

## PROMOTING SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN RURAL AREAS THROUGH SOCIAL ECONOMY IN TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### **Abstract**

*COVID pandemic impacts the human environment and the social economy as any other ordinary economic sector. The paper analyzes the potential that the social and solidarity economy has in rural Romanian areas as a key element in developing social resilience in those communities. The historical trajectory of the development of the social economy in Europe has highlighted its full capacity to positively and promptly respond to the increasingly pressing need to create and maintain jobs, especially for the most vulnerable ones, including the residents of rural areas. Public policies adopted by the Member States of the European Union towards sustainable development of social enterprises include support for agriculture and the rural environment with a direct impact on cooperative societies (especially in agriculture-related fields of activity) and mutual aid associations active in those areas. The analysis of active social economy entities in Romania highlighted their prevalence in the urban areas. From this perspective, the research of rural social economy entities brings an original perspective. Among the active social economy entities in Romanian rural areas, we note the preponderance of cooperative consumer societies, agricultural cooperative societies, and mutual aid houses for employees, and to a lesser extent, handicraft cooperative societies as an example. So, rural social economy entities can either be active in the agricultural or tourism sectors or respond to poor or even totally not covered social needs of the population (e.g. childcare services, elderly or persons with disabilities long term care). A key measure in stimulating the continuation and diversification of social economy entities active in rural areas can be supported by dedicated tax measures or specific subsidies. Besides, an accurate diagnosis of the underemployed working population living in rural Romania as well as the support of social entrepreneurial activities could significantly improve the quality of life for people and support the development of social resilience in rural communities.*

### **Keywords**

*Social economy; social resilience; social development; agriculture reform; rural areas.*

### **Introduction**

Social and economic challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the key role of social resilience as a successful coping strategy. The paper is focused on Romanian rural areas selected for research due to their potential vulnerability in terms of coverage of the social protection provided to the resident population. The first part of the paper analyzes the characteristics of the Romanian rural area with a special focus on various factors supporting the development of social resilience, including the community participative culture. The second part highlights the current situation in the Romanian rural area from the perspective of the active social economy entities. The third part of the paper proposes some public policy recommendations to further support the development of social resilience in rural Romania.

## Rural Romania

The first Law on agricultural reform was adopted in Romania in 1864 by the French model and the current configuration of the Romanian rural environment is marked by 1921 and 1945 agrarian reforms as well as by massive industrialization and privatization in the post-communist transition from a planned economy to a market economy (Vorovenici, 2003; Mihalache, 2020). The 1921 agrarian reform was criticized because the expropriation of the former landowners and the reforestation of the peasants were not effective either for the quality of farmers or for the progress of Romanian agriculture. One of the most popular measures proposed as a solution was the idea of "uniting peasants in production associations, to adapt parcel ownership to the technical cultivation conditions of large agricultural exploitation" (Șandru, 2000, p.307). We also bear in mind that "associationism is one of the expressions of a high social capital" (Voicu, 2006a, p.47). The agrarian reform of March 23, 1945 "has not only pursued the peasant gospel settlement on solid foundations, but also the destruction of the economic base of the great rural landowners" (Șandru, 2000, p. 307). In comparison with the 1921 reform, this time, the selection was made mainly ideologically, and it was not based on the assessed working capacity of people to properly proceed in taking care of the received land. From this perspective, it was considered that the communist agrarian policy acquired a "pronounced anti-racist character" (idem, p.309). Besides, massive urbanization in communist Romania has reconfigured rural social capital and it was followed by industrialization and job placement during the post-Decembrist period (Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection, 2010, p.32.) On the other hand, "rural workers are the most exposed to social exclusion "(idem, p.47), as unemployment is sometimes hidden from declaring people to be active in agriculture. In the rural area, the share of employees is about 38% post-crisis with a 46% jump in 2015 (Ilie, & Preoteasa, 2017, p.250). The non-salaried occupation is specific to the rural environment and "is far from being the entrepreneurial initiative of liberal professionals, creative or niche" (idem, p.252). On the other hand, the initiative to start a business is directly correlated to "a relatively high level of regional development and /or economic growth trends in the region" (Chivu, 2019, p.80). This implies an additional risk in terms of the lower presence of entrepreneurship initiatives exactly where they are needed most: in the vulnerable areas. Categories of vulnerable population in connection with the labor market are homemakers (unpaid family workers in own households), people who declared themselves as retired for health-related reasons or by anticipated retirement procedure, long-term unemployment people, subsistence farmers, and underemployed persons (Preoteasa, 2018, pp.146-152).

