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EDUCATION ROLE IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF ROMANIAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

ABSTRACT

Currently, the knowledge capital and the human capital are key factors in any economic and social development policy. In our view, education should not be missing from any sustainable development strategy of Romanian rural communities. In this regard, it is first necessary to increase investments in education so that this could shift from its current state of predominantly theoretical to that of predominantly practical (applied, creative). The paper presents the current situation of the Romanian educational infrastructure in the rural area, the problems existing in this area in terms of education and the solutions that can be found and implemented. The results showed that the role of education in the sustainable development of Romanian rural communities is known and accepted by all local regional and national stakeholders. According to the official surveys conducted nationally, almost half of the Romanians consider education as the main factor meant to restart the engines of national economy.

Key words: rural communities, education, sustainable development.

JEL Classification: I21, I25, Q01.

1. INTRODUCTION

An undoubted factor of viable society development, from the economic point of view inclusively, is education. The role of education in the sustainable development of the Romanian rural communities is well-known and accepted by all economic, social, political, regional and local actors. According to the official surveys conducted at national level, almost half of the Romanians consider that education is the main factor meant to restart the engines of national economy.

According to the EuroBarometer published by the European Union in March 2011, 47% of the Romanians consider that education improvement and raising the professional training level could also increase the local and national economic performances. It is to be remarked that, on this issue, the percentage of population in Romania is similar to the EU average.

Next to education, the most important measure for getting out of crisis is “facilitating the setting up of a company”, mainly for the young people. 32% of the Romanian citizens opted for this variant, the EU average being 33% (Vidru, 2011). In these conditions, the research works on the role of education in the process of Romania’s communities sustainable development are opportune and necessary.

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

For the elaboration of the present scientific paper, a comprehensive fundamental research was first made, numerous bibliographic sources from the national and international literature being studied. The statistical databases from the National Institute of Statistics, the National Forecast Commission and Eurostat – the Official Statistical Office of the European Union, as well as the National Rural Development Programs were also investigated.

Previously to our research, the rural development experts have studied numerous elements contributing to a balanced rural space, regarded as an extremely complex economic, social, cultural and ecological system; in November, 1996, they launched the Cork Declaration, which explicitly asked all decision makers to actively contribute to the promotion and implementation of sustainable rural development at national and international level through: prioritization of rural development in the national governance programs; development of concrete actions to increase the rural space attractiveness; elaboration of educational programs adapted to the market requirements; diversification of agricultural and non-agricultural activities in the rural area, etc. The Kyoto Protocol (1997), the Lisbon Strategy (2000), Johannesburg Declaration (2002), the EU Sustainable Development Strategy for an enlarged Europe (2006), the Lisbon Treaty (2007) etc. followed next.

At national and international level, there are many studies and research works on sustainable rural development, but there are relatively few studies that address the role of education in the sustainable development of the Romanian rural area, as well as the solutions to motivate the setting up of young people in the rural area. We shall next briefly present only a few of the most important identified titles that were studied in detail and used as bibliography for the purpose of our scientific paper.

The volume *Management of local and regional development through projects* represented an important documentation source for the research theme, in the context in which it delimits, define and presents the characteristics of certain concepts such as: local development, regional development, sustainable development, community development etc. (Berea, Stoica, Brăgaru, 2010).

Romania’s integration into the European Union presupposed the implementation of an ample process of reforms in all the sectors of activity. In this context, aspects linked to development economics, sustainable development, social equity, economic

inequities, economic cohesion, etc. began to be approached and studied (Dăianu, Vrânceanu, 2002). In the present conditions, the sustainable socio-economic development of the rural area represent a priority when we speak about the development policies at national and European level (Dona, Florian – coordinators, 2010). The sustainable and integrated rural development should be approached in accordance with the global (economic, ecological, social, cultural etc.) values, traditions and percepts. Regarded in a not too far perspective, the integrated economic development of rural area can represent a genuine framework scheme for approaching reality and reaching a balance between the legitimate social and economic needs of the rural population and the environmental needs (Dona, Dobre, Gergely, 2005).

In accordance with the new philosophy of the sustainable development of the rural space, agriculture will continue to have a special place in the sustainable rural development strategies; yet the sustainable development of the rural areas will have to be reconsidered in accordance with the local resources (human, labour force, agricultural capital, non-agricultural development potential, productivity of production factors etc. (Gavrilescu, coordinator, 2010). For example, in the volume *The Romanian Rural Economy*, rural economy is approached as part of the general socio-economic development. In this vision, rural poverty is mainly caused by the limited access to resources, resulting from the lack of balance between the available resources and the population's needs. Besides the problem caused by the population's increase, the access to resources is also limited for the poor rural people due to the national socio-political situation. The sustainable rural development system presupposes a system of social change correlated with numerous elements, such as: natural and human resources, available technology, socio-political organization forms, educational level, etc. These elements are integrated into a system, being closely correlated, so that if one element is changed, the whole system will be changed (Gavrilescu, Florian, coordinators, 2007).

