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TRANSITION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE ROMANIAN RURAL AREA

ABSTRACT

The transition towards an economy based on the market principles represents a period of deep changes, starting from redefining the development paradigms, continuing with resetting the whole economic and social system into the new conceptual frameworks, to end with the transformation of this new system into a functional one. In this analytical approach, we intend to capture the social change of the Romanian rural area in transition, as a result of the deepest transformation that defined the shift to a capitalist type of economy, which we named the *re-setting of land ownership and operation into a private framework*.

The central argument of this approach is determined by the current rural reality in which agriculture is the most important economic activity, which absorbs the greatest part of the available labour force in this area, whose determinant production factor is the agricultural land.

Key words: transition, social structures, rural area, Romania.

JEL Classification: P25, R23, Q15.

1. INTRODUCTION

The intensity of the social change depends on the amplitude of the changes of factors in the external environment in which the individuals evolve. The deepest changes of the external environment conditional to the evolution of the social structures in transition have in view the *ownership transformation* in relation to which the economy is getting restructured, both implying the redefinition of positions in the new social order. The institutionalization of private ownership in Romania started with the constitution and reconstitution of the private ownership right on the agricultural land, through the enforcement of Land Law 18/1991, while in the other sectors of the economy privatization took place at a lower speed. This ownership redefinition led to the deep transformation of the rural social structures. After the reconstitution of the private ownership on the agricultural land, the prevailing social category in the rural area during the communist period disappeared, and the restructuring of the other sectors of national economy turned a significant part of the people previously employed in the secondary and tertiary sectors into farmers.

The rural area became the main absorber of the shocks generated by the restructuring of overall economy, the private land ownership being one of the main means to meet the subsistence needs of the household members. We could say that the rural social structures were the first and the deepest affected by the transformations of the post-communist socio-economic environment.

2. THE AGRARIAN STRUCTURES AND THE RURAL WORLD

The farm size structure is established as a pyramid-like hierarchy, which describes the structuring of the rural society by the most important economic activity in the countryside and which absorbs the greatest part of the available labour in this area.

The agricultural farm system in Romania was subject to some major shocks in the transition period, materialized into ample and long destructuring and restructuring processes, imposed by the land reforms and the agricultural policies that were not always coherent and not at all convergent. The result was that Romania, where agricultural land accounts for one-third of its total area, became a net importer of agri-food products. In a Europe where we speak about multifunctional agriculture, in Romania the debates still focus on the establishment of a farm system to satisfy the primary role of agriculture, namely to cover the population's agri-food needs.

There is a strong inter-conditionality relation between the structure of the Romanian farm system and their contribution to the job supply. Although Romania has over 40% of its population employed in agriculture, in reality this fact cannot be associated to the agricultural holdings assuming the *job supplier* role in the rural area. The existence of a great number of small-sized subsistence or semi-subsistence farms makes a large part of the population be *under-employed* in agriculture. The large volume of rural population and the lack of non-agricultural occupational alternatives, offers the commercial farms a very large labour recruiting pool, which does not force them to apply the technologization of agricultural works. Agriculture contribution to the employment of rural labour has rather the effect of maintaining the population in the stage of meeting its stringent existential needs, and less the improvement of the living standard of the rural community members.

3. THE LAND AREA OF FARMING UNITS

The structure of the agricultural farm system is bipolar: 65.2% of the utilized agricultural area is operated by a large number of individual agricultural holdings (the Farm Structure Survey reports that in 2007 in Romania, 3.9 million individual agricultural holdings operated 2.29 hectares on the average), the remaining 34.8% of the utilized agricultural area being farmed by legal entity farms that totalled 17.7 thousand farms in 2007, with an average farmed area of 270 ha.

The statistical data revealed the bipolarity of the Romanian farm system, where a small number of farms that own thousands of hectares and use modern agricultural techniques and technologies co-exists with an extremely large number of peasant household farms that operate small land areas (under 5 ha), using rather traditional technologies, whose production is intended to cover the subsistence needs of the rural household members. These two poles of the farming system managed about 70% of the utilized agricultural area in 2007. Between these two extremes, one can identify the semi-subsistence and medium-sized farms, which have a less significant specific weight, both as number and utilized agricultural area.

