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Factors behind working poverty in Romania

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Abstract

Empirical research shows that working poverty (or in-work poverty) has become a serious socio-economic problem at European level, and not only. This paper analyses the main factors behind in-work poverty in Romania, between 2007 and 2011, aiming to identify some possible measure that need to be taken so that in-work poverty decreases. The results highlight that working poverty in Romania, is mainly determined by employment vulnerability and precarity. The existence of an inefficient employment structure, characterised by high employment in agriculture, high share of self-employment (especially own-account workers and contributing family workers), low labour productivity, low level of the employed population with tertiary education, contributes to an increase in employment vulnerability in Romania, with a negative impact on working poverty. Moreover, low wages generated by an extremely reduced labour productivity; represent an important channel of in-work poverty in Romania. Nevertheless, the results confirm those personal characteristics, job characteristics and the household context determine the extent to which the population is affected by in-work poverty. Therefore, adopting some active policies is required in order to make the transition of employment from poverty to welfare.

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1. Introduction

Currently, *full productive and decent employment* is considered the central objective of national and international policies, being the most important source of income security and the one that opens the way to

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social and economic advancement (ILO, 2012a). The belief that employment growth is fundamental in the fight against poverty and social exclusion has long been at the centre of the EU's strategic agenda (Lisabona Strategy) and continues to be a core of Europe 2020 Strategy (EC, 2010a).

Despite all these strategic directions, Marx et al. (2012) state that "past experience teaches us that employment growth does not always affect the distribution of work across households in such a way as to reduce poverty". In OECD (2009), it is shown that, in many countries, the increase in employment rates between the mid 1990s and mid 2000s was accompanied by stagnant or rising poverty rates for the working age population. The same tendencies were highlighted also at EU level over the "Lisbon decade" (Cantillon, 2011; Vandenbroucke and Vleminckx, 2011).

The apparent absence of a relationship between employment growth and poverty reduction can be justified by: job growth has not sufficiently benefited poor people, a job does not always pay enough to escape poverty, and wage inequality and in-work poverty may have increased (Marx et al., 2012; Andreß and Lohmann, 2008). *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2011 Report* (EU, 2012) highlights that, although jobs were created at EU level, in the pre-crisis period, the employment rate increased as well "there is some concern about the quality of many of those jobs, not least in terms of pay and job security, and the need to strengthen the links between job creation policies and those intended to reduce poverty" (EU, 2012).

Empirical research shows that working poverty has become a serious socio-economic problem at European level (Peña-Casas & Latta, 2004; Andreß & Lohmann 2008; Fraser et al., 2011). According to the most recent statistical data offered by Eurostat Database (2013), at EU level, the in-work poverty risk is widely spread. Thus, in 2011, 8.9% of working age population was exposed to the risk of monetary poverty, there being significant differences between countries. The measures for reducing the number of working poor, stipulated in the European employment strategy, had different results. Thus, in new member states (EU-12), between 2007 and 2011, in-work poverty decreased, from 15.3% to 10.8%. On the contrary, in old member states (EU-15), in-work poverty rate had a slight increase tendency, from 7.3% to 8.5% (Eurostat, 2013). Romania, as a member state of EU, between 2007 and 2011, recorded the highest in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate in EU, twice above the European average.

In the light of these considerations, this paper highlights the main causes and mechanism of working poverty, through a theoretical approach as well as an empirical one. We aim to analyse the specific factors behind working poverty in Romania, between 2007 and 2011, in order to identify some possible measures that need to be taken so that in-work poverty reduces.

2. Literature review

Employment growth, in Europe, in the last fifteen years, has not been accompanied by a significant reduction in poverty because of a relative expansion of low quality jobs as demonstrated by Fraser et al. (2011). *Quality of employment*, considered a multidimensional concept, includes different attributes and dimensions of work and employment, reflected by rewarding work, contractual relationships, occupational and professional status, job security, working time etc. (ILO, 2012a). These qualitative dimensions of employment have a potential impact on workers' welfare and development of professional career.

