



Disadvantaged Areas in the Context of the Rural Development Policy in Romania

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The theme revealed by the title is a result of the crossing of two sectors cover area, that is the rural development and the territorial development.

Both sectors have a relatively recent history: the science of the territorial development was promoted after the Second World War and the rural development – in its present meaning – has become a true concern for about a decade. Consequently, the disadvantaged rural areas have become a study object for the experts only lately.

The traditional significance of the rural area admits the existence of great discrepancies between the living conditions in the urban and rural area, for the benefit of the first one. In such a spirit, the rural milieu is conceived as an area in which the prevailing activity is agriculture; the technical infrastructure is precarious; the dwellings endowment and comfort are under the level of those in the urban area; the social and cultural services which are meant for the population are precarious or qualitatively inappropriate; the non-agricultural economic activities are very few and of no attractiveness for most of the labour force; population's incomes are insecure and lower than those in the urban area.

Such a way of differentiating the rural area from the urban one, when the rural are is – implicitly – in a lower position as against the urban one, is still present nowadays in Romania, being even legislated by law No. 2/1968 on the territorial administrative organisation (still in force). Under this law, the rural is implicitly approached in the light of under-development, since the town is defined as "a population's centre that is more developed from the economic, social-cultural and municipal-domestic point of view".

Even if the present Romanian reality entitles such a definition of the rural area, the consideration over the rural area future cannot accept the perpetuity of this situation. The rural area must be considered in terminus of aiming the modern standards in what concerns the comfort and infrastructure, in general, and in what concerns equal opportunities to training, labour and life for each individual – within the urban or the rural area. With that end in view, there are necessary integrated and complex actions that are organised as policies meant for the rural area development, by means of which the living standard within the rural area be significantly raised.

There are two reasons for which the outline of a new policy meant for the rural area is required in Romania now, with a different content as against the old one, reasons which are stated in two basic principles that mark out the building of such policy:

- the need for more social and economic justice and for balance between regions, in general, and between the urban and rural areas, in special;

- the need for a society sustainable development, the need for reconciliation – on long-term – of the human activities with the environment factors.

Both requests come from the need for Romania's updating, from Romania's option for integration into the European reality, in general, and for alignment to the European concepts and methodologies in what concerns the territorial development, in special. Within the European integration process, the goals are promoting a balanced and sustained economic and social

progress, decreasing of major disparities between areas, economic, and social cohesion.

This does not admit the territorial exclusion for economic or social reasons. Romania cannot aim the European integration when having a rural area that is an economic and social reality of a lower level, not only as against the European level, but also as against the national average level. A society that allows within its areas with two development speed rates generally has no chance to be accepted in the partnership of the eligible European balance.

As long as the rural area has identified itself with agriculture and the rural economy has identified itself with the agricultural economy, the rural development has been mainly approached in the terms of the agricultural policy.

Gradually, due to the complexity of the relationships in which the rural area is as against the rest of the society, there has been understood that agriculture is just an element as any other within the rural context and that its development is insufficient for the rural progress and cannot be considered irrespective of the overall economic and social context.

The emphasis in the rural area approach has moved from a sectoral approach – aiming only the agricultural branch – to an integrated and overall approach, in the terms of the rural area developed policy or, in brief, of the rural policy.

This change in view occurred relatively recently in Europe, only in the late 80's, when the rural policy became a priority object of the Council of Europe and other European bodies activity. A campaign was launched then, aiming a better knowledge of the functions and problems of the continent rural milieu and the promotion of a rural area policy, in its whole was stimulated.

The defining of a rural area policy, within the context of the overall economic and social policy includes two spheres: a sectoral one – the agricultural branch – and a regional one – the rural development. The regional sphere is very stressed as it highly aims the territorial aspects, but at the same time it crosses the agriculture sectoral problems as the main activity within the rural area.

The main **role** of the rural policy is the population's determination to go on living in the rural area, in order to provide a continuity of the human development within the territory and in order to carry out a significant role in the environment preservation.

The set of the living conditions that will make attractive the life and work in the rural area constitutes the **general objective** of the rural policy. The **final purpose** of the rural area development policy is included in the category of the regional policy goals: the removal of regional disparities between various areas, in general, between urban and rural areas, in particular.

By applying such a policy there will be hope to set a rural area that will have a modern development level (infrastructure, endowment services), equal to that in the urban area, keeping only a specific feature that comes from the particular relationship between man and nature within the rural area.

The diversity of the rural areas – from the point of view of their geographical location, the relationship with the urban area, the available resources, the development level and the occurring problems – imposes differentiated approaches and strategies that are carried out by appropriate policies for each area.

These policies must be able to value the opportunities and to preserve the area individuality, but, at the same time, to specify a support of the endogenous development when the areas specific resources are insufficient and the average development level is very low. So arises the theme of the disadvantaged and under-developed areas.

