

RURAL DEVELOPMENT FROM RURAL WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

Sercin ALI, Oana Maria LUNGU, Ana-Maria CALOMFIR (METESCU)¹

Abstract

This paper aims the approach of agriculture labor fluctuations, the main activity of the Romanian rural area but in terms of rural development under the current economic crisis. The analysis highlights the importance of rural development from the perspective of rural women, encouraging rural areas partnerships.

Key words: *rural development, LEADER program, rural women*

Introduction

The rural areas of the European Union represent an essential part of the Union image and identity. In standard definition terms, over 91% of the European Union territory is for rural purposes and accommodates over 56% of the European Union population. A 45% percentage of the Romanian population lives in villages.

This percentage is higher in the South, with 58% of population living in the rural territory. Thus, from this point of view, Romania is far away from the rest of the European Union. More than half of the member states population lives in rural areas.

Structural problems of rural development

The real differences are seen when it comes to the incomes of people and their life quality.

The following presentation will refer to the major issues and structural multifunction of the Romanian rural environment: the infrastructure does not offer perspectives for the potential investors despite the cheap workforce in the rural areas; the lands and

¹ Sercin ALI, PhD Candidate, Economics, E-mail: ali_sercin@yahoo.com
Oana Maria LUNGU, PhD Candidate, Management, E-mail: oanal20@yahoo.com
Ana-Maria CALOMFIR, PhD Candidate, Management E-mail: anametescu@yahoo.com
Doctoral School, The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Romania

properties have been divided without having a precise plan or adequate agricultural policy. This led to the practice of a subsistence economy in these areas as an alternative; a weak development of the non-agricultural sector; a strong difference among the major regions – from non-capitalized villages (for instance the aged population, with low level of education and few financial resources) to villages with enough capital as the small cities; the “coming back to the household life” of an important amount of the female population and the hidden unemployment among them; the only existence of decreased turnover companies with reduced possibilities to invest in qualifications and trainings for the actual workforce.

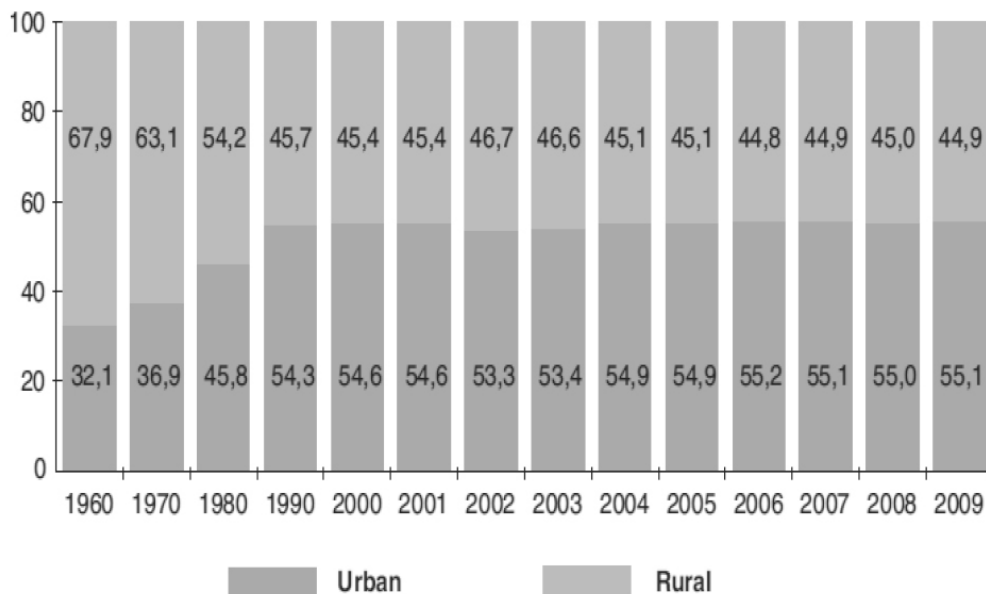
According to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, the percentage of domestic persons from the rural environment represents 53.1% of the total of inactive population, exclusively women.