The volume: *Sustainable Rural and Regional Development of the Romanian Village* includes conceptual aspects regarding the rural space, methodological delimitations between rural and urban areas, the rural space structure, characteristics and functions of the rural space, presentation of rural development in economic, ecological and social terms, detailed presentation of the sustainable rural development concept. In the authors' vision, the rural development must comprise all the activities that have in view the improvement of life quality for the rural people and the preservation of the natural and cultural landscape, ensuring the sustainable development of rural areas in conformity with the particularities of the respective places (Man, Mateoc – Sîrb, 2008). The volume: *Rural development. Policies and strategies* starts from the same premise as the theme approached in the present research paper, that rural space is a vital domain for a country, both by its size and by the complex effects it generates. In the above-mentioned volume, the rural space is defined, characterized and presented from the point of view of its functions, structures, resources and national importance. The paper includes several chapters

referring to the sustainable rural development, its bases, principles, indicators and determining factors. The paper also presents the national rural development strategy and the national strategy for Romania's regional development, both documents presenting aspects linked to the socio-economic profile of the Romanian rural areas and to the demographic problems of the rural area (population ageing, depopulation, lack of qualified labour force etc.) (Mărăcineanu, Nistreanu, Constantin, 2003).

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

For the elaboration of the present scientific paper, basic research studies were conducted, mainly based on bibliographical study, with the purpose to acquire new knowledge and learn new concepts, to investigate the specific phenomena and processes, to formulate hypotheses, ideas and paradigms known in this field, as well as applied research studies based on gathering and processing data, which led to formulating original hypotheses, drawing synthetic conclusions and personal and original comments. The present research paper has approached a highly debated issue in the national and international scientific environment, and apparently insufficiently known, that of the rural area and its complexity.

The Romanian rural area and its sustainable development, under the present research, was approached in scientific terms while having in view several integrated levels, namely economic, social, educational, cultural, ecological etc.

The activities carried out for the purpose of this paper and the utilized research methods were the following: scientific documentation, based on the consultation of the national and international bibliographic sources; information on the educational system in Romania; investigation of the socio-economic context of the educational activities development in the Romanian rural area; the creation of databases; data processing and interpretation; drawing up the scientific paper, while complying with all academic rigours regarding its scientific quality.

The main data processing methods were statistical-mathematical, respectively the computer assisted processing, using the Excel program.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The sustainable rural development has a major importance for Romania, as the rural area represents over 87% of the country's territory, where about 45% of the country's population is living. The Romanian rural area is largely characterized by unsatisfactory living conditions, caused by the underdevelopment of physical infrastructure (roads, water, sewerage network) and of social infrastructure (healthcare, educational, cultural services).

The complex development of the rural area has become a national importance objective, taking into account the new requirements imposed by the European Union, in the first place, as well as the need to reach the European standards.

It is a well-known reality that the Romanian rural area is endowed with a great variety of local resources that can be highly capitalized in a sustainable manner, in order to ensure the sustainable long-term development of the rural area. In order to achieve this, we need young, well-trained populations, with entrepreneurial spirit, who should revitalize the rural communities. Complex development programs are also needed, integrated, scientifically substantiated and based on pluriactivity and multifunctionality (Moga, Rădulescu, 2004).

In a generic sense, the sustainable rural development concept represents the totality of forms and methods for socio-economic development, based on ensuring a balance between these socio-economic systems and the elements of the natural capital in the first place. The concept was initially linked to the environmental problems and the crisis of natural resources, mainly those linked to energy. Sustainability starts from the idea that human activities are dependent on environment and resources. Healthcare, social security and the economic stability of society are essential in defining the quality of life. Table 1 presents the evolution of this concept worldwide and at European level.

As we can also see from Table no. 1, sustainable development, regardless of its application scope or area, tries to find a stable theoretical framework for decision making in any situation in which a relation of man/environment type exists, whether it is about the natural, economic or social environment.

Sustainable development was intended to be a solution to the ecological crisis determined by the intense industrial exploitation of resources and the continuous environment degradation and it focused on environment quality preservation in the first place. At present, the concept has been extended to life quality, approached in its entire complexity, under economic, social, ecological, cultural aspect, etc. (Durand, Huylenbroeck, 2002).

