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Promoting Regional Convergence – Scientific Network Potentiation in Rural Development

Abstract

Rural development and modernization implicitly became the main practical and theoretical issues of the local rural communities. In general, the variants of development patterns that are envisaged start from the present characteristics of the rural area, focusing upon the modernization of activities or upon occupational diversification, upon income multiplication or institutional development implicitly.

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The rural communities are authors of a systematic exploration of the concrete adaptation forms to a deeply changed macro-economic system, of institutional emancipation modalities, correlated with the modernization and development process.

Rural development and modernization implicitly became the main practical and theoretical issues of the local rural communities. In general the imagined variants of development patterns start from the present dysfunctionalities of the rural area, focusing upon the modernization of activities or upon occupational diversification, upon income multiplication or institutional development implicitly. There is also a complex case of conjugating all the variants, in an attempt to revigorate and increase the social efficiency of the complex functionality of the rural area.

Up to the present moment, the scientific and political approaches to the modernization and development process have been fragmented, fractured, and have not represented a main subject of rural society evolution. In this respect, the following aspects can be detached as characteristic notes of rural development through the amplification of institutional emancipation:

- A basic legal and institutional network already exists, which is necessary for the rural economy to operate as market

economy, but not all the components are operating at normal parameters;

- The institutional change is much more difficult in the rural communities due to the strong inequality;
- The institutional change has not had a clear vision on the transition process management;
- The institutional pattern and the whole package of laws with direct or indirect incidences in the rural communities often overlap, are confusing and are still full of traditional elements.

These add to the population's lack of trust in the central power entities, which generates apathy in the civil society elements, with the tendency to fragment and to weaken the emerging small community networks (*A Decade Later: Understanding the transition process in Romania*, National Human Development Report, 2001-2002).

In the modernization and development rationale, the rural communities are obliged to follow certain "potential steps", starting with:

- Decoding the current development strategy,
- Creating an emergency state of mind,
- Understanding a set of strategies and getting informed about these,
- Analysis of strategic options,
- Building up a vision of the country after the transition period,
- Establishment of new productive collaborations,
- Development and communication of successful actions on the short term,
- Institutionalization of changes,
- Evaluation of changes.

Rural development has maximum social efficiency in the conditions of its regional/zonal or local approach; in this respect, the central concept is the rural local system, which can be defined as: local economic system, local organizational system and formal and informal institutional arrangements between the local players (Esposti, Sotte, 2000). For the local economic system, we must have in view the following: the local players and their strategies are heterogeneous; the local players are not always rational, because they can be also motivated by traditional values and customs; there is a complex interaction between the players who are able to adjust and learn new things, mainly those with entrepreneurial spirit. At the same time, there are interactions between these and the institutional factors that are exogenous to rural communities; the system is dynamic, depending upon the environment and in its turn imprints a certain development type.

The local organization system features a fluctuating dynamics, both at the level of productive and non-productive organizations; there are modern structures that coexist with the traditional structures; an important component is represented by the necessary envisaged

organizations, which have not appeared yet due to the organizational capital deficit.

For the informal, formal, institutional arrangements / co-operation and collaboration between the local players, another set of characteristics can be listed, namely: the arrangements have a dynamic character; they have a strong informal character; they have an obviously traditional character, and from this perspective the rural communities have an institutional development facing the past; the organizational emancipation is in an early stage, which is also a result of the legislation that does not always reflect the modernization requirements. In a rural system, the element that can ensure a sustainable development rate is the institution, represented by the materialization of the cultural patterns and of the social relations organized in such a way so as to satisfy the basic social needs. In the institution rationale, action plays an important role, because:

- The normative aspect, the whole set of norms give it validity and applicability,
- There is a habitualization of the action, determining the emergence of routine acts that are necessary for the continuity of the action; in this way, the alternatives of action are reduced, the situations no longer need to be continuously redefined,
- The habitualization and institutionalization processes appear in all the areas of human interaction, characterized by relevant collective behaviours,
- Action habitualization implicitly results in the self-contradictory character of the institutional aggregate.