The process of globalisation, technological change, the decline of the manufacturing industry, corporate restructuring and intensified global competition etc have determined profound changes in the labour market, especially turning from the standard employment relationship (full-time, permanent jobs, employee status etc) to the non-standard employment relationship (part-time, temporary work, self employment etc). These changes have made work more precarious and more vulnerable.

Recent studies carried out by Eurofound (2010) and EU (2012), for Europe, years 2007 and 2009, show that personal characteristics (gender, age and education), job characteristics (professional status, full-time or part-time work, type of employment contract, months worked in year etc) and the household context (single

parenthood/person, households with dependent children or without etc) determine the extent to which population is affected by the in-work poverty risk. Low earnings, low labour force attachment or/and a high number of dependants, relative to national averages, represent, according to Crettaz and Bonoli (2010), three mechanisms or immediate causes of working poor status.

Taking into consideration that “poverty always means fewer opportunities and wasted potential” (EC, 2010b), working poverty is caused by the lack of the opportunity of having a productive and decent job that assures professional development and maximum valuing of the human capital. *Decent work* refers to the opportunity of getting a productive job, under circumstances of freedom, equity, security and human dignity (ILO, 2008). The deficit of decent work is obvious when work is forced, when the opportunity for paid work is limited to certain categories of people to the detriment of others, when work and social conditions increase the social risk of workers and when the lack of productive work determines workers and their families to remain trapped by economic poverty. ILO experts (ILO, 2003, p.5) consider decent work a productive factor and emphasize, at the same time, the dynamic role of social policies based on decent work in promoting a healthy economy and a just society.

Evans and Gibb (2009) consider that „one of the most challenging and threatening features of the new global economy has been the rise of precarious employment”. Precarious work is characterized by low wages, uncertainty and income and job insecurity, work characterised by atypical employment contracts, lack of access to social protection or to its minimum level, lack of benefits, low job tenure etc (Vosko, 2006; Kalleberg, 2009; Tucker, 2002; ILO, 2012b). “From a workers’ point of view, precarious work is related to uncertain, unpredictable and risky employment” say Evans and Gibb (2009, p.4).

Experts ILO (ILO, 2012c) consider the share of own-account workers and unpaid family workers in total employed population *vulnerable employment*. High vulnerable employment indicates a high agricultural sector, high informal work, in which workers do not have, most of the times, an adequate social protection, guaranteed by employment contracts. Vulnerable employment is characterised, most of the times, by low income and difficult working conditions, in which the fundamental rights of the workers can be undermined.

Different studies (Fraser et al., 2011; EC, 2010c; Herman, 2013) show that working poverty can be the result of the different dysfunctions of the labour market, job instability, involuntary temporary and part-time work, reduced salaries, household structure of the person working, etc.

3. Data and research methodology

In order to highlight the empirical relationships between in-work poverty, on the one hand, and personal and the household characteristics, job characteristics, low earnings, as main drivers of working poverty, on the other hand, we used the secondary analysis of statistical data collected from Eurostat Database.

