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The Research Networks – A Necessity for Rural Area Development

Abstract

It should be emphasized that the network concept has become widely used in the socio-economic studies of the economic life. Following the debates around research development, the networks may also have particular utility in making understandable the different forms of rural development. This paper assesses whether networks provide a new paradigm of rural development. It seeks to capture a series of differing perspectives on economic networks — including political economy, actor-network theory and theories of innovation, learning and knowledge transfer — and attempts to show how these perspectives might be applied to different types of rural areas.

It is argued that rural development strategies must take heed of research network forms and that rural policy should be recast in network terms.

Keywords: rural development, rural research networks, economic competitiveness, diversification

JEL Classification: Q01, Q16

Rural development in EU and Romania is an activity of vital importance, taking into consideration both the size of rural area, expressed by the area it covers, and the share of its population employed in different activities. If we also take into account the different aspects referring to the population's living standard, the access to services, the physical and social infrastructure development, rural development could acquire a nationwide dimension.

The structure of rural areas, as regards both industry and population, has been dramatically altered in the last 50 years, and this situation seems to continue. The specific research work has demonstrated the huge diversity of the rural development approaches. The specialized studies highlight the farmers' attempt to create a sustainable economic pattern for the rural community, the diversification of the income sources, and the identification of some off-farm sources to support the rural economy.

In the year 2006, EU established the guidelines for the rural development policy, which have to be adopted by all Member States

within the national development policy. Even since the Common Agricultural Policy reform, the rural development has laid a great emphasis on the increase of the support to rural areas so that these could face the challenges of the 21st century. The rural area accounts for almost 90% of the area of the enlarged EU (EU-27) and the new financial decisions of the rural development policy target the economic growth and the creation of new jobs in the rural areas - in conformity with the Lisbon Strategy - and the improvement of sustainability - in conformity with the Göteborg Strategy¹.

While the urban-industrial agglomerations are, undoubtedly, the centers of the economic and social development in Europe, the rural area will have an increasingly greater importance in the future.

The importance of the rural area is mainly given by the following factors:

- It ensures food security; the food quality and safety depend on the economic, political and social conditions of the farming sector, and on the rural environment situation;
- The rural area supplies natural resources that are vital for the urban centers: water, wood, biomass;
- The nature and landscape, as well as the cultural traditions are large-scale production factors in the tourism industry;
- Many valuable eco-systems are located in the rural area;
- The under-urbanization asks for a new approach to regional planning.

Besides the importance of these factors, the rural area will also have to guarantee the meeting of the requirements from the European Chart of the Rural Space. The Parliament Assembly of the European Council adopted the Recommendation 1269/1996 with regard to the European Chart of the Rural Space – the political and juridical framework document of the rural development in Europe.

The countries that signed up the European Chart of the Rural Space commit themselves to guarantee a production system meant to ensure:

- the necessary food for the population;
- an income level for the farmers and their families, close and comparable to the income level from other professions, with a comparable level of responsibility, providing a vital income (profit) source for the rural population;
- environment protection and the regeneration of soil and ground water for the future generations under a sustainable development vision;
- production of recyclable raw materials for industry and energy production;
- all the needs of the small and medium-sized enterprises activating in agriculture, handicraft, and services;

¹ Presidency Conclusions – Göteborg, June 15-16, 2001

- a base for leisure and tourism;
- preservation of genetic resources as a basis of agriculture and biotechnology.

In this context, the European Chart also formulated measures, supported by a legislation adjusted to the conditions of each country, meant to protect the environment. The provisions of this document refer to the following aspects:

- ◆ sustained efforts in the rational and sustainable use of the natural resources and preservation of habitats and bio-diversity;
- ◆ natural, semi-natural or man-made landscape protection;
- ◆ protection of the rural area beauties, village renewal and renovation, rehabilitation of the degraded natural landscape;
- ◆ notification of sites with old species or breeds of farm animals, traditional rural landscapes, traditional techniques in agriculture, etc;
- ◆ the strict respect of the national and international legal provisions on environment protection, etc.

We appreciate as valuable the provisions from the European Chart with regard to culture development and protection in the rural area, which have as main objective to maintain and protect the diversity and richness of the archeological heritage in the rural areas and to promote a dynamic culture, by taking action in the following directions:

- inventory, putting into value and promotion of the historical and cultural heritage, including the abilities of the rural life;
- development of traditions and forms of cultural expression, as well as of local dialects,
- strengthening the regional cultural identity of the rural populations and promoting the associative life;
- promoting the rural and local gastronomic heritage.