One of the rural community development opportunities, generated by its endogenous resources, is the integration into larger economic areas. The endogenous development type, through the increase in the efficiency of resources utilization and the connection to the existing agri-food systems is a socio-economic modality for the revitalization of rural communities, for their economic modernization and sustainable development. In this perspective, the rural communities can develop according to the functional relations with the urban organizations, depending on their own human and social development processes. The multiple relations generated by this type of collaborations/arrangements are determined by the economic development level of the respective organizations, by the quality of the organizational factor, by the organizational culture "exported by the organizational nucleus" and by the quality of rural human resources. The process is quite ample, developed along several levels and mainly depends upon the urban economic organization, triggering not only economic but also social integration. New relations appear in space, equally supported by the integrating entity and the integrated entity. The development, modernization type focuses upon on the social and economic role of the integrating factor, increasing the value and

occupational structures of the integrated factor, favourable to integration (Florian, V., *Sociologia speranței*, 2006).

The Romanian rural communities are characterized by a local economic system where the traditional characteristics still prevail, by a local organizational system where there is a mix of modern and traditional structures and where the informal arrangements between the local players play a main role. For those investigating the rural universe, such contrasts are rather challenging, mainly in the conditions where this world is revealed as a unity of paradoxes between eternity and the temporal flow, between traditionalism, simplicity of existence and assimilation of European values, mainly out of the desire to go beyond the multiple contraries. The modernization process can induce a series of transformations of this type of local rural system due to the insertion of the rural communities into the European space, by means of the implementation of results obtained from the studies specific to the economy of knowledge. The rural research networks are one of the multiple responses that rural modernization can provide.

In the European area, the investigation of rural communities took place under integrated institutionalized forms, having in view both the convergence of the areas of knowledge – by different, interdependent domains – and the applicability, implementation of research results. As the rural area needed ample interventions, in the sense of modernization and development, while respecting its cultural identity, the rural studies were mostly of pragmatic, applied type. The pragmatic orientation did not diminish the scientific accuracy and the approach to fundamental, theoretical aspects in order to support the modifications, sometimes mutations of agrarian and implicitly rural structures.

Another orientation was established out of the need to investigate the rural area in its interdisciplinary character, while respecting the interconditionality of fundamental elements that define the rural phenomenon complexity. Out of this reason, the studies of the university and academic research centers focused upon the true needs of the rural population, permanently taking into consideration the geographical constraints and ending up with the modalities of inserting the rural communities into the global society.

The approach to this issue in a project (*The promotion of the regional convergence – the potentiation of the scientific network in the field of rural development*, CEE-M3, 164/2006) implied: getting familiar with the institutional characteristics of the research networks specialized in rural development; knowing the institutional design specific to the New Member States, their social efficiency, their integration level into the European networks and their adjustment to the European requirements; knowing the organization and operation of the research networks in the Old EU Member States; the Hungarian, Polish and English researchers getting familiar with the institutional design of the Romanian research activity specialized in rural area

investigation; establishment of scientific convergence areas between the rural research from different EU countries and Romania.

The methodological requirements impose specifying the objectives in relation to: knowing the investigation domains of the rural areas in the New Member States (Poland and Hungary) and in a country with a very long EU membership (Great Britain) that managed to absorb the EU funds under the Framework Project 6, as well as the institutionalized forms materialized into research networks, that managed to be socially efficient, due to the promotion, development and implementation of regional rural development projects/programs.

The complexity of a normative approach, in this cognitive area, consists of the articulation of certain different modules focusing upon: knowing the scientific areas of interest in two research networks from countries with relatively similar problems with the Romanian rural area; knowing the possibilities to increase the efficiency of the Romanian rural area investigation network, through the modernization of the research centers and the improvement of their integration with the higher education units; knowing the modalities to optimize the implementation of projects so as to ensure a mostly sustainable socio-economic impact; knowing the formal requirements for developing eligible projects under the Framework Program 7, in conformity with Article 169 of ERA-NET; knowing the modalities of scientific partnership with similar institutions/networks from the EU Member States.

The project design contributes to the scientific substantiation and assistance of the National Plan for Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to regional rural development; the development of regional programs is based, from the scientific point of view, on knowing and evaluating the current situation of rural communities and their development in relation to their endogenous opportunities.

The project is relevant as it prepares for accessing the projects developed under the Framework Program 7, by promoting the new funding requirements for the rural development projects beginning with the year 2007. At the same time, the axes of the New Rural Development Policy are envisaged, so as to be eligible from the perspective of the EC rural development priorities in the period 2007-2013.

The project relevance is also based on the international scientific partnership form that it establishes; in this respect, the project envisages both the increase of the Romanian scientific research quality in the rural development area, of the collaboration with partner institutions, as well as the establishment of common research relations.

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