In the period 2002–2007, significant changes were produced in the number and distribution of utilized agricultural areas by farm categories. Thus, in the above-mentioned period, the total number of agricultural holdings was down by 12.3%; this evolution was noticed in all the farm types. Hopefully, a process of concentration in land farming was simultaneously produced, the medium farm size increasing from 3.1 ha/farm in 2002 to 3.5 ha/farm in 2007¹. We can notice the significant increase, by 33%, of the average size of the individual agricultural holdings.

Table 1

Evolution of the farm structure by the utilized agricultural area size in the period 2002–2007

UAA size categories	Individual agricultural holdings				Legal entity farms			
	Number		Hectares		Number		Hectares	
	2002 ¹	2007 ²	2002 ¹	2007 ²	2002 ¹	2007 ²	2002 ¹	2007 ²
Total, out of which (%):	4462221	3913651	7708758	8966309	22672	17699	6221952	4786738
Without land	4.1	2.0		0.0	2.8	1.8		0.0
under 1 ha	48.5	43.0	9.8	7.2	14.4	8.0	0.0	0.012
1–2 ha	20.1	20.4	16.5	12.9	5.6	5.2	0.0	0.025
2–5 ha	21.3	24.6	37.6	33.6	12.6	12.1	0.2	0.1
5–10 ha	4.8	7.6	18.4	22.3	14.0	13.3	0.3	0.3
10–20 ha	0.8	1.8	5.9	10.1	6.4	7.0	0.3	0.3
20–30 ha	0.1	0.2	1.6	2.5	1.9	2.2	0.2	0.2
30–50 ha	0.1	0.2	1.7	2.6	2.2	3.2	0.3	0.5
50–100 ha	0.1	0.1	2.3	2.7	4.8	6.8	1.2	1.9
over 100 ha	0.1	0.1	6.2	6.0	35.2	40.3	97.5	96.7

Source: ¹ NIS (2004) General agricultural census 2002, ² NIS (2008) 2007 Farm Structure Survey (2007).

The process of farming area transfer from the legal entity farms units to the individual agricultural holdings continues, also as an effect of the continuation of the agricultural land ownership right reconstitutio² and of withdrawal from the agricultural associations.

¹ EUROSTAT Data Base, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/agriculture/data/database>.

² Law 247/2005 “Law on the reform in ownership and justice, as well as a few adjacent measures” introduces the “restitutio in integrum” principle (land restitution to former owners without imposing an upper limit).

As a result of these structural transformations, the farm system configuration in 2007 can be described by classifying the farms into four categories, according to their integration into the market flows³:

– Very small and small farms – under 5 ha, accounting for 89.9% of the total number of farms and 35.1% of total utilized area (average area 1.37 ha): these farms practice subsistence agriculture, and their products mostly go to self-consumption; insignificant amounts of production are sold on the market, in order to obtain some cash incomes to cover certain stringent needs;

– Small to medium-sized farms from 5 to 10 ha, representing 7.6% of the total number of farms, 14.7% of utilized area and an average size of 6.7 ha; they practice semi-subsistence agriculture, the production mainly going to self-consumption and partially to the market;

– Medium-sized farms from 10 to 50 ha, accounting for 2.2% of the total number of farms and 10.2% of the utilized agricultural area, with an average area of 16.3 ha. The characteristic of these farms is that they are mainly market-oriented, hence they are commercial farms;

– Large-sized farms – between 50 and 100 ha – and very large-sized farms – 100 ha and over 100 ha; they represent 0.4% of the total number of farms and 40% of utilized agricultural area; these have an average area of 382 ha and practice commercial agriculture.

Although in the period 2002–2007 the number of *individual agricultural holdings that operated less than one hectare had a slight decreasing trend, these continue to represent more than 43% of total farms in Romania* and they operate only 4.7% of UAA⁴ in 2007. As these farms do not benefit from area payments (*SAPS Scheme*⁵, the eligible farms being only those larger than one hectare, with compact parcels larger than 0.3 ha), *this increases the vulnerability of their members to the poverty risk*. As the transfers from the budget for the financial support to agricultural works are not possible any more and the farm products do not have a commercial destination, it will be impossible for these farms to farm their land in the absence of alternative income sources. An important means to attenuate the poverty risk for this category of farms and even to transform the household economic activities into a prosperity source for their members is the development of farms on the multifunctionality principles, i.e. by developing certain non-farm activities on the agricultural farm and using its resources for supplementing farmers' incomes (some traditional food products in commercial interest, agro-tourism, small crafts, handicraft etc).