Rural development should be considered from the global perspective of the European space. In order to stop the decline of the countryside, we need to organize this area so that it becomes less dependent on the economic centers. This implies the respect of the rural sustainable development principles²:

1. At economic level:
 - a prosperous, competitive and efficient rural economy;
 - a competitive sustainable agriculture, which should supply adequate amounts of healthy food and cover the consumers' needs;
 - a diverse and dynamic economy, with local services and initiatives, which can create job opportunities.
2. At socio-cultural level:

² www.cceg.ro

- meeting the social needs in terms of assistance and security, dwellings, education, health, trade, communications;
 - provide new opportunities for the young people (jobs, education, training, etc.);
 - cultural heritage preservation.
3. The ecological dimension:
- promoting the organic practices for land use and the rational use of resources (soil, water, energy, eco-systems), mainly at farm level;
 - preservation of the diversity of habitats and landscapes (in parallel to the farming activities);
 - ensuring population's stability as regards its number.

As a conclusion, we shall list the measures proposed by the EU under the sustainable development schemes of the rural areas:

- ◆ providing support to structural adjustments in the agricultural sector (investments on agricultural holdings, selection of the young farmers, training);
- ◆ support to farm activities for environment protection;
- ◆ granting support for investments in the processing and sale of food products;
- ◆ granting support for forest rehabilitation;
- ◆ support for measures promoting the adjustment of the rural areas to the agricultural practice and for their conversion.

All these measures proposed by the EU represent a motivation for the development of the rural research networks.

After the Common Agricultural Policy reform, at European level, the approach to agriculture and rural areas has changed, focusing on the need to integrate all the rural area components. As a result, the financial support efforts were channeled into new directions, many of them in opposition to the previous ones. The single common point remained, at EU level, the size of the amount dedicated to the rural environment.

Another measure which strongly motivates the development of the rural research networks is the change of vision in the Common Agricultural Policy, so that:

- ◆ CAP provides more support to the natural environment sustainability and less support to production;
- ◆ CAP has reduced its protection in the face of the global competition.

Thus, the farmers' commercial advantage will depend upon the possibility to apply the latest research results.

The scientific research represents a source of economic and innovation progress, of high-tech assimilation, and national technical support to the investment programs. At the same time, it represents a modality to prepare and train the human resources of high cultural, intellectual and scientific level, for excellence affirmation and promotion. The scientific potential of a country is defined by the level

of finance, the qualification level and the number of human resources, by the knowledge heritage, by the infrastructure situation, as well by the volume of international cooperation for which the necessary funds are provided.

For Romania, the need to give an impetus to the economic competitiveness increase represents the priority of the post-accession period, having in view to narrow the technological gaps, which separate Romania from the remaining EU Member States, mainly in the context of the revised Lisbon Strategy.

From the point of view of the direct resources of competitiveness increase, the gaps between Romania and the other Member States are manifested mainly as regards the innovation and research/development, as well as in the field of the informational society. This results in the main goal for Romania to establish a dynamic and competitive economic environment, capable to assimilate and to develop high-tech areas and to respond to the strategic long-term development requirements, in the context of a knowledge-based economy.

The integration into the EU structures implies competitiveness, cooperation and specialization, both in the economic activities of different players, from different fields, and in the rural areas. In order to become a country with a competitive, knowledge-based economy, it is essential for Romania to find the "key of the future" in order to make progress faster than other countries. The National Development Strategy should see in the Romanian research, integrated into ERA (European Research Area), the key to progress.

It should be stressed from the very beginning that Romania cannot bridge up its economic gaps in the absence of a competitive, adding value economy; competitiveness needs access to new technologies. These technologies are based on multi-disciplinary scientific knowledge, which develops very fast.

The research works, studies, knowledge and all the activities specific to the scientific research, must represent the challenge for the development of the rural community through the establishment of rural research networks. In Romania, in the pre-accession year 2006, the situation of such networks was not very favourable, because the focus was still laid on a simple economic partnership, with no consequences on knowledge, as primordial element in the requirements for the new European economy, launched through the Lisbon Strategy. The revigoration of the rural areas can be achieved through the involvement of all the stakeholders and policy makers, by the initiation of a dialogue, facilitated by the exchange of knowledge and experiences, key elements of experimental and applied research.