Table 1

Evolution of the sustainable development concept at national and international level

Organized event	Documents signed	Delimiting the concept of sustainable development at that moment
Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, 1972	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Stockholm Declaration with 26 principles – Plan of Action for the Human Environment – The United Nations Environment Program-Voluntary Environment Fund 	<p>On this occasion, the international community was reunited for the first time to debate on the global environment issue and the development needs. The Action Plan for the Human Environment had three components, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the program for the global environment evaluation; – environmental management activities; – support measures for the environmental measures. <p>This is the moment when it has been recognized that human activities contribute to environment deterioration, which endangers out Planet's future.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

The Club of Rome, 1972	The Report: "The limits to growth" (The Meadows Report)	The issues approached at that moment refer to: zero growth, world resource depletion, continuous environment deterioration, prevalence of material values in the economic development etc. This report was sent to the Club of Rome, with a little exaggeration of the consequences of the ecological disaster getting shape in the world, in order to incite the public interest for the environmental problems and environment limited resources.
Vienna Convention, 1985	Vienna Convention	Discovery of the hole in the ozone layer above Antarctica and initiation of the process of searching solutions for the diminution of the use of substances that endanger the protective layer around our planet.
United Nations Conference, 1987	Brundtland Report- "Our Common Future"	The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which had started its activity after a resolution adopted by UN in 1983, recognizes the universally accepted definition: "Sustainable development is the kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".
United Nations Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development (The Earth Summit), Rio de Janeiro, 1992	Agenda 21 – representing the basis and plan of action of the sustainable development concept on the pattern of integrated development from the social, economic and environmental point of view	On this occasion several conventions were signed referring to climate changes (reduction of methane and carbon dioxide emissions), biological diversity (species preservation) and stopping massive deforestation. Agenda 21 was elaborated, approaching the issue of sustainable development of local companies and economies, by focusing on environment and natural resources preservation and protection. It was convened upon the fact that the starting point for achieving sustainable development is at local level. Romania represents a successful example in Local Agenda 21 implementation.
European Conference on rural development, Cork – Ireland, 1996	"Rural Europe – Future Perspectives" the Cork Declaration	The Cork Declaration comprises the EU guidelines to the member states for the implementation of sustainable rural development as a national priority, by which to ensure: reversing rural exodus, fight against poverty, incentives to the labour force, protection and improvement of rural environment. It also stipulates the integrated approach to the activities by which to ensure the multidisciplinary character and the multisectoral application of sustainable rural development.
Göteborg European Council, 2001	The sustainable development strategy of the European Union	At that moment, the sustainable development strategy of the EU was launched, which proposes an integrated approach in which the economic, social and environmental goals should be simultaneously reached. The priorities established at Göteborg refer to: climate changes, transport systems, public healthcare, educational level, responsible management of natural resources.

Table 1 (continued)

The World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 2002	The Johannesburg Declaration on sustainable development; Plan of implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.	This Conference took place 10 years after Agenda 21 adoption (the Rio Conference); on the occasion the progresses made towards sustainable development was analyzed and the engagements of the participant countries in this respect were reaffirmed, giving a new impetus for putting into practice of measures for the fight against poverty and for environment protection.
The European Council, June 2006	EU Sustainable Development Strategy for an enlarged Europe	This strategy intends to be a catalyst for those who design public policies with the purpose to change the behaviour of the European society and to actively involve the public and private decision makers, as well as the citizens, in the elaboration, implementation and monitoring of the sustainable development objectives. The EU Strategy also establishes precise implementation, monitoring and tracking procedures, with reporting obligations on behalf of the EC and the Member States on the assumed commitments. "For Romania, sustainable development is the only rational perspective of national development, having as the result the foundation of a new development paradigm through the confluence of the economic, social and environmental factors." (www.europa.eu)
Romania's Government, Bucharest, 2008	The National Sustainable Development Strategy Horizon 2013–2020–2030	The Strategy establishes concrete objectives for shifting, in a reasonable and realistic time interval, to a new development pattern characteristic to the European Union and shared worldwide – the sustainable development pattern, oriented towards the continuous improvement of people's lives and of their relationships in harmony with the natural environment. Following the debate of the project at national and regional level, with the active involvement of stakeholders and with the conceptual support of the Romanian Academy, the Strategy proposes a vision of Romania's sustainable development for the next decades.