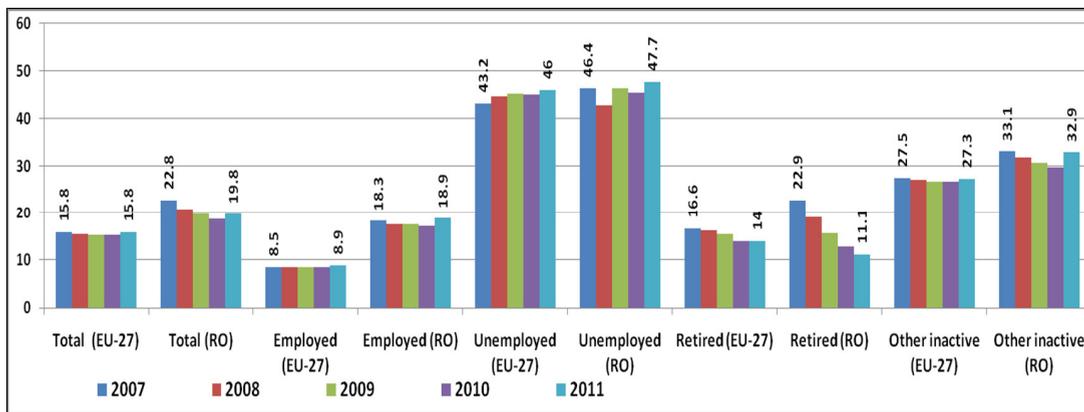
The comparative analysis carried out in this paper is based on the main indicator that measures working poverty, in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate respectively. This indicator catches the individual aspects of the employed persons, as well as those of the household the worker lives in, which provides a better understanding of the social problems in-work poverty entails (Peña-Casas and Latta, 2004). In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate, according to Eurostat (2013), shows “the share of persons who are at work and have an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income (after social transfers)”. By setting the poverty threshold in relation to the median equivalised disposable income, which depends on the size and composition of household, employed persons who are in-work poor despite potential household resources, as well as those working persons who might be poor precisely because of the household context they live in belong to the category of working poverty. This indicator reflects the relative size of monetary poverty, fact that brings into discussion the socio-economic position of the individual in relation to the general level of welfare of the population he or she belongs to (Georgescu, 2005); at-risk-of-poverty is defined relative to the standard of living in each Member State separately.

The statistical data analysed and interpreted in this paper have been collected from Eurostat Database and they

are for the 2007-2011 period. We have chosen to analyse this period because for Romania in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate is calculated by Eurostat only since 2007, the year when Romania became an EU member.

4. Employment precariousity and vulnerability from Romania: incidence on working poverty

Having a job remains a guarantee against the poverty risk. This fact is confirmed by the level and the dynamics of the poverty risk, recorded in Romania, as EU member, and all over EU-27. Poverty risk, in general, is lower among employed persons and higher among unemployed persons, as well as those recorded as being economically inactive and retired people(Figure1). In Romania, the poverty rate is2.3 times higher for those without work (unemployed people) than it is for those in work, thus confirming that, both at individual level and at the level of the households the workers live in, participation in the labour market significantly diminishes the risk of monetary poverty (Corluy and Vandenbroucke, 2012).



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the Eurostat Database (2013)

Fig.1: Incidence of poverty risk, by most frequent economic activity status, in Romania and EU-27, 2007-2011 (%)

The highest in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate from EU-27 is recorded in Romania, 2.2 times higher than the European average and 4.8 times higher than in Finland, the most efficient European country from this perspective (figure 1). Moreover, Romania is among the member states that have the highest total poverty rate. It is alarming that, in Romania, there is an extremely small difference (below 1 percentage point-p.p.) between total poverty rate and in-work poverty rate (Figure 1 and Table1). The difference below 1 p.p. between the two rates of monetary poverty recorded by Romania can be explained by the fact that the working poor have more weight in total poverty. For this reason, we consider that working poverty contributes significantly to the high poverty rate.

The empirical data presented in Table 1 show that in the most recent period (2007-2011), Romania have once again failed to make headway in the fight against monetary poverty among the working-age population. In the context of the financial-economic crisis in this period, employment rate (20-64 years) fell, a decrease associated with an increase in in-work poverty rate and a relative stagnation of the total poverty rate. A similar trend was recorded at EU-27 level, but the share of the working age population (18-64 years) below the poverty threshold grew (Eurostat, 2013).