³ Classification proposed by Marin Popescu in the paper *Economia rurală din România*, Gavrilăscu, D., Violeta Florian (coord.) (2007), Terra Nostra, Iași, p. 122.

⁴ UAA – Utilized Agricultural Area, the area consisting of arable land, kitchen garden, (permanent) pastures and natural hayfields and permanent crops (vine and fruit-tree plantations). This area can be located in the residence locality (commune/town/municipality/sectors of Bucharest municipality) or in localities other than the residence locality of the agricultural holding.

⁵ SAPS – Single Area Payment Scheme.

At present, *the farm structure by size classes* is very close to that in place after the agrarian reform of 1945, characterized by the high share of farms smaller than 5 ha (over 91%). It is more than obvious that the present size structure of land ownership considerably limits the possibility of intensive agriculture practice by adequate use of crop rotation, irrigations, mechanization, application of chemicals, etc.

The low farm size generates major risks on the way of transforming the individual agricultural farm into a commercial farm that generates significant incomes for its members. As the available agricultural area diminishes, the farm production specialization and intensification opportunity decreases as the land resources are firstly perceived as a means to ensure food security for the household members.

The number of agricultural households that farm their land on individual basis grew in the first decade of the transition to market economy, as a great part of the urban industrial restructuring “victims” returned to the rural area and to agriculture. In 1993, the number of individual farms totalled 3.4 million and their average area reached 2.14 ha; by 1999, as result of the continuation of the agrarian reforms by which the land ownership right was reconstituted on areas larger than 10 hectares (which had been the limit for land restitution per household according to Land Law 18/1991) and of the disaggregation of the associative forms of farm land operation established between the new small owners in early transition, the number of individual farms exceeded 4.1 million and their average area reached about 2.4 ha⁶. The land size of the individual farm remained very small, which significantly diminishes the chances of this farm type transformation into a commercial farm.

In the second post-communist decade, the number of individual agricultural farms began to decrease; this process was accompanied by a slight tendency of land operation concentration, at the level of individual agricultural households inclusively. The increase of the average farm size after the year 2000 had the fastest growth rates in the regions Center, North-West, West and Bucharest, in which the average farmed area by an individual agricultural household farm increased by 40% in seven years (with a maximum increase of 71% for the individual agricultural holdings in the region Center).

These regions benefit from the significant contribution of a relatively more diversified occupational structure in the rural area (generated by the higher economic development level) in generating certain incomes from off-farm occupations, which relieves a part of the rural households and their financial resources from the pressure of the need to cover the subsistence food consumption. As a result, some of the households can give up (and even gave up) farming part of the area into ownership, transferring its use to some third parties – small individual farms or legal entity units – which enabled land consolidation on these areas (Annex 1).

⁶ OECD (2000) *Assessment of Agricultural Policies: Romania*, MAF, p. 99.

Table 2
Regional evolution of the individual agricultural holdings

Region	Individual agricultural holdings								
	2002 ¹			2005 ²			2007 ³		
	thousand thousand ha	UAA thousand ha	ha/ farm	thousand	UAA thousand ha	ha/ farm	thousand	UAA thousand ha	ha/ farm
Total	4736.6	7715.6	1.63	4237.9	9102.0	2.15	3905.5	8966.3	2.30
NE	905.7	1353.6	1.49	852.0	1478.1	1.73	802.3	1584.0	1.97
SE	586.7	1063.7	1.81	529.7	1303.1	2.46	497.4	1263.2	2.54
S	936.8	1149.7	1.23	844.4	1232.1	1.46	758.6	1218.4	1.61
SW	642.1	1149.6	1.79	606.2	1398.0	2.31	578.7	1292.3	2.23
W	394.4	908.0	2.30	315.2	945.6	3.00	281.8	952.0	3.38
NW	661.8	1166.9	1.76	588.5	1433.2	2.44	530.4	1483.9	2.80
Center	524.4	866.2	1.65	438.3	1243.3	2.84	394.3	1111.2	2.82
Bucharest	84.7	57.9	0.68	63.6	68.6	1.08	62.0	61.3	0.99

Source: ¹⁾ NIS (2004) General Agricultural Census, 2002; ²⁾ NIS (2006) Farm Structure Survey 2005; ³⁾ NIS (2008) Farm Structure Survey 2007.