Source: Processing and completion of Annex 3 of the Ph. D thesis "The integrated economic development of the Romanian rural communities. A case study on Microregion 2", Chirișescu Vergina, 2013.

As a practical approach, the *sustainable rural development* concept presupposes the integrated approach (from the economic, social, political, ecological, cultural and institutional point of view) to all the local and regional development projects, which should be participatory, involving all the social and economic beneficiaries (Otiman, coordinator, 2011). The role of education, in this context, is undeniable, in the conditions in which young people can be trained in order to transfer expertise, enthusiasm, work power etc. to the rural areas. Maybe the most serious present problem of the Romanian rural area is the lack of specialists, in general, and of young specialists in particular, who could work both in the public and private sectors. The young population's exodus, mainly to the urban areas, the labour force migration to countries from the European Union and outside the EU, as well as the young people's unwillingness to settle in rural areas, are only some of the

reasons out of which the human resources of the Romanian rural area are mainly old aged, without education and with a deficient professional training.

In the transition period, in particular, in Romania, simultaneously with the amplification of the rural communities' underdevelopment phenomenon, a process of widening the present disparities between these at local and regional level took place. The economic and social gaps are, on one hand, the result of their different endowment with natural and human resources, and on the other hand, the result of the specific directions of the economic, social, demographic and cultural evolution. (Oțiman, 2006).

The sustainable rural development concept must be understood as a system of interdependencies, which need integrated modifications at the rural space level instead of isolated measures. Within the system of interdependent elements in the process of sustainable rural development, agriculture has a multitude of very important functions. The basic function is the production of foodstuffs and raw materials for the consumption of households, for the non-agricultural population as well as for industry. At the same time, agriculture has the function to create the demand for non-agricultural commodities, which is a pre-condition for the growth of the secondary and tertiary sectors.

Rural economy is presented as a fundamental component of sustainable development, which presupposes to ensure a continuous and steady development based on several strategic pillars: economic growth (maximization of the value added to products and services; increase of economic competitiveness; technological development, increase of professionalism and attitude of the active human resource on the labour force market, etc.); educational level increase; social equity (involving both the social responsibility of the decision makers – administrative authorities, as well as of corporate citizens and business environment, as well as the responsabilization of the beneficiaries of investments, services and social aids supplied by the community); a healthy natural environment (environment preservation and protection will be based inclusively on the creation of the community ecological awareness and on the implementation of integrated management systems). The sustainable rural development is, at the same time, a goal and a methodological approach; the goal is to include the poor rural populations in the process of increasing mankind's welfare, and the approach to attain this goal is the implementation of a package of well-balanced measures of economic and socio-political nature (Oțiman, 2006).

In another opinion, the concept of sustainable rural development designates the totality of socio-economic development forms and methods, aiming to reach a balance between these socio-economic systems and the natural capital elements (Simion, Tănăsescu, Buianu, 2002).

The main demographic tendencies in the present rural Romania are the population decline and ageing, due to the decrease of the natural population increase and to the migration from rural to urban area or to foreign countries, mainly in the case of young people (Zahiu, Toma, Dachin, Alexandri, 2010; Chirișescu, 2015).

The low educational level of the rural population is another critical problem from the perspective of labour employment. Rural incomes are lower than those in the urban area and the income gap is growing larger; as a result, the poverty incidence is significantly higher in the rural area (Zahiu, Toma, Dachin, Alexandri, 2010). According to official statistics, the rural regions account for 92% of the EU's territory. These regions are producing 45% of the value added in the EU and 53% of jobs. Despite the diverse situations, in the rural regions the incomes per capita are generally lower by one third than the EU average, while the women's employment rates are lower, and the sector of services is less developed. Hence the rural areas will have to face growth, labour employment and sustainable development challenges (Zahiu et al., 2006).

This not too optimistic picture is valid for the "typical", "average" rural localities, according to the statistical data. But in reality the situation is different from case to case: in Romania we can find both rural localities under full development and rural localities lagging behind, which have to face serious socio-economic problems, while other localities are on verge of disappearance.

The educational infrastructure in the Romanian rural area (Table 2) is deficient at all levels, being almost absent in the post-high school and higher education system. The number of education units decreased at all levels, not always justified by the decreasing number of children/young people, quite often the decisions being made only out of economic reasons.