From a social capital perspective, interpersonal relationships, such as trust in people and institutions are displayed alongside collaboration, participation in associations, and solidarity in the formation of the common good (manifested especially in rich communities) (Voicu, 2006a, pp.42-47). Starting from the typology of six Romanian villages proposed by Sandu in 2004, the analysis of participatory culture elements highlights a "rural Romania with a low degree of participation in community life, but with a great growth potential" (Voicu, 2006b, p.219).

Rural communities in Romania are characterized by a low development level mainly due to „local infrastructure and lack of attractively investment (...) administrative organization (...) low number of residents, mainly elderly, or isolated villages”

(Mihalache, 2015, p.238). The sustainable reform can be reached by choosing one of the following two strategies: either the bottom-up approach by „setting up intercommunity development associations and local action groups which would represent the engines in supporting micro regional development through involvement of public authorities and relevant stakeholders from neighbors communities”, either the up to down approach by „implementing reform administrative-territorial measures able to produce a reorganization of localities through specific principles of efficient self-governance” (idem, pp.238-239).

The analyses of recent public administration regulations emphasize that Romania is selectively implemented multilevel governance. From this perspective, “the public administration reform has strengthened rather local authorities who enjoy larger competences in comparison with the regional ones (...). Regionalization in Romania was rather a bottom-up reform” (Anghel, 2015b, p.251). This aspect is going on in Romania despite a post-accession recommendation from European Union institutions addressed to Romania as an EU member state. “Despite the fact that European Union supported during the `90 dispersal of responsibilities to subnational actors, this has put pressure, with the end of the pre-accession process, on the re-nationalization and recentralization of regional policies by increasing the capacity of absorption ministries at the central level” (idem, pp.251-252).

Another hot topic for rural areas is their low capacity to access and implement projects especially co-financed by the European Social Funds. Such initiatives could support the identification of sustainable solutions for rural communities. The need to access supportive funds impact on social economy units from rural areas who face a “reduce of even loss of innovatory character (...) which validate to a great extend the theory of resource dependency” (Vlăsceanu, 2010, p.60).

Successful use of multiannual European funds available for achieving national goals towards community development involves the appropriate correlation between domestic multiannual budgetary exercise and the European Union’s one, a continuation of implemented strategies and projected direction no matter the political scene configuration as well general agreement of political parties on investment priorities (Dima, 2015, p.269). Declarative approach of the complex decentralization process within the inconsistent political, administrative and electoral Romanian context “negatively disturb the normal function of local administration, with repercussions into the future” (Anghel, 2015a, p.123). In the same line, „the practice of decentralization in Romania amplified development gaps at territorial level” (Stănescu, 2015, p.79).

### **Social economy entities in rural Romania**

The historical evolution of the concept of social economy in Europe has highlighted its capacity to respond positively to the need to create and maintain jobs, especially for the most vulnerable ones and in rural areas (Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection 2010, p.19). Sectorial policies adopted by the Member States of the European Union towards the support of the social economy include support for agriculture and the rural environment with a direct impact on cooperative societies and mutual aid associations (idem, p.28).

