Strategic Analysis of The Rural Area Development in the Central Region of Romania

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Abstract. This paper aims at addressing issues of rural development in the Central Region for Development of Romania, in terms of preserving both the traditional aspect of Romania’s rural area and the modernization of rural life for the integration in the European Union. The premise and the importance of such a process are made up by the certainty that the development of rural area and of agriculture in Romania have to be consistent with the values and global beliefs on the environment, agriculture and the role of tradition.

Key words: rural, development, analysis, natural resources.

INTRODUCTION

Rural space represents a socio-cultural entity which includes all rural areas respectively that land area where forests, crops and green areas prevail and whose basic economic activity is represented by agriculture.

As defined in the European Charter of Rural Space, rural area includes an interior or a coastal area comprising of villages and small towns, where most part of the land is used for agriculture, forestry, aquaculture and fishery, economic and cultural activities of inhabitants of these areas (crafts, industry, services); facilities of non-urban areas for leisure time and entertainment (or nature reserves); other utilizations (except housing).

Rural development and setting up that tend to upgrade themselves have as the main objective the maintenance and preservation of national character of rural space and culture. In areas where serious physical damage or socio-cultural local damage, regional or national damage (such as the case of former communist countries and in some over industrialized countries of Western Europe) have been produced, the solution is offered to rebuild or restore these areas for the purpose of restoring them to rural standards.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is conducted on the Development Region 7 Center, which is one of the most dynamic regions of Romania. The dynamic character of the region is due primarily to the location in the center of the country that allows connections to six of the other seven regions of development, occurring approximately equal distances from its central area to the border crossing points, but also due to its traditional links with Western Europe. Economic, political and social transformations that our country went through due to the „de facto” integration of
Romania into the European Union left their mark not only on macroeconomic but also meso-economic level.

The study is a more complete analysis of this rural area focusing on the most important elements for characterizing rural life including physical, geographic, demographic, economic and social aspects. The results obtained revealed the highlighting of development disparities within the region, of the weaknesses and development potential.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Physical and geographical aspects.

The performance of economic, social and cultural activities of rural areas takes place in close accordance with the peculiarities of relief. The Region Development Centre, with a total area of 34,100 km² (14.31% of Romania), includes the counties of Alba, Brasov, Covasna, Harghita, Mures and Sibiu and includes 50 towns and cities (of which 18 towns), 334 communes and 1823 villages.

Landforms

The Development Region Centre contains important parts of the three branches of Romanian Carpathians, the hills of the Transylvanian plateau and the depressions of the contact area between the hills and the mountains and it creates different living and life conditions for residents of this rural area that holds about 90% of the total surface area.

The mountain area covers 47% of the Centre Region area, occupying the Eastern, Southern and Western parts of the region. On the border between Centre Region and Southern Region are the highest peaks in Romania: Moldoveanu (2544 m) and Negoiu (2535 m), being situated both in the Fagaras Mountains, whereby numerous peaks in the Southern Carpathians exceed 2,000 meters height. Occupying almost entirely the territory of Harghita and Covasna counties and important parts of Mures and Brasov counties, the Eastern Carpathians have average altitudes (maximum altitude of the Carpathians in the Central Region is of 2100 m in the Pietrosu Peak in Calimani Mountains) and a diverse genesis. The Apuseni Mountains that occupy half of the North-Western part of Alba County have lower altitudes (maximum height of 1849 m is reached in Curcubata Mare peak in Bihor Mountains, at the boundary with the North-Western region). A characteristic of the Eastern Carpathians and Apuseni Mountains is the presence of well individualized inner-mountainous depressions.

Main natural protected areas

The region combines a large variety of landscapes, geological and paleontological formations, and valuable elements of flora and fauna that cannot be found in the other land areas. The unique Alpine landscapes with rare flora and fauna elements justify the creation of four national parks that extend as well on the territory of other region's counties: Piatra Craiului (15,000 ha with administration in Zarnesti city) and Bucegi (of which the Brasov county possesses only the Northern part, but also the most spectacular alpine scenery), Calimani (Mures and Harghita) and Cheile-Bicazului Hasmas (Harghita).

Providing modern means for monitoring these national parks will lead both to an effective protection of the natural environment and a boost in our country's ecotourism. Apuseni Mountains National Park that unfolds across three counties includes a significant area of the Alba County as well.

Numerically, the scientific reserves in the Region "Center" represent 22% of the total number of scientific reserves in Romania, and covering thus 43.3% of their total surface.
Demographic characteristics

The demographic element is particularly important for analysis because of the population’s role both in triggering of phenomena and in their consumption, as the population also benefits from the development. In the diagnostic analysis of rural space, the demographic element appears mainly as a potential for development.

