LEADER programme.

LEADER was launched in 1991 with the aim of improving the development potential of rural areas, by exploiting rural initiatives and competences, by promoting knowledge achievement regarding integrated local development and by spreading such knowledge in other rural areas. In policy terms, LEADER was introduced as a “Communitarian initiative” financed from the EU’s Structural Funds. There have been three LEADER generations: LEADER I (1991-1993), LEADER II (1994-1999) and LEADER+ (2000-2006). During this period, the member-states and the regions had autonomous LEADER programmes financed from funds reserved at the EU level. Since 2007, the LEADER approach will be integrated in the global policy of rural development of the EU. This means that LEADER shall be included in the national and regional development programmes supported by the EU, together with other rural development axes. Since 2007, the financing of LEADER axis has been made from the total amount offered to each member-state by the EU, according to the new European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), in order to support rural development [2]. Rural development must start with people’s needs and be built on their resources, it must also be connected to their ideas and bring them back the feeling of pride and belonging attached to the rural area they populate.

3. Features of the LEADER Approach

Because of the diversity of the European rural areas, the main concept featuring the LEADER approach is that development strategies are much more productive and efficient if being decided and implemented at local level by local players who use clear and transparent procedures and

benefit from the support of corresponding public administrations and from technical assistance needed to transfer good practices.

The difference between LEADER and other traditional measures of rural policy consists in the fact that LEADER shows “how”, but not “what”, to be done. The LEADER approach can be resumed into seven essential features:

- **Local development strategies centred on the area.** An approach centred on the area focuses on a small homogenous area, which is cohesive from the social point of view, often featured by mutual traditions, local identity, sense of belonging or mutual needs and expectations, as being the target-area for implementing the sustainable development strategy. With such areas as starting point, strong and weak local points are more easily recognized and so are risks, opportunities and the local development potential. Another advantage of this approach is the possibility to identify barriers in reaching the sustainable development of rural areas.
- **“Top-down” approach.** In such an approach, local players participate in the decision making strategic process, as well as in the selection of priorities that they have to centre on in their local area.
- **Public-private partnerships: creation local action groups (“GAL”).** A GAL must associate public and private partners, to be well balanced and to represent local interest groups deriving from the different social and economic sectors in the area. At the decision-making level, private partners and associations must form at least 50% of the local partnership.
- **Encouraging innovation.** LEADER can play an important role in stimulating some new innovative approaches of

rural areas development (developing some alternatives of tourism sustainable development, promoting the local specificity by encouraging the practice of traditional manufacturing activities etc.).

- **Integrate and multi-sector actions.** LEADER is not a sector development programme; the local development strategy must have multi-sector logics integrating different activity fields.
- **Establishment of network contracts.** This includes achievement, experience and knowledge sharing among LEADER groups, rural areas, administrative bodies and organisations implied in EU’s rural development, irrespective of their status as direct beneficiaries of the LEADER programme or not.
- **Cooperation.** In the view of LEADER, cooperation does not mean establishing contacts, but cooperation of local action groups that have similar approaches (those GALs implied in cooperation processes can belong to the same or to different countries).

4. Analysis of Rural Resources

An important step in approaching LEADER is the analysis of resources defining the rural area (aimed at its development). Resources are those values or objects that can substantially contribute to developing life quality within rural communities. They can be tangible (natural resources, labour, equipment, architectural patrimony, landscape etc.) and intangible (popular customs and traditions, local and regional knowledge basis, ethnographic values etc.). In the rural area, some important resources are the calmness, the peace, the healthy and unpolluted environment that can represent attractions for rural areas with utilisation value from the tourism point of view (for instance, alternative forms of tourism having low

impact on the environment such as rural tourism, eco-tourism, local community-based tourism etc.).

Romanian rural areas are very diverse, but this diversity must be capitalized in an optimum manner.

For the rural areas within the county of Braşov, we can present an overview of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as of their opportunities and threats (the SWOT analysis) defining the present rural area (Table 1).

The SWOT analysis of the rural area within the county of Braşov

Table 1

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • various natural resources • multiculturalism • rich cultural patrimony • developed tourist activities (rural tourism, agrarian tourism, adventure tourism, eco-tourism, mountainous tourism etc.) • rich natural patrimony (protected areas, classified with Sit Natura 2000); • presence of NGOs that coordinate important projects in the field of cultural patrimony and village revitalisation conservation; • population training in traditional occupations (carpenter, stoneworker, agrarian tourism, ironworker, folklore artist); • unpolluted fields. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • infrastructure deficiency • lack of cooperation means • lack of innovative ideas • lack of capital • low cultural diversity within rural area • loss of forestry funds • departure of German population, some rural areas being lived by a numerous Romani population nowadays; • aged population; • high unemployment; • inexistence of pharmacies with consequences on the population's health status; • lack of consciousness with regard to the need to conserve local patrimony as a whole; • reduced functionality of cultural institutions; • diminishment in the number of fully employed teachers; • lack of Internet connections in some schools; • in communes, economic and commercial activities are weak whereas services are insufficient; • most exploitations are family-owned, whereas agricultural activities bring unattractive income; • a high degree of agricultural field division determining the practice of unprofitable agriculture, whereas production is mainly used for personal consumption; • public food services are insufficiently developed; • communal and forestry roads need repairing; • financial and human resources are reduced as regards protected area management; • precarious infrastructure for waste