A strategic element in the development of social economy units in rural areas is represented by the human resource both in terms of employers and employees. In this line, university education and training of social economy experts represent a key factor in reducing multiple risks and elaboration of "employment active policy efficient for vulnerable groups" (Zamfir, 2011, p.237). On the other hand, atypical work contracts can potentially become vectors of competitiveness (Ghinăraru *et al*, 2017).

Social entrepreneurship is perceived as "a global phenomenon focused on the idea of social innovation and a deeper involvement of citizens in seeking and finding solutions to solve social problems" (Vlăsceanu, 2010, p.153). On the other hand, social entrepreneurship is oriented towards "obtaining income that serves a social mission, by applying market solutions to social problems" (Pavel, 2011, p.79). Social entrepreneurship "is an innovative process of recognition and consistent search for opportunities of any kind, in order to obtain social value, being strongly oriented on the efficient use of available resources and results" (Pavel, 2011, p.79). The support of social entrepreneurship in Romania should not only main be concerned with the solving of reducing the labor market dysfunctionalities. Probably a more sustainable path could be the "strong message to the society and economic sector regarding the labor potential of disadvantaged groups on the labor market, which can contribute to overcoming different stereotypes share by employees, job seekers and employers" (Pavel, 2011, p.97).

The analysis of active nongovernmental organizations in Romania highlighted their prevalence in the urban environment (Kivu, 2017, p. 24). When looking at active social economy entities in rural areas, we note the preponderance of cooperative consumer societies, agricultural cooperative societies, and mutual aid houses for employees, and, to a lesser extent, handicraft cooperative societies (Barna, 2014, pp. 20, 72, 79, 85, 102). Rural social economy entities can either be active in the agricultural or tourism sectors or respond to poor or not covered needs (e. g childcare services). Stimulating associations in rural areas can be supported by favorable tax measures or subsidies (Ilie, Preoteasa, 2017, p.262). On the other hand, an accurate diagnosis of the underemployed population in rural Romania as well as the support of entrepreneurial activities (Mihalache, 2014, pp.214-215) could improve the quality of life for people.

When referring to a non-governmental organization, one can notice their openness towards the provision of collective goods or public services. Their institutional flexibility and independence support their quick adaptation to new contexts while "their central value is the constant answer to needs of free association of citizens and individuals" (Vlăsceanu, 2010, p.50).

Comparative research of two development regions of Romania (Bucharest-Ilfov and South-East) emphasized the characteristics of demand for the social economy: "people identify simultaneously the personal need and the low community one" (Ilie, 2011, p.172). Taking a look at all social economy entities, the most known ones are the mutual aid societies (Ilie, 2011, p.163) mainly due to their function of borrowing money to the in need. The need for financial aid is more acute in a rural area (*idem* p.166). Among cooperatives, the most known ones are the handicraft and agricultural ones (*idem*). Most probably one of the reasons for such a public perception is the fact that "the comparatist sector preserves a strong social character of activities." (Briciu, & Preotesi, 2011, p.252)

Two traditional social functions of cooperatives were identified: the offer of "jobs for its members when the private sector is not able to provide them" especially for historically land dispossessed classes alongside "supportive social services for members" (Alexandrescu, 2011, p.174). The current erosion of the two social functions mentioned above requires a reinvention of cooperatives as social economy entities assessed as „vehicles of an economy based on solidarity relations" (idem, p.175). Strongly declining after 1990, cooperative societies adopted a generally survival strategy but failing "to ensure their subsistence through running traditional economic activities" and depending on "their capacity to adapt and innovate" in the economic austere environment (Mihalache, 2011, p.195). Among adopting various survival strategies, renting owned spaces is common (Briciu, & Preotesi, 2011, p. 52).

From the perspective of confronted barriers when conducting their ordinary activities, the representatives of social economy entities from two development regions in Romania (Bucharest-Ilfov and South-East) considered the "economic difficult context and regulations in the field" (Mihalache, 2011, p.195). Other barriers were considered: specific difficulties when hiring a vulnerable person due to one hand their strong willingness to work and on the other hand the lack of qualifications. Other obstacles were considered: the difficulties when accessing the international funds and the low even lack of capacity to write such application forms and to implement in the case of a winning proposal (Briciu, & Preotesi, 2011, p.252).