Population number

With a population of 2,530,486 inhabitants, the region includes 11.7% of the Romanian population whereby the Central Region is on the fifth place among the eight development regions of the country. The regional average rate of 74.2 inhabitants / km² is lower than the national average rate, where the highest population density is in Brasov county (111.4 inhabitants / km²), and below the regional average Alba counties are (60.7 inhabitants / km²), Covasna (60.3 inhabitants / km²), Harghita (49.2 inhabitants / km²). 41.1% of the total population belongs to rural area while the remaining of 59.9% of the population is concentrated in urban areas - ranging in the network of region’s 50 cities. The highest percentage of the population that belongs to the countryside goes to Harghita county (55.9%) followed by Covasna county (49.6%) and the lowest percentage belongs to the counties of Sibiu (32.4%) and Brasov (25.3%).

Economic characteristics

Economic activities performed in rural areas are less diversified and dominated by agriculture, but in recent years a new source of income is being developed through the practice of rural tourism and agrarian tourism.

Climatic, terrain and soil conditions as shown above highlight a low favorability for agricultural development in the Central Region, but in reality, agriculture finds good conditions for development in most parts of the territory. Even in the mountain region large areas of pastures and natural hayfields are favorable to livestock, and the colder climate and specific rainfall regime lead to the fact that here the effects of drier periods during the year are less intense.

The agricultural area of Centre Region is of 1.929 million hectares representing 56.6% of the total surface area and 13.1% of the agricultural area of Romania. By the usage method the structure of agricultural surface is divided as follows: 39.8% arable area, 34.5% pastures, 24.5% grassland, 0.4% vineyards and nurseries, 0.8% orchards and nurseries. Areas planted with grain hold the largest share in the total amount (main crops are orderly placed as follows: corn, wheat and rye, barley and two-row barley), following technical plants (potatoes and sugar beet) and vegetables. The Central Region produces a quarter of Romania's potato production, about one third of sugar beet production and it holds a fifth of Romania's sheep herd. Central Region also owns 13.3% of the country's tractors park, whereby the average arable area for a tractor is of 33.3 hectares, representing the lowest level in Romania. The production value of agricultural goods and services of the Centre Region is of 600,000 lei, representing about 12% of agricultural production value in Romania.

Forestry

In the Centre Region the area covered by forest represents 36.4% of total area which shows the existence of great forest potential, thus being one of the main areas of the country's wood supply. Forests represent biological productive systems that provide the raw material needed for wood industry, being therefore an important energy source. In addition, forests are a great habitat for several species of animals and plants. Region "Centre" owns 18.8% of the total area of forests in Romania and 27.4% of the area of coniferous forests, respectively 15.1% of the area of beech forests. The timber put into circulation in the economic cycle can reach levels located around 4,000 cubic meters as the second provider of wood in the country.
after the North-Eastern region. A complementary source of income that is currently less exploited is represented by berries and mushrooms.

**Non-agricultural activities**

The villages’ density on an area of 1000 km² differs greatly within the counties of the region, from Alba County having 105.4 villages/1000 km² to the county of Brașov with 28 villages/1000 km² (compared to national average rate of 55 villages/1000 km²). The large number of villages in Alba County is due to the very small settlements of the Apuseni Mountains, where several communes are grouped into more than 30 villages. This aspect creates significant problems with regard to transport infrastructure and facilities in these villages. Villages or isolated human settlements within rural communities in the region are faced with the phenomenon of poverty and characterized by a reduced consumption of goods and services. According to the study "CARTA VERDE" of rural development in Romania, the Region "Centre" comprises of some areas where the contributing factors for development are predominant (eg Căliman area - Mureș county, Ciuc Depression – Harghita county, Brașov depression and Sibiu surrounding area - Lotru - Sibiu county) and areas where restrictive factors of development are predominant (eg. Apuseni Mountains - Alba County).

In view of these factors one can consider the existence of some kind of obstacles in the approach and development of non-agricultural activities in the Central Region. These activities have been discussed and/or developed under the aegis of crafts that hold secular traditions and thus were able to generate highly diversified economic activities. In the same time the development of production activities has been favoured by a positive position to trading goods and the trade activity has tradition. The Centre Region potential is varied, having both natural resources and human, social and economic resources.

The tourism activity is driven by the highly varied tourism potential of Centre Region, both because of the relief and because of historical and cultural variety. The agrarian tourism is also gaining ground year by year, by making use of the potential represented by the households of population in rural areas (they are approved by the Ministry for Small and Medium Enterprises, Commerce, Tourism and Liberal Professions 237 rural locations). The specific character of Center Region offers special conditions for mountain tourism and agrarian tourism by being on the first place in the country in terms of number of accredited pensions. Agrarian tourism benefits particularly of the potential of rural households.