The analysis of the Romanian research networks reveals the organizational modality and structure; the inter-disciplinary character, a new factor in their development horizon, is the offspring of a linear character, which is already denied by the European research area, as

not being a factor of economic growth any more for any actor involved in such scientific research activities. Thus, in Romania, we can find research networks that are different from the point of view of their members, namely:

- Networks that first address to research institutes and organizations
- Networks that address to individual researchers, according to their specialty
- University research networks, consisting of students, professors, and researchers.

At the same time, there are research networks that are structured according to the approached thematic, namely:

- multi-disciplinary networks, consisting of different committees, which approach different complex areas (social, economic, political)
- thematic networks, focusing on a certain domain: environment protection, agriculture, protection of water and forest resources, nano-technologies, bio-technologies, etc.



Network of Non-governmental Organizations in Community Development

In the rural development field, we should highlight the existence of the Network of Non-governmental Organizations in the Community Development "RuralNet", in Timișoara, whose objective is to build up relations meant to support different actions at community level. In this stage, the community is informed about the presence and role of intervention, the key actors are identified, a working group is set up and consolidated, the community gets mobilized. This is a long-term objective and gets the community development agent implied in the identification of isolated groups and taking care that these groups are also taken into consideration and get involved.

For this manifestation form at community level and for the belonging persons, the community development values and principles have been established and taken into consideration.

The community development values:

- ◆ Social equity
- ◆ Local heritage
- ◆ Confidence
- ◆ Responsibility
- ◆ Professionalism
- ◆ Civic spirit

- ◆ Open character
- ◆ Voluntary spirit
- ◆ Creativity

The community development principles:

1. The participation and the involvement of the community
2. Community potentiation
3. The local resources valorization
4. The strategic approach to local needs
5. Sustainable development
6. Promotion of the voluntary spirit
7. The respect of the local traditions and customs
8. Lack of political and/or religious bias
9. Intervention responsibility
10. Permanent learning
11. Transparency of the community development process
12. Respect of the diversity
13. Promoting equal opportunities
14. Partnership promotion

RuralNet promotes partnership at community and regional level, yet in the absence of the scientific research factor involvement, which could add its contribution to the development and knowledge cycle completion. That is why the rural research community network should be established, taking into consideration the fact that Romania's economy is mainly an agrarian economy, and the agricultural activities are carried out in the rural area, which needs to get closer to the development path that should support Romania's getting in line with the economic, social and cultural development level in Europe and worldwide. RuralNet has a close cooperation with the Resources Center CREST (in October, 2002, at the initiative of the mother organization, Hygeia Foundation, Crest acquired its own legal personality) and with the Rural Assistance Center, which are together involved in the community development based mainly on the actors' attitude with regard to the problems they are confronted with, and on the modality in which they get involved in decision-making in relation to the management of their own resources.

All these community development approaches, through information, training, and consultancy actions, must be correlated with the scientific research activities for adding value to the community.

The existence in Romania of a network of public and private organizations (NGOs), active in the community development, some of them with expertise in the community development programs or projects, which could be quickly involved in rural community development, may represent the starting point in setting up a rural development network, which should develop in time, and within which changes will be produced with regard to the range of issues, participants, undertaken actions.

This national rural development network must be supported through actions of a rural research network (RRN), dedicated to the support of the Romanian rural community renaissance, through actions based on studies, research, knowledge, and other scientific research specific actions. The rural research network must benefit from data and information, supplied by all the actors in the rural area, under the form of an information flow which should facilitate the transmission of these data to all the beneficiaries, as fast as possible and in a most unaltered form. This network should consist of research institutes, concerned with rural development issues, both from Romania and abroad. It is also recommended that this network should have a close collaboration with similar networks in the country and abroad, having in view the exchange of information, experience and knowledge, meant to contribute to rural area development.

Such a research network must be built up and developed in order to become mostly useful in supporting our country's efforts in reaching the Community performances in the field of agriculture and rural development, after Romania's accession to the EU.

At the same time RRN represents a partnership, collaboration model that should lead to the affiliation of as many institutions possible and/or to the creation of other similar networks. An active management, which should permit the involvement of all the actors into this network, could ensure good functionality and high efficiency.

This network has the possibility to have access to programs and financial support in order to conduct research in the reference field, to apply for support schemes, RDI support schemes from national programs, structural funds and funds allocated under FP7.

While respecting the scientific development principles of the rural community, it is important that its profile should be made together with the community members, while trying to focus on both local needs and local resources.

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