What do we mean by disadvantaged areas? In a very large acceptance, they are those territories on which relatively homogeneously occur economic and social phenomena and process whose characteristics significantly deviate, in a negative way, from an average development level. The causes of the poor development are either the natural hostile/restrictive conditions for the development or inappropriate evolutions or policies for the area resources and need.

This problem of the disadvantaged areas belongs to the territorial development sector – where the inequalities and unbalances in development are considered as essential dysfunction of the economic and social mechanism. In this spirit, the identifying of the areas that are lagging behind in their development is vital for the accomplishment of the democratic values (in the way of providing equal opportunities) and of the social justice (providing satisfactory living conditions, convertible for all citizens).

The goal of the step for the identification of those areas that face various problems in their development is the conceiving of some policies of those areas supporting in order to recover the lagging behind in development, as against other areas.

The rural areas that have development problems, or, in brief, the *disadvantaged rural areas*, restrict the sphere of interest only to the rural area development. From the practical point of view, the problem of the disadvantageous rural areas is bounded to the concern for setting *priority actions within the rural development policy*.

From that perspective, there must be taken account of two aspects:

a) the methodology of evaluating the development level, in order to identify and define

the areas, which negatively deviates from the average;

b) the ways of recovering the lagging behind in development by those identified areas; on one hand, this aspects must refer to what the areas expect from society and, on the other hand, to what the areas themselves can do for their own regeneration.

The conceiving base that is operational for the evaluation of the development level and the identification and definition of the areas has a great relativism – both from longitudinal perspective, in time, and from transversal perspective, in space.

In time, the characteristic of a under-developed area is not permanent. The content of the concept of under-development is very dynamic as the appreciation of the development level depends on the standard to which it is compared – the average of a certain area – and this average itself is in a continuous change process, and, also, the area itself is evolving, is changing.

In space too, the disadvantaged areas characteristics are relative: the disadvantaged areas in Romania are different from those in France, United Kingdom, Italy and so on, as the under-development of the areas is mainly appreciated according to the average development level within the said country.

But the standard of the development measuring can vary within different ranges. According to those, the size of the development occurring areas is different.

- If the standard of appreciation of Romania's area development level is *the average of the Romanian rural area development*, the disadvantageous areas will look like islands. Their size and number depends on the existence or non-existence of some local or general factors having a territorial occurrence.

- If the standard of appreciation is *the average of the urban area development*, then most of the Romanian rural areas will be considered as disadvantageous areas, as a consequence of the fact that – except for the differentiated historical processes, by which the urban and rural areas have developed in different lines – the communism political and economical mentality has situated the rural area in a looser position as against the urban area, a kind of a second class milieu.

- If the standard of appreciation is *the average of the European Union rural area*, then the entire Romanian rural area will be considered as an under-developed area, because there is a serious discrepancy between the competitiveness of the two areas.

The significance of this comparison and appreciation methodology of development will be proved when the problem of the eligibility of some rural areas in our country arises in order to benefit of assistance from the European Funds.

But our analysis framework is limited to the first way of identifying the disadvantaged areas – by comparing them to the average level of the Romanian rural area development – as the policy towards these areas is bounded to the rural development policy in Romania, which is, in its turn, bounded to the sphere of the regional policy in Romania.

The ways of recovering the lagging behind in development can be conceived in the first place as a support that those areas are expecting from society. Such policies of supporting the rural areas that are facing problems are also operational in Europe's developed countries.

But similar steps in our country involve some more delicate aspects. In the developed countries, within the rural areas in which the population's incomes are low, the unemployment is high, the immigration is significant and the inadequate services are an exception from the rule. The focusing on them, with the purpose to bring them to the average development level, is but a problem of the economic and social balance resetting and of the democratic principle occurrence.

In our case, the precarious situation of the entire rural area makes that the problem of deciding the assistance priorities of some areas acquires also, besides the economic and social size, a moral one – whom does one saves first?

Secondly, the areas must be assisted to discover the means by which they themselves may contribute to their own development. With this purpose, the assimilating of the above shown theoretical elements must have as a consequence the following:

- the getting accustomed of the local communities and authorities to discover and evaluate their local potential;

- the consciousness of the specific value of each area, in order to acquire a partnership co-operation with other developed rural areas or with the urban areas.

As a result of the space and phenomenological enlargement of the rural under-development in Romania, the problem of the disadvantaged areas must be treated very seriously and the elaboration of the policies in the advantage of such areas becomes an urgent need.

The elimination of major discrepancies between various parts of the rural area will need a specific policy, aiming to stimulate the development of those territories. The particular note of the policies regarding the rural disadvantaged areas is the complex feature of the step that must be multi-sectoral, aiming all the economic and social life sections, concerted by the central and local authorities and focused on the aimed area.

The criteria of defining, identifying and delimiting of some disadvantaged areas in Romania

are research subjects within the studies concerning the territorial planning and regional development.

These may give substantiation elements for the decisions of granting the disadvantaged area status to those territories, which have the most urgent need for support in their development process.

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