A special interest for cultural tourism is represented by the villages in the Center Region, which some of them due to isolation and as a result of poor infrastructure have kept their traditional culture alive with architecture and popular technique (building of houses, gates, religious buildings), used materials, technical installations (dies, pives) or techniques used in wood processing. Regarding the historic area, medieval towns and fortified churches are very well preserved, and some are part of the UNESCO international heritage.

**Regional SWOT Analysis 2007-2013**

In rural areas there are important resources, especially land and human and some natural resources (including landscapes), it (the countryside) is an economic environment with high potential for absorption of capital investment and employment as the result of the SWOT analysis:

**Strengths**

The location in the center of the country that allows connections to six of the other seven regions of development and the existence of important points for road and rail transport;

Cultural interference with a high variety of traditions and customs due to a concentration of nationalities.
Education and training network well represented for all skill levels, as well as traditional university cities (Brasov, Sibiu, Tg. Mures, Alba Iulia) which reflect positively on the rural development.

Labor skilled in several professions;
High agricultural potential both in terms of livestock as well as crop production;
High tourism potential usable throughout the year due to the mountain landscape, traditions, architectural and historical monuments;
High density of spa centers that offer treatments for all diseases;
Many protected areas, national parks, natural parks, natural monuments and reserves;
High touristic and agrotouristic capacity;
Industry’s guideline for processing resources and existent products in the region;
The trend to increase the number of SMEs;
Many qualified work resources in various areas (traditions in agriculture and industry)

Weaknesses
The specific configuration of the relief limits the road access to some clearways;
Migration, which includes mainly the young population;
Negative natural growth and population’s aging process;
The reduced number of upgraded county and communal roads;
Absence of educational and health infrastructure in some remote mountain villages;
Absence of facilities in the educational and health system;
Educational problems in poor populations, particularly Roma people: the increasing number of institutionalized children;
Non-correlation of the educational supply with the needs on the labor market;
Under-estimation of tourism resources in the Region;
The inappropriate protection of tourists who undertake high-altitude trekking or in winter season;
The absence of thematic tourist routes that exploit the natural /anthropogenic potential;
Tourist non-modernized utilities and inadequate technical equipment.
Lack of accommodation facilities with ICT equipment (Information and Communication Technology);
Business consulting services are poorly developed;
Small number of active SMEs in rural areas and insufficient development of SMEs in the services sector in general;
Low offer in consulting services for preparation of marketing studies, project management, financial analysis, etc.;
Collaboration relations between university research and rural area are poorly developed;
Small agricultural lands which do not allow an efficient exploitation, the existence of unexploited areas;
The old car and farm machinery dealer that causes inefficient exploitations;
Using large amounts of chemicals substances in agricultural production (pesticides, fertilizers).

Opportunities
The location in the territory represents an advantage;
Developing / creating new opportunities for investments after Romania's EU accession
Development of village-city partnerships;
Major European infrastructure projects which will lead through the region will ease the transport and will lead to an increase in tourist attractiveness;
European programs aimed at supporting business;
Globalization will increase competitiveness;
The existence of institutions or NGOs dealing with professional training and retraining of the workforce;
The demand’s increase on international level for cultural tourism, eco-tourism and spa tourism;
Direct presentation, customer oriented presentation, environmentally friendly products.

Threats
Poverty and isolation of some areas generate depopulation, which doubled by the aging population creates the prerequisites for the disappearance of locations;
Free movement of labor, especially that of the highly skilled labor will affect the quality and quantity of work resources;
Degradation of natural environment;
Free movement of labor, especially that of the highly skilled labor will affect the quality and quantity of human resources on the labor market;
The slow adapting ability of enterprises to the changes occurring in the markets’ structure;
Lack of investment strategies that take into account demographic evolutions;
Lack of involvement of responsible authorities in fundraising;
Danger of degradation of flora and fauna in the protected areas;

CONCLUSIONS

The production value of agricultural goods and services in the Centre Region is at the level of 600,000 lei, representing about 12% of the agricultural production value of Romania. The timber put into circulation in the economic cycle can reach levels located around 4,000 cubic meters thus being the second wood provider in the country after North-East region.

In rural communities in the region are also villages or isolated human settlements faced with the phenomenon of poverty and characterized by a reduced consumption of goods and services.

The specific character of Center Region offers special conditions for mountain tourism and agrarian tourism, thus being on the first place in the country in terms of the number of accredited pensions. The agrarian tourism benefits particularly from the potential of rural households (e.g. Bran area, Marginimea Sibiu ethnographic area, Seni mountain area, etc.).

The prerequisites for development and diversification of economic activities in rural areas and for upgrading forestry activities do exist.

Dezvoltarea rural area in the center region and country based on diversity resources a major concern for European tourism and infrastructure projects, but also in technology, environment or supporting small and medium

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