Without benefiting from off-farm occupational opportunities, the rural population in the regions South, South-West and North-East puts a much higher demographic pressure on the land resources. What is specific to these regions is the fact that the small-sized agricultural holdings do not demonstrate the same pronounced behaviour in giving up farming the agricultural land themselves, the number of individual agricultural households going down by less than 20% in 2007 compared to 2002. Given the poor development of the rural non-farm business sector, the rural households focused their efforts on increasing the farm size, as main means to cover the subsistence needs (Annex 1). But this strategy is adopted by many rural households that own land, which makes it more difficult to increase the farm size. Furthermore, for land consolidation, the households that intend to develop a commercial farm are facing competition on the land market from the part of the great tenants, which somehow restricts their successful access to the farmland transactions.

The low size of the land areas operated by the peasant household farms is equivalent to a low welfare level, as long as this source of consumer goods is not replaced by another one to generate cash incomes on the rural household. As a result, the low size of the agricultural individual holding can be associated with a worsening tendency of the social structure, mainly in the case of the rural households that largely depend on agriculture.

4. THE ECONOMIC SIZE OF THE AGRARIAN STRUCTURES

The excessive polarization of agricultural land operation at the level of small and very small-sized farms has major implications upon the productive capacity of Romanian agriculture and upon the access opportunities to a decent living standard for the agricultural household members.

Table 3
Farm structure by economic size (ESU)

No. of farms – total, out of which	2003		2007	
	No.	%	No.	%
	4484890		3931350	
No. of farms under 1 ESU	3273110	72.98	3064670	77.95
No. of farms between 1 and 2 ESU	865500	19.30	629800	16.02
No. of farms between 2 and 4 ESU	268540	5.99	169560	4.31
No. of farms between 4 and 8 ESU	51630	1.15	43320	1.10
No. of farms between 8 and 16 ESU	12610	0.28	12950	0.33
No. of farms between 16 and 40 ESU	6670	0.15	6390	0.16
No. of farms between 40 and 100 ESU	3870	0.09	2910	0.07
No. of farms between 100 and 250 ESU	1880	0.04	1270	0.03
No. of farms over 250 ESU	1100	0.02	480	0.01

Source: EUROSTAT database 2009, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/extraction>.

Thus, the greatest part of farms – over 94% – have an economic size under 2 ESU⁷, while at EU-27 level this share is by thirty percent lower (Table 3). Under these conditions, the average economic size of a Romanian agricultural farm amounted to 0.96 ESU in 2007, representing the tenth part of the value reported for a farm in EU (10.5 ESU/agricultural farm in EU-27).

The Eurostat data reveal a negative phenomenon in the structural changes regarding the economic size of farms, namely the increase of the specific weight of farms whose economic output is lower than 1 ESU. This evolution signals out that an increasing number of small-sized farms are facing great difficulties in managing their production activities and are in the situation of choosing between continuing the farming activity by themselves, leaving their land unfarmed or transferring the right of use or even the land ownership to other operators. Regardless of their decision, the members of households who are in this situation are confronted with major risks of losing their only source for covering their subsistence needs. *The low economic output of the small-sized individual agricultural holding* is another argument for the adoption of certain multifunctional development strategies on this type of rural households.

5. (UNDER) UTILIZATION OF WORKING TIME IN AGRICULTURE

Another argument in favour of implementing the multifunctional development strategies for the agricultural farms in general and mainly for the *agricultural individual farms is labour under utilization on* the latter group of farms.

⁷ The European Size Unit (ESU) is a standard gross margin of 1200 EUR, used to express the economic size of an agricultural farm. For each activity of a farm (for example for wheat production, for dairy cows or for grapes production), the standard gross margin (SGM) is estimated on the basis of utilized area for certain crops (or number of livestock heads) and a regional coefficient. The sum of all these margins, derived from the activities on a certain agricultural farm, is its economic size, which is then expressed in European size units (by dividing total SGM in euro by 1200, and thus the conversion to ESU is obtained).

Out of total working time devoted to agriculture, over 97% is used for obtaining agricultural products on the individual farms that manage only 65% of the land resources (of UAA in 2007).