Table1. Employment, wages and poverty in Romania, 2007-2011

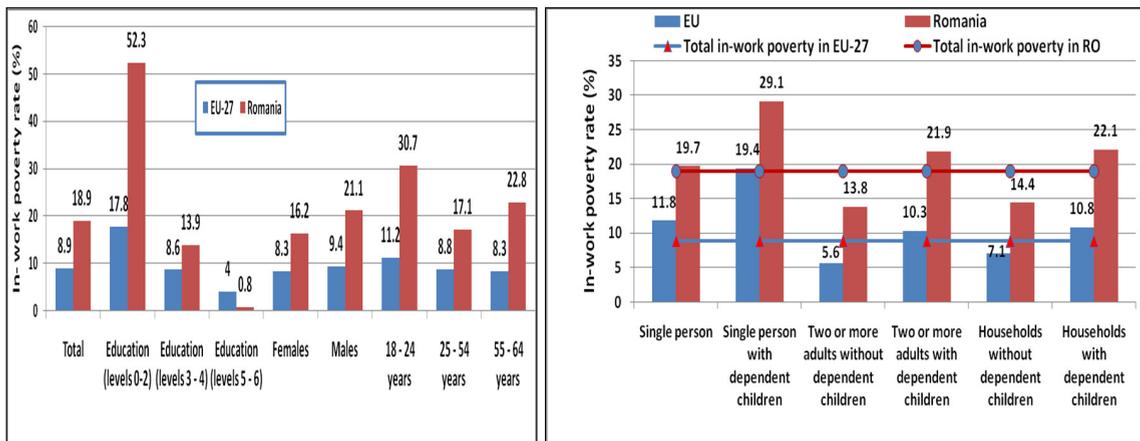
Indicators	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Employment rate (20-64 years)	64.4	64.4	63.5	63.3	62.8

Total poverty rate	22.8	20.9	19.8	18.7	19.8
In-work poverty rate	18.3	17.5	17.6	17.2	18.9
Monthly minimum wage as a proportion of average monthly earnings* (%)	-	30.1	33.3	32.3	35.8
Minimum wages (EUR/month)	115.27	138.59	149.16	141.63	157.2
Indices of real earnings (%)	100	116.5	114.7	110.5	108.4
Real labour productivity per hour worked (EUR)	4.9	5.2	5.6	5.3	5.3

*Industry, construction and services (except activities of households as employers and extra-territorial organisations and bodies)

Source: Eurostat database (2013); NIS (2013)

Recent studies (Eurofound, 2010; EU, 2012) have shown that the influence of the personal characteristics (gender, age and education) on in-work poverty is different, there being large variability between countries. In Romania and whole EU-27, it is confirmed that the education level of employed people represents an important factor that influences in-work poverty. Data presented in Figure 2 show that, as the level of education attained increases, the in-work at-risk-of-poverty falls.



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the Eurostat Database (2013)

Fig. 2. In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate in EU-27 and Romania, 2011: A. by education level, age and sex; B. by type of household

In Romania, in 2011, 52.3% of the employed population with pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education (levels 0-2) is exposed to in-work poverty risk, whereas, among the employed population with a higher level of education (first and second stage of tertiary education; levels 5 - 6), there is a much lower risk, 0.8% respectively. Compared with the European average, the risk of working poor is much higher among the population with a low and medium level of education. Since Romania records a low share of employed population with higher education, in total employed population, (only 17.6% relative to 29.9% in EU-27) we consider that in order to reduce in-work at-risk-of-poverty, it is necessary to increase the level of education, which should correspond to the needs of the labour market (Popovici, 2011). Without investments in education, health care and social services poverty cannot be eliminated and sustainable development can never be achieved (Kardos, 2012).

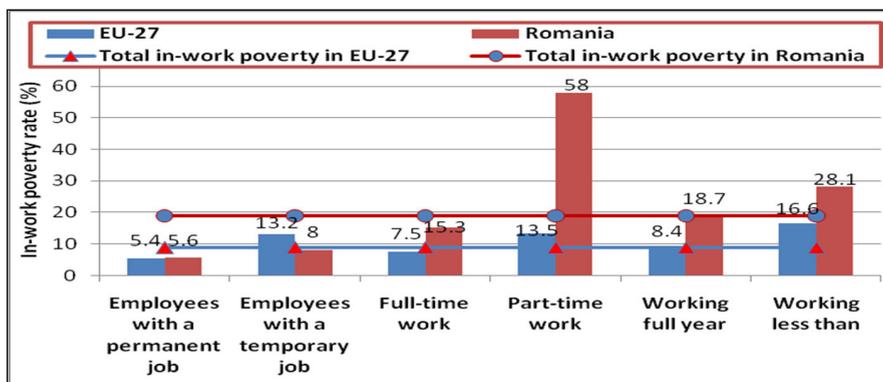
From the point of view of *gender effects* on working poverty, we notice that there are significant differences in Romania compared with the average across the EU (Figure 2a). The in-work poverty risk, both among women and among men, is twice higher than in EU. On the other hand, we notice that in-work poverty risk is lower for women (16.2%) than for men (21.1%) in Romania, but also in the EU27 average (8.3% compared with 9.4%).