### **Development of social resilience in rural Romania**

Initially used in in the context of disaster risk reduction followed by climate change policy, "resilience was seen as an overarching concept, a goal for the process of adaptation, although not without a certain degree of debate around its meaning and relation to both vulnerability and adaptive capacity" (Lisa et al., 2015, pp.9-10). More recently and especially within the COVID context, social resilience has become a popular term in the social field when referring to community capacity to successfully manage challenging situations.

With regard to the governance of the commons, three models can be identified: the tragedy of the commons goods, the "prisoner's dilemma" game, and the logic of collective action as part of the theory of collective action (Ostrom, 2007, pp.16-21). Attention is drawn on the applicability of challenging the formulation of theories on an empirical basis, considering that the missing element of analysts in the field of policies is "a theory that adequately describes the collective action through which a group of beneficiaries can organize voluntarily for to keep the surplus of one's own efforts" (idem, p.39).

From a social capital perspective, interpersonal relationships, such as trust in people and institutions are displayed alongside collaboration, participation in associations, and solidarity in the formation of the common good (manifested especially in rich communities). Starting from the typology of six Romanian villages proposed by Sandu (2004), the analysis of participatory culture elements highlights a low degree of community participation. Referring to Romania, "forms of social engineering of social development type in '90s Romania were produced (...) by import, on the line of international trademarks projects" (Sandu, 2007, p.9).

Social capital "refers to characteristics of social organization, such as networks, norms and social trust, which facilitate the coordination and cooperation for the reciprocal benefit" (Putnam, 1998, p.485). When referring to communities, "life is simpler in a community blessed with a fond of social capital" (Putnam, 1998, p.485). One additional element within this context is represented by the fact that "Romanian voluntary spirit reacts rather to difficult situations than to the general community interest" (Ilie, 2011, p.168).

Vlăsceanu argues that "there is a higher probability of obtaining more performant actions among communities characterized by civic spirit and engagement" (Vlăsceanu, 2010, pp 50-51). Organizations tend to become more and more similar as they gradually confront at the same time the increasing dependency on resources and their centralization, and the increase of uncertainty referring to purposes and means (DiMaggio, & Powell, 1991). All these elements can lead to the institutionalization of the so-called third sector (Kramer et al., 1993).

Taking into account the two related concepts of social resilience and social risk management, Anghel argues that "a system effective in managing social risks is, also, more resilient to shocks and stress. And, also, a resilient system is more effective in managing social risks, no matter the risk" (Anghel, 2014, p.527). Measures taken towards their development can include "increase diversity in asset base and instruments, connectivity among the social actors and their knowledge bases, learning, reflexivity, redundancy, equity, inclusion, cohesion (...). They should also foster technological innovation" (idem, pp.527-528). Other successful elements include the "empowerment of local stakeholders, especially public administration, use of local resources, and long term investment in supporting local entrepreneurs" (Stănescu et al., 2014, p.637). Resilient third sector organizations can be considered efficient ones (Zimmer et al., 2018, p.10). Comparative European analysis on social economy indicators (GDP contribution, the employed population in the social economy, and the amount of voluntary involved) reveals that Romania occupies a marginal place (Popa, & Căce, 2020, p.370). Still, the ones involved in the activity of social economy units are young persons (Drăgan, 2018, p.187).

Development of social resilience in rural areas involves an overview and assessment of available human, financial and other kinds of needed resources, commonly set up of relevant indicators, identification of actions to be taken as well as engagement of relevant social actors involving both social economy units and public administration. By their traditional way to function both following social and economic goals, social economy units can be considered as one of the main vectors in continuing to act for building up the bridge between vulnerability, adaptability, and answer to social community needs.

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