Table 4
Distribution of working time devoted to agriculture by types of farms

	2005		2007	
	Average number of days worked/ pers.	% in working time allocated to agriculture	Average number of days worked/ pers.	% in working time allocated to agriculture
Individual agricultural farms	73.1	97.0	76.4	97.6
Legal entity units	241.7	3.0	171.3	2.4

Source: NIS (2008) Farm Structure Survey 2007.

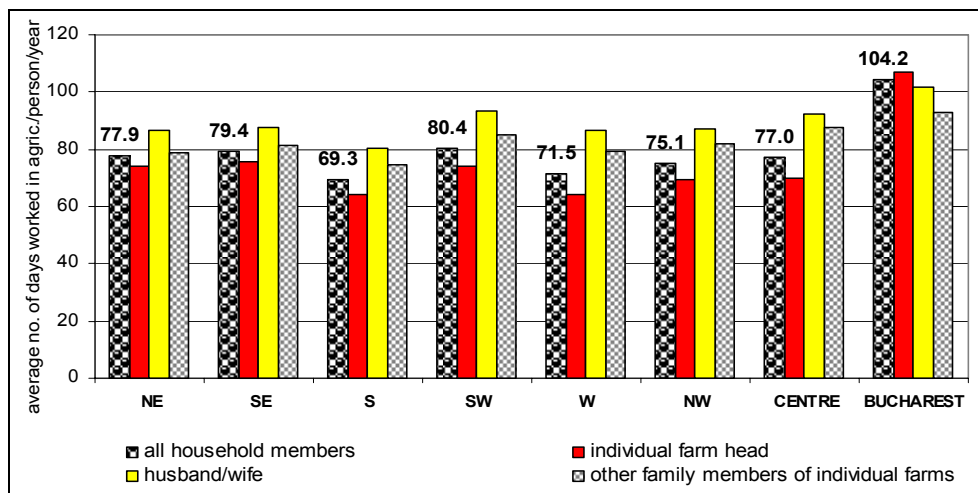
As a result, a member of individual agricultural holdings worked on the farm only 76.4 days on the average in 2007. At the level of the legal entity units, an underutilization of labour resources can be also noticed, the average days worked on farm by a person permanently employed in agriculture being down in the period 2005 – 2007 from 241.7 days/year to 171.3 days/year.

Thus, a chronic underutilization of labour force in the case of individual agricultural farms can be noticed, the differences between the occupational behaviour in agriculture at this farm type level being quite insignificant across regions, except for the region Bucharest where the annual number of days worked on farm per person who practice this activity on the household being 104.2 in 2007. We can estimate that this is a direct consequence of two phenomena: i) relatively low dependence on agriculture in the region Bucharest determined by the diversity of off-farm occupational opportunities makes fewer household members be involved in the farming activity, in their spare time; ii) increased intensity of production activities on the agricultural holdings near the capital city, which fructifies their position rent in the vicinity of an agri-food market with high potential.

The household members' involvement in the farming activities on the individual household farms is different. Thus, in most regions, except for Bucharest, the individual farm heads devote less time to farming activities compared to the other household members. Among the components of an agricultural household, those who devoted the most numerous days to the farm works in 2007 are the wife/husband of the farm head.

The average number of days worked in agriculture by a member of an individual agricultural holding fluctuates across regions. Two factors influence this disparity: the higher the importance of agriculture in the occupational structure, the less time a person employed in agriculture allocates annually to the activities on the individual farm (the correlation coefficient between the average number of days worked in agriculture/person and the share of population employed in agriculture

in total employed population -0.605); the underutilization of working time on the individual agricultural holding lowers as far as the household members are involved in off-farm economic activities (the correlation coefficient between the average number of days worked in agriculture/person and the regional share of employees is 0.625 and the correlation with the cumulated share of the population employed in industry and construction is 0.605).



*) other family members of the individual agricultural holding are: son/daughter, son-in-law/daughter-in-law, grandson/granddaughter, father/mother, father-in-law/mother-in-law, brother/sister, brother-in-law/sister-in-law, grandfather/grandmother.

Source: NIS (2008) Farm Structure Survey, 2007.

Figure 1. Regional differences in the working time allocated to agriculture by the members of individual agricultural holdings, 2007.