According to data for Romania on in-work at-risk-of-poverty by age, the most affected by this risk are younger workers (30.7%), followed by older workers (22.8%) and workers aged 25–54 years (17.1%). At the EU-27 level, in-work poverty risk decreases with the age of workers. The fact that younger workers face the highest risk of in-work poverty “can be explained by the fact that young people often start their careers with low-paid jobs” (Eurofound, 2010, p.6).

Beside the individual characteristic, analysed above, household characteristics can justify the incidence of in-work poverty risk in Romania (Figure 2b). The highest risk is recorded by single parents with dependent children (29.1%), followed by households with dependent children (22.1%) and households composed of two adults or more with children (21.9%). Thus, the hypothesis according to which having many dependent children is a mechanism that can lead to poverty is confirmed, considering that “the same number of children may be more likely to lead to poverty for one-parent families than for two-parent families” (Crettaz and Bonoli, 2010, p.11). As the resources (incomes) are shared between the household’s members, what is more important is the number of dependent children per adult (workers). The employed persons who live in households without children face the lowest in-work poverty risk at 13.8% for Romania and 5.6% for the EU27 average (see Figure 2b).

In the specialist literature, it is acknowledged that working poverty, beside the individual and household characteristics, is significantly influenced by employment characteristics, such as professional status, level of remuneration, type of contract (temporary or permanent contract), working time (part-time or full-time), number of hours worked in a year etc. The European Commission (EC, 2009) highlights the fact that in many member states, under the circumstances in which all other elements remain unchanged, having a temporary or part-time job represents a substantial wage penalty, thus contributing to the increase in poverty and inequality in terms of income on the labour market.

Statistical data in figure 3 confirm the fact that, both in Romania and in EU-27, the poverty risk is higher in part-time employment relative to full time employment, temporary contracts compared with permanent contracts, and for people working less than a full year relative to those working a year, thus highlighting the precarity of non-standard employment.



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the Eurostat database (2013)

Fig.3. In-work poverty by job characteristics (type of contract, full-/part-time work, months worked), in Romania and EU-27, 2011

The fact that, in Romania, in 2011, employees with temporary employment contracts, had more reduced in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate compared with the European average can be explained by the existence of a more reduced percentage of employees with temporary contracts, in total employees, of only 1.5% compared to the one recorded in the EU-27 of 14.1%. It is worrying that, in Romania, most of the flexible work is involuntary: over 80% of the employees with temporary employment contracts and 53% of part-time employed people

declared to be in this situation because they could not find a permanent job or full time job, thus being considered workers in precarious working conditions (Table 2).

Table 2. Precarious and vulnerable employment in relation to working poverty, in Romania and EU-27, 2007-2011 (%)

Indicators		2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate (%)	Romania	18.3	17.5	17.6	17.2	18.9
	EU-27	8.5	8.5	8.4	8.4	8.9
Vulnerable employment(%)*	Romania	32.3	31.2	31.4	33.1	31.5
	EU-27	12.3	12.0	12.1	12.3	12.3
Part-time employment (% of total employment)	Romania	8.6	8.6	8.5	9.7	9.3
	EU-27	17.6	17.6	18.1	18.6	18.8
Involuntary part-time employment (% of total part-time employment)	Romania	53.1	51.8	51.3	54.4	53
	EU-27	22.4	25.3	25.3	26.7	26.1
Temporary job (% of total employees)	Romania	1.6	1.3	1	1.1	1.5
	EU-27	14.6	14.1	13.6	13.9	14.1
Involuntary Temporary job (% of temporary job)	Romania	78.1	79.2	83.4	78.7	80.1
	EU-27	60.3	59.7	60.4	61.7	60.4
Employment in agriculture** (% of total employment)	Romania	:	:	30.1	32.1	32.6
	EU-27	5.5	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.3
Labour productivity**(EU-27 = 100)	Romania	43.4	49.2	49.4	48.5	49.2