The entrepreneurial capacities as well as the women workforce are used in a very small percentage. Most of the economic activities in the small areas are low sized, mostly informal and based on survival activities.

Due to the lack of better alternatives, the populations of rural regions depend mostly on the subsistence agriculture.

Even if those structural constraints would be eliminated, the issue of women insertion on the labor market in the rural areas will be a major challenge without any actual and active measures to be taken.

FIG.1. Evolution of population - urban and rural areas in Romania (%)

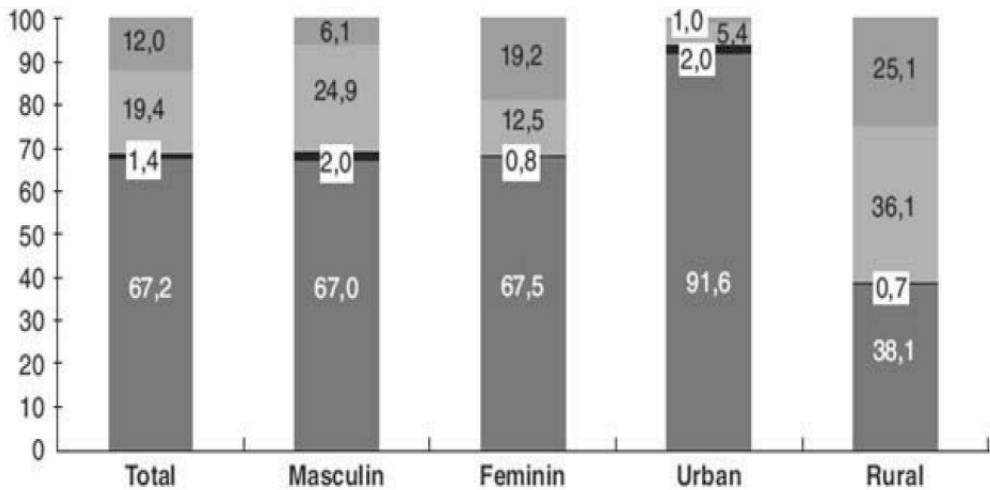


Source: Statistical Yearbook, 2010

As seen on the FIG.1, there have been slight fluctuations from rural to urban and backwards, both in economic growth or regression periods. The Romanian rural population adapts with difficulty to other living conditions, being mostly accustomed to subsistence agricultural activities and self-consumption.

The agriculture have been playing an important role for the absorption of work places in comparison with other economic activities, while relocation to the field of services have suffered ups and downs due to the lack of certitude and faith regarding this sector of economy.

FIG.2. Structure of employed population by employment status, by sex and area in 2009 in Romania



Source: Statistical Yearbook, 2010

Analyzing the value of the occupation rates, there are two issues to be discussed. The first one is related to the rate which the agriculture covers from the whole assembly of the workforce occupation - eight times more than the European Union percentage. The second issue relates to the low number of population activating in the services field in comparison with the European Union: 32% in Romania and 66% in the European Union.

A significant deficiency of these indicators is the fact that the significant volume of activities, whose results are not a market object, remain unrecorded. This mainly refers to the housewives' activity, whose services were appreciated by John Kenneth Galbraith to represent approximately a quarter of the Gross National Product. *"If we hadn't have this role (that of crypto-servant – as the above mentioned author defines the domestic activity of a woman), all the domestic consumption forms would be limited, due to the time required by the management of this consumption – i.e. the selection, transportation, preparation, repairing, maintenance, cleaning, service, storage as well*

as any other activities related to asset consumption”².

Women play a key-role within local communities, yet their contribution is often unnoticed and unrewarded. The assurance of equal opportunities for both sexes is essential in the maintaining of rural area dynamics.