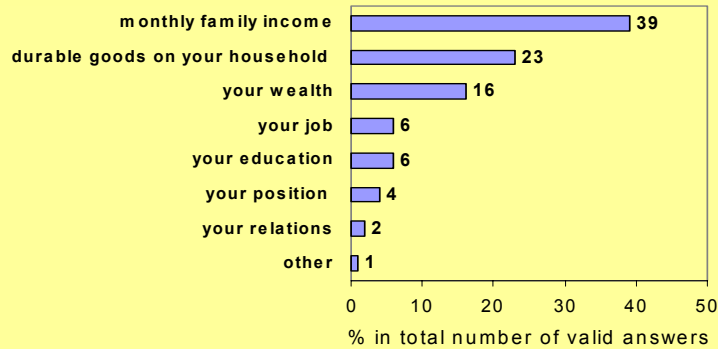
The multifunctional development of the individual agricultural holdings (consisting of the occupational multiplication on the household) is one of the easiest means to increase the income sources and to efficiently use the available working time of the household members. Thus, according to the data from the farm structure survey in 2007, non-agricultural income gainful activities are performed on 21.7% of the total number of agricultural holdings. Out of the 853637 agricultural holdings in this situation, 851821 are individual agricultural holdings (that is 99.8%). The directions of the activity diversification at farm level focused on processing products of animal origin (31% of farms developing initiatives in the field of milk processing and other 24% in meat processing) and on fruit and vegetable processing (grape processing takes place on 20% of farms and fruit and vegetable processing on 14% of farms). Agrotourism and crafts, which might fast find a solvent market, represent market niches that are still uncovered; only 0.2% and 0.4% respectively of the agricultural holdings developed related activities in these fields.

6. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS – THE INCIDENCE OF THE AGRARIAN STRUCTURE CHANGE UPON THE RURAL HOUSEHOLD INCOMES

The changes induced by the transition to the market economy generated the change of the social paradigm according to which the society members place themselves on the social scale. While in the communist period, education and occupation were the main socially acknowledged criteria of individuals' hierarchy on the social scale, at present the main characteristics envisaged for the assessment of a person's position on the social hierarchy in Romania are closer to the capitalist pattern.

Box 1.

Which of the following things did you have in view first when you said that you pertain to this class?



Source: Soros Foundation Romania (2007), *Public Opinion Barometer October 2007– BOP 1998–2007*, www.soros.ro, p. 119.

They appreciate the position of an individual between the extremes “poor” and “rich”, 39% of the respondents of the Public Opinion Barometer consider that the main characteristic that structures the Romanian society today is the *monthly income of the family*, followed by the accumulation of durable goods and the household wealth, both having a pronounced monetary character. Having in view this change of social vision on the self-assessment of the position in the system of social structures (poor, middle class, rich), a change already internalized by most society members, we consider it useful, in our approach, to try and determine the influence of the changes in the agrarian structures upon the rural household incomes.

The conclusions next presented are based on the correlative analysis between the regional evolutions in transition of two categories of variables:

– **The dependent variable**, considered relevant for the rural household members' self-positioning on the social scale: *Average monthly income per rural household*;

– **The independent variables** describing the main evolutions of the agrarian structures in the Romanian rural area, with influence upon the household incomes: i) the average utilized agricultural area per individual agricultural holding, ii) *the share of population employed in agriculture in rural employed population*.

The statistical data from secondary sources at this disaggregation level, available until this moment, have in view the years 2002 and 2005 (Annex 2), enabling to highlight two sets of conclusions relevant for agriculture contribution to the Romanian rural household welfare:

- *The rural occupational structure significantly influences the level of rural household incomes*, a high share of rural employed population in agriculture generating low income levels, due to the poor performance of the individual agricultural holding, with a poor technical endowment and unable to invest in the development of a farming business. In this case, a reverse dependence relation can be also noticed between the percentage of rural employed population working in agriculture and the regional level of the average income of rural household (-0.675);

- The rural household incomes largely depend on the wage earning status of the household members, all the other components of the family benefitting from the remuneration of a household member's work (the correlation ratio between the average income per household at regional level and the specific weight of the salary workers in overall population by regions reaches 0.604);