*The share of own-account workers and contributing family workers, in total employment; ** per person employed
Source: Our processing based on data provided by Eurostat (2013)

Professional status, which reflects “the situation of an employed person, depending on the way of achieving income from his activity” (NIS, 2013a, p.42) proves to be an important determinant of working poverty. Thus, in Romania, 54.9% of employed persons except employees are confronted with the high risk of in-work poverty, a risk 10 times higher relative to the one employees are dealing with and 2.3 times higher than the one recorded by employed persons except employees from EU-27 (figure 4a). Self-employed persons without employees (own-account workers), self-employed persons with employees (employers) and contributing family workers fall into the category of employed persons except employees.

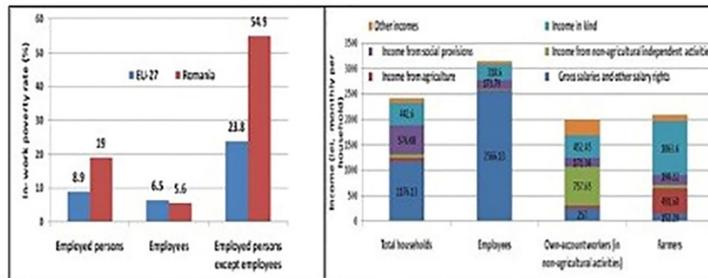
The high level of working poverty, which the group – employed persons except employees – is facing, is determined by the high share of own-account workers and contributing family workers in total employed population (Table 2). As these employed persons usually have low income and do not have an adequate social protection, guaranteed by employment contracts, they are considered vulnerable employment (Herman, 2013).

Romania is the *first EU country* in terms of the share of contributing family workers in total employment (12.7%), followed at considerable distance by Greece (5.4%) and Slovenia (4.3%). Compared to the average value recorded at EU level (of 1.5%), this category of employed persons, in Romania 2011, has a 8.2 times higher share. The fact that 1.16 mil contributing family workers of the EU-27 total of 3.36 mil belong to Romania, a share of 35%, is alarming. As for own-account workers, Romania ranks *second*, with a share of 18.8%, after Greece, country where 23.3% of the employed population has this status (Eurostat, 2013).

In Romania, the high share of self-employment and contributing family workers in total employment, is determined by the inefficient sectorial structure, characterised by an extremely high employment in agriculture (32.6%) to the detriment of employment in services, and by an extremely reduced labour productivity (Table 1 and 2). Romania ranks first in EU-27 in terms of employment in agriculture, but penultimate in terms of labour productivity. Most of own-account workers and contributing family workers work in agriculture, a subsistence agriculture that generates insufficient income, thus in creating the poverty risk.

Statistical data in Table 2 confirm the existence of a direct relationship between vulnerable employment and poverty, in Romania, according to the economic theory (ILO, 2009): a high share of vulnerable workers in total employment can indicate a higher poverty risk. An extra argument for the influence of professional status on working poverty is the level and structure of total income of households, on origin sources, by occupational status of the head of the household (figure 4b). We note that the income level, in households where the head of

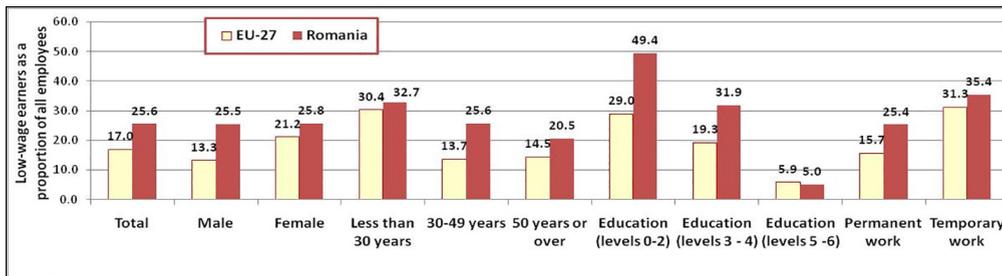
the household is a wage earner, is much higher than in households run by own-account workers (in non-agricultural activities) and farmers. On the other hand, income from salaries represents a relatively reduced share in total income obtained by households run by de own-account workers and farmers, thus increasing the risk of in-work poverty.