In spite of the fact that market active women are no longer an unusual issue, they continue to be poorly represented in the business sector, especially in management positions or as small undertakers. Statistics show that the further we go from large cities and the closer we get to smaller towns or villages, the discrepancies between the male and female economic impact are more and more obvious.

As the leaving standard decreases, the gap between “professional development” and “family life” widens. Therefore, the entrepreneurial skills of the women are not only neutralised but, quite often, even discouraged.

In 2011, the occupancy rate of the rural population continued to increase while the one of the urban population decreased. As of 2002 we noted a reversed tendency, i.e. an increment of the occupancy rate in urban areas and a decrease in rural ones, so that in 2008 the difference between the occupancy rates between the two environments went down to 3.3%, due to the economic crisis and urban restructuring. 57.5% of the urban population was employed in the service sector and 40.1% in industry and constructions. The massive fall of these sectors determined a part of this population to turn to the rural areas, most of them becoming part 60.3% of the population involved in the agricultural sector.

Therefore, in 2008 the majority of the working population in Romania worked in the agricultural sector (28.7%).

Within the economic crisis framework, agriculture became the main source of income (money income from agriculture + self-consumption of agricultural food products) for an important segment of the rural population and part of the rural population, as we mentioned before, the exodus of the urban towards the rural slightly increased as of 2008. Thus, we can assume that agriculture is, for this population segment, a safety against personnel dismissals causing the increment of the agriculture’s subsistence and semi-subsistence weight. In order words, the economic crisis acts as catalyst for the development of subsistence and semi-subsistence agriculture.

Agriculture played a dumping part by absorbing the loss of working places in all the other sectors, while the occupancy reallocation towards the service sector was marginalised sue to the slow development and marginalization of this sector.

In absolute numbers, the reduction of the number of persons working in agriculture, recorded for the last 10 years, is quite substantial, of over 1.6 million persons, yet this is mainly due to the failure to record a part of the population and to the reduction of the

2 John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics and Public Interest*. Ed. Politică, Bucharest, 1982, p.49.

population number, not to the increment of the non-agricultural occupancy percentage. The non-agricultural occupancy is still at very low levels.

In general, we note that the labour market indicators in rural areas are practically within the same tendencies but with a more significant negative impact given by the development of subsistence agriculture.

Further to the assessment of this occupancy indicator, two issues rise. The first is related to the very high weight of the agriculture on the labour occupancy market, with a percentage of approx. 8 times higher than in the European Union. The second is the low occupancy level in the service sector compared to the level recorded by the European Union: 32% in Romania against 66% in EU. If we take into account the services in rural areas, not only are they underdeveloped, but there areas where are completely inexistent.

We note a slight fluctuation of the rural population in urban areas and vice-versa, during sustained economic development as well as during recession periods. This could be justified by the fact that the Romanian rural environment continues to be defined by a population working in the subsistence and semi-subsistence agricultural sector, the majority being placed in the self-consumption area.

In other countries as Poland, France or Sweden, European Union programmes have already provided significant backing to developments in rural areas that have benefited women.

The LEADER Initiatives have helped many women develop paying activities in the fields of tourism, crafts and regional products.

The expectations of young people and young families in rural areas are different to those of previous generations. Creating a social and community framework that meets those expectations is an integral part of effective rural development.

Taking into consideration the approach of LEADER program – bottom up – this is one of the European Social and Regional Development Funds that can co-finance training and economic development initiatives, having an important contribution to women's opportunities in the rural labour market and to improve infrastructure and access to services in rural areas.

Conclusions

In order to obtain a sustainable development within the rural areas, there is a necessity of creating partnerships among rural areas belonging to the same country and later on with the ones of other countries. The rural services percentage will increase and furthermore, the women labor market will be occupied.

The economic regression influenced the competitiveness among the Romanian agricultural products, due to price reductions and so the incomes in agriculture have been lowered.

In the actual economic context, the Romanian workforce is over numbered due to the low productivity, the decrease of the population incomes, the aging of population and their depending on the agricultural activities.

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