	collection, transport and elimination (inexistence of a waste management plan).
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • financing programmes within the EU (e.g. LEADER); • use of state funds for SMEs; • interest increase at European and national level for cultural and historic elements, which aims at re-exploiting historic monuments, traditional events and local values; • Prince Charles's sponsorship in Viscri village; • restoration and renovation of historic monuments and cultural institutions; • refreshment of traditional occupations so as to create new jobs; • use of traditional technologies and materials for building restoration; • integration of Romani population into the social and economic life of rural areas; • high cultural tourism perspectives; • rehabilitation of county and communal roads to increase accessibility within rural areas and to patrimony objectives; • accessing external funds for village renovation, basic services and improvement of the environmental infrastructure; • use of reusable sources of energy; • high agricultural potential: animal breeding, organic, ecologic and local agriculture; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high tourism development potential: cultural and natural patrimony, vivid folklore traditions, numerous culinary products; • possibility of rapid selling of traditional products, more precisely during summer, because of the high number of tourists; • accessing funds for increasing the accommodation capacity and service diversification; • transport infrastructure development for offering access to tourist objectives. 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rural colonisation according to the appearance of speculative foreign capital (maximum profit in fewer time); • disappearance of local cultural values as a result of globalisation; • decrease of schooling population as a consequence of birth rate reduction and migration; • lack of rural environment attractiveness for qualified educational personnel; • great number of educational personnel employed on a determined period of time with negative effects on students' educational level; • increase in the number of the unemployed; • labour migration; • risk of lack of modernization for some of the roads in the rural areas because of the diminished financial resources, that decrease the commune's attractiveness for private investors; • risk of a great part of historic monuments to be irremediably destroyed if no urgent measures are taken.

5. Possible Non-Refundable Financial Sources for Romanian Rural Areas

In order to create a proper framework for rural development, the following conditions have to be fulfilled: knowledge of active non-refundable financial opportunities for rural areas; knowledge of legislation within horizontal fields, as for example, state aid, public acquisitions, environment protection; implementing projects corresponding to directions and objectives established in the local strategies of sustainable development; periodical evaluation and update of local, regional, national or even European development tendencies.

Development objectives can be fulfilled both by financing available at local level and by accessing national or European non-refundable funds according to real projects. Moreover, rural areas can benefit from good practice models offered by member-states (that they can adapt to the existing context within rural Romanian areas) and from non-reimbursable financial resources in order to put such models into practice.

Structural and cohesion funds are financial instruments of the European Union managed by the European Commission that operate so as to diminish social and economic disparities existing among its different regions. There is financed investment in education, research, agriculture, basic infrastructure, SMEs' development and rural areas development.

The European Union's structural funds are: The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). In Romania, structural funds are accessed according to the following Operational Programmes: Regional Operational Programme (POR), Operational Programme for Administrative Capacity Development (PO DCA), Sector Operational Programme for Human

Resources Development (POS DRU), Sector Operational Programme for Environment (POS Environment), Sector Operational Programme for Increasing Economic Competitiveness (POS CCE), Sector Operational Programme for Transport (POS Transport).

The European Union also created financial instruments for implementing the Common Agricultural Policy. Funds aiming at developing rural environment are: European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (FEADR), European Fishing Fund (FEP), European Fund for Agricultural Orientation and Guarantee (FEOGA).

6. Conclusions

The sustainable development of rural areas implies a multi-disciplinary, inter-sector and territory (territorial) approach aiming at ensuring a real chance to the Romanian rural area that comprises, according to statistical data, the majority of Romania's territory, more precisely more than 90% of our country [3].

Nowadays, the LEADER Programme represents an approach offering new rural development opportunities that lay the foundations of identifying local needs, strengthening the development capacity and implementing local development strategies in order to conserve the rural and cultural patrimony, to develop the economic environment and to improve organisational skills of the local communities.

According to the National Strategy for Romania's Sustainable Development [6] for funding the objectives of the National Rural Development Plan, Romania can access total pre-allotted funds for the 2007-2013 period of approximately 8.02 billion Euro, of which 80.46% come from the communitarian co-financing by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural

Development. To these sums, we have to add important allotments from the Romanian state budget.

A better promotion of financing resources that can carry on sustainable development projects of rural areas within our country and a better education of local communities as regards the will to effectively cooperate and imply in everything concerning the elaboration and implementation of local strategy of sustainable development can bring important long-term benefits to Romanian rural areas.

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