Source:Elaborated by the authors based on the Eurostat database (2013) and NIS (2013b)

Fig.4. a. In-work poverty by professional status, in Romania and EU-27 average, 2011; b. Total income of household structure on origin source, by occupational status of the head of the household, in Romania, 2012

Only labour market attachment and characteristics of workers and household cannot explain entirely the intensity of working poverty, because this depends on the income of both the household and the individual. When a worker has a low-wage job, even under the circumstances of a full-time work or permanent contract, the in-work poverty risk may increase, the level of work remuneration representing a significant determinant of in-work poverty risk.



Source:Elaborated by the authors based on the Eurostat database (2013)

Note: Low wage earners are defined as those earning less than two-thirds of the national median wage per hour.

Fig.5.Low wage earners (as a proportion of all employees)in Romania and EU-27 average, 2011

Data in Figure 5 show that 49.5% of wage earners with a low education level are low wage earners, which justifies the existence of a high in-work poverty risk (52.3%). Moreover, wage earners face a higher risk of low-wage work because their work is temporary or because they are young (less than 30 years). We have to take into consideration that low wage earners are not confronted immediately with in-work poverty risk, due to their household context, which allows them to obtain income of other household members. This can explain the reduced in-work poverty risk among wage earners in Romania, of 5.6%, under the circumstances of the existence of a share of 25.6% of low wage earners in total employees. For preventing the growing in-work poverty and for ensuring decent job quality it is necessary to set minimum wages at appropriate levels. As for minimum wages “as an important means of improving workers’ standard of living and reducing poverty” (Eurofound, 2011, p.15), in Romania, in the 2007-2011 period, these increased. Moreover, monthly minimum wage as a proportion of average monthly earnings (%) of industry, construction and services (Table 1) has

increased as well, but without determining a reduction in in-work poverty. Nonetheless, in the same period, the real wage fell by 8%. We have to underline the fact that Romania records significant negative gaps relative to other EU member states in terms of wages, determined by disparities recorded in employment structure and labour productivity.

5. Conclusions and implications

Taking into account the premise that human resource is and will continue to be the most important resource for sustainable development, the society needs to give maximum importance to employment growth as a viable solution for the multiple economic and social problems that Romania is confronted with in the international context. The results of the economic-statistical analysis highlight that Romania has the highest risk of working poverty in EU, determined mainly by employment vulnerability and precarity. The existence of an inefficient employment structure, characterised by high employment in agriculture to the detriment of employment in services, high share of self-employment (especially own-account workers and contributing family workers), low labour productivity, low level of the employed population with tertiary education contribute to the increase in employment vulnerability. Taking into consideration that *most offlexible work (part-time and temporary work)* is involuntary certifies the precarity of non-standard employment in Romania, with negative effects on working poverty. Moreover, low wages generated by labour productivity; represent an important channel of in-work poverty in Romania. Thus, the hypothesis according to which personal characteristics, job characteristics and the household context determine the extent to which population is affected by in-work poverty is confirmed. In order to increase employment efficiency and to reduce working poverty it is highly necessary to make structural changes that should increase the importance of non-agricultural sectors in production and employment. As Romania is characterised by the highest values of employment in agriculture in EU, the quality of the jobs in this sector needs to be improved. Any movement of employment from the agricultural sector to the one of industry and services entails an increase in labour productivity and decrease in working poverty, by reducing the self-employed population and contributing family worker or by making their work more efficient. On the other hand, actions need to be taken for reducing employment vulnerability. One of these actions may be turning self-employment from “necessity entrepreneurship” into “opportunity entrepreneurship”, one driving productive and decent jobs and welfare implicitly.

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