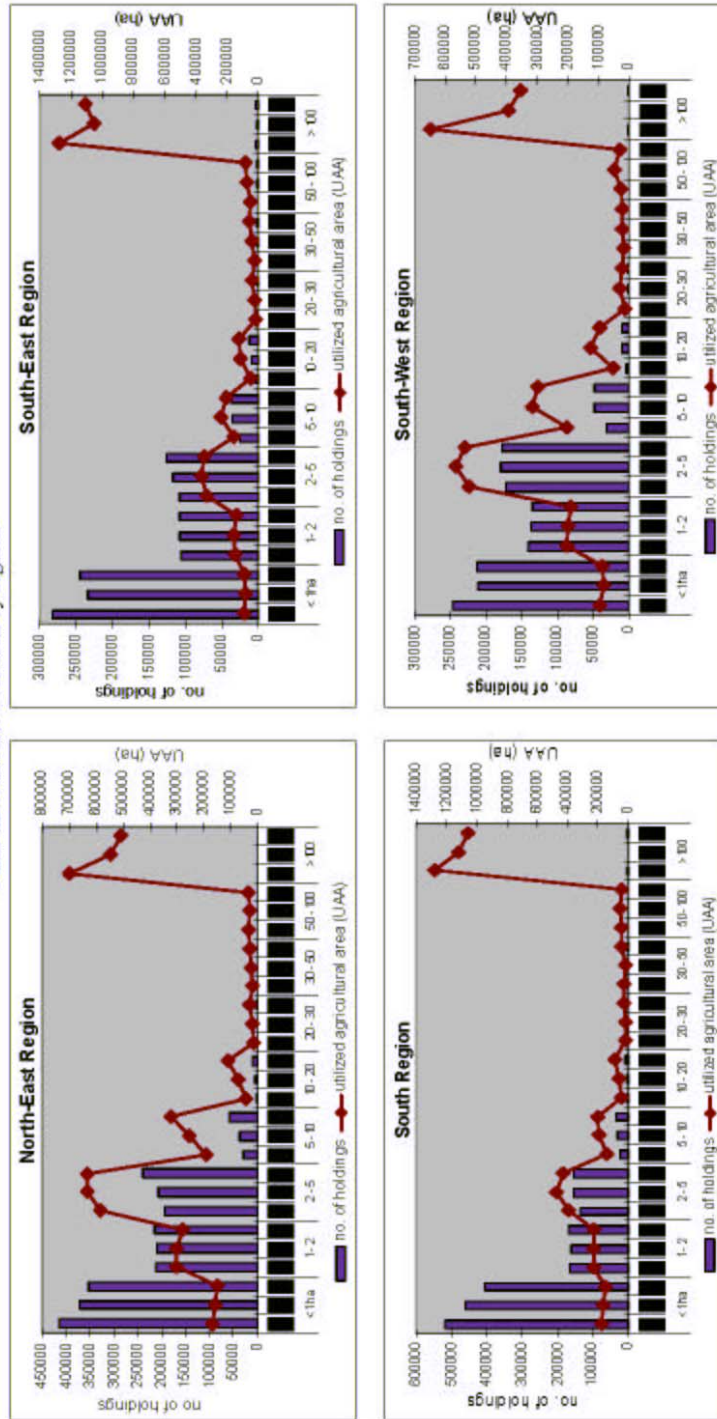
- Given the fact that agriculture represents the main occupation in the rural area, the land resources of an individual holding – as basis of the agricultural production organization – should contribute to supplement the cash incomes of the rural household. However, the correlation coefficient between the average income of the rural household and the average size of the individual agricultural holding across regions reveals a slightly negative connection between these characteristics (- 0.142), demonstrating that an increase of the cash incomes of the rural household depends more on the off-farm activities rather than on the sale of farm products.

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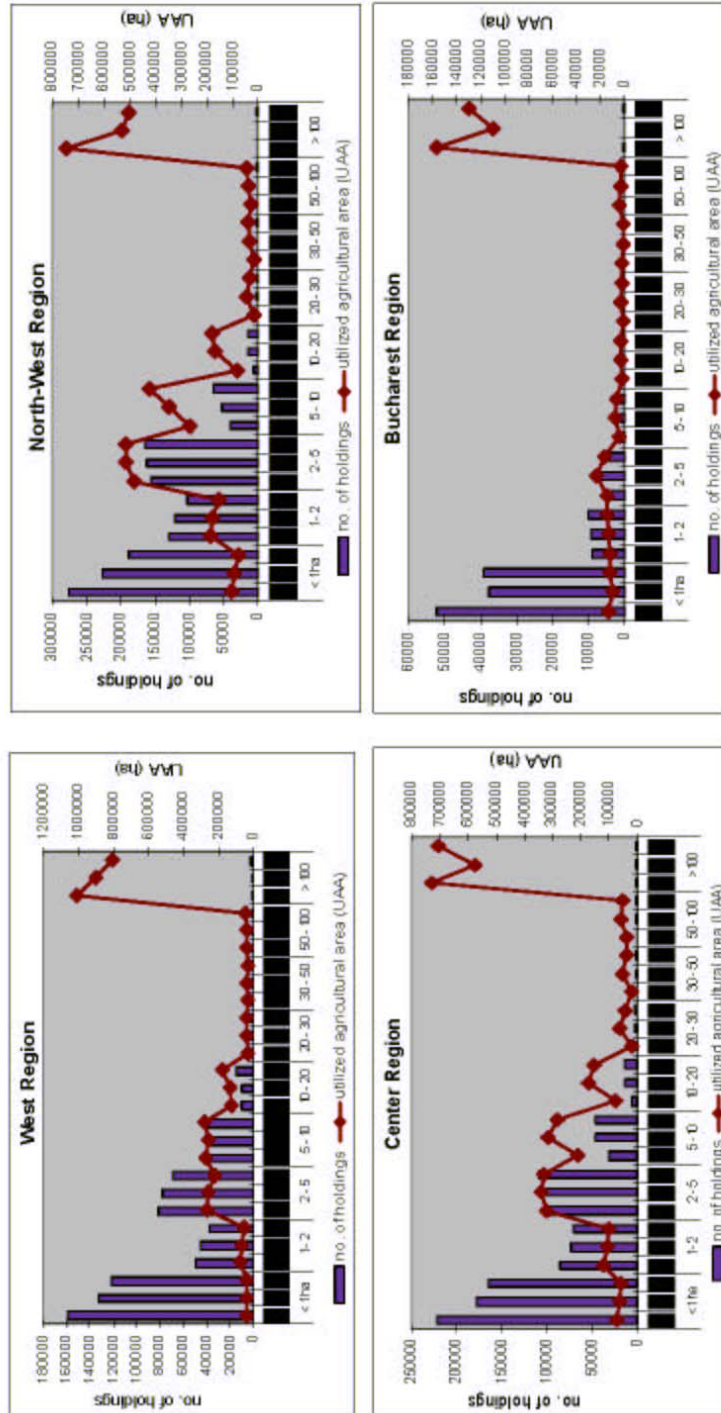
Annex 1

Farm size structure evolution by regions



Source: NIS (2004) – General Agricultural Census 2002; NIS (2006) Farm Structure Survey, 2005; NIS (2008) Farm Structure Survey, 2007.

Annex 1 (continued)



Source: NIS (2004) – General Agricultural Census, 2002; NIS (2006) Farm Structure Survey, 2005; NIS (2008) Farm Structure Survey, 2007.

Annex 2

Changes in the rural social structure
and their incidence upon household incomes across regions

Region	Average monthly income per rural household (constant prices) ¹		% population employed in agriculture in total rural employed population ²		% salary workers in total rural population ²		Average UAA per individual agricultural holding ³		
	Year	2002	2005	2002	2005	2002	2005	2002	2005
North-East		310.5	538.1	76.1	75.12	11.3	11.4	1.49	1.73
South-East		429.3	563.9	75.8	69.12	12.4	12.9	1.81	2.46
South		401.2	724.0	65.7	58.50	15.1	17.2	1.23	1.46
South-West		439.7	585.4	76.4	78.76	13.1	10.4	1.79	2.31
West		386.9	685.4	63.7	50.36	16.9	20.4	2.30	3.00
North-West		510.7	633.9	62.6	58.68	15.5	15.6	1.76	2.44
Center		483.4	768.0	51.9	44.62	19.0	18.7	1.65	2.84
Bucharest		698.7	736.9	23.7	15.61	25.2	30.4	0.68	1.08

Source:

¹ own calculations on the basis of data from the Rural EuroBarometer 2002, 2005 Foundation for an Open Society

² NIS Labour Force in Romania. Employment and Unemployment in the years 2002, 2005 series.

³ NIS (2004) General Agricultural Census, 2002; INS (2006) Farm Structure Survey 2005.