Table 2

Evolution of education units in the Romanian rural area

Analyzed years	2007	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Number of education units							
<i>Total – national</i>	8230	8221	8244	7588	7204	7069	7108
<i>Total – rural</i>	3754	3748	3793	3420	3200	3189	3205
<i>Share of education units in the rural area</i>	45,61	45,6	46,01	45,07	44,42	45,11	45,09
Education levels							
Pre-school education	210	206	208	130	102	91	105
Pre-university education	3543	3541	3584	3289	3097	3097	3098
Primary education	17	18	18	29	33	39	41
Secondary education	3268	3261	3180	2946	2775	2783	2815
High school education	169	170	310	313	286	271	254
Vocational education	89	92	76	1	1	2	17
Post-high school education	:	:	:	:	2	2	3
Higher education	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Note: ":" – lack of data; no data recorded after 2015.

Source: Authors' processing of data from Tempo Online database, Romania's National Institute of Statistics, www.insse.ro.

However, the statistical data supplied by the study “*Romania in Figures 2011*” of the National Institute of Statistics (www.insse.ro) reveal that the employment level for the rural persons has a slightly increasing trend, even in the conditions in which Romania was seriously affected by the crisis from 2009–2010. At the same time, the long-term unemployment in the rural area averagely decreased by 2%, even in the young people, as the most affected unemployment category. This could be a signal for decision makers with regard to the capacity of poor rural communities in Romania to respond to crisis situations.

According to the same NIS study, in the Romanian rural area, the opportunities to get a job are almost null, and the access to services, not always of good quality, is difficult. These are also the reasons for the rural to urban migration phenomenon, mainly in the case of young persons, 8.3 in 1000 inhabitants in 2010, as against 6.8 in 2007 and 6.0 in 2009. The migration phenomenon is also manifested under reversed form, from the urban to rural area, 13.8 in 1000 inhabitants in 2010, as against 12.2 in 2007 and 10.0 in 2009; but the people migrating to the rural area are not young people any more, and this adds to the population’s ageing process in the rural area.

The whole Europe suffers from demographic stagnation or decline, under different intensities, resulting, among others, in the general ageing of the population. In the case of the countries from Central Europe that joined the European Union, the situation is quite alarming, due to the very low birth rate, and hence to the gradual decline of the number of persons able to work, to the exodus of young people and of the persons with average or higher qualification, to the unsatisfactory professional training level in relation to market requirements and to the skills necessary to shift to the knowledge and innovation-based information society. It is considered that there is a real risk that, in the following decades, the Central and Eastern European countries may become a weakly populated region, with a declining labour force, forced to carry the burden of an uneducated and ageing population. Romania is not an exception in this respect (National Strategy for Romania’s Sustainable Development, 2008).

In this context, for ensuring *the sustainable development of the Romanian rural communities*, and not only, a series of objectives and strategic projects are absolutely necessary, with the following priority directions: promoting active measures in order to reduce the number of young people or young families who emigrate definitively; broadening the framework for lifetime learning for the labour force from the rural area; supporting young people and entrepreneurs to get knowledge and high skills; improving the life quality in all the rural communities; elaboration of development programs adapted and differentiated for the rural areas as regards sustainability and proactive involvement of young people in the elaboration and implementation of projects and programs compatible with the sustainable development goals (for instance under the Local Agenda 21); expanding quality education and professional training in the rural areas, promoting equal opportunities and attracting the young people from the less-favoured groups in the education system: setting up young farmers and replacing the present generation of farms heads.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion of the research work revealed that the evolution of the Romanian rural space results from a complex set of factors of historical, political, economic, social and conjunctural nature, and last but not least, of certain factors of international nature, which have influenced this evolution mainly after the integration into the EU (2007). The sustainable rural development has a major importance for Romania, as the rural area accounts for over 87% of the country's territory, where around 45% of the country's population is living. The Romanian rural area is largely characterized by unsatisfactory living conditions, caused by the underdevelopment of physical infrastructure (roads, water, sewerage) and social infrastructure (healthcare, educational and cultural services). The Romanian rural economy is still weakly diversified and depends in a too great measure on agriculture, dominated by subsistence and semi-subsistence farms, producing mainly for self-consumption and only marginally for the market.

In this context, education has a primordial role in the development of sustainable rural communities. It is necessary to implement a quality education process, based on creative education, on the labour market requirements, on local needs, etc. Through the national, local and regional development programs, the entrepreneurial culture development must be supported and promoted, as well as the increase of the participation rate of local entrepreneurs, mainly the young ones, to the increase of national competitiveness. Through the continuous educational and professional training programs, the entrepreneurial education must be introduced as compulsory at all levels and in all disciplines. Each theoretical element must be also presented under the aspect of its practical applicability. Innovation and entrepreneurship do not appear arbitrarily, so they must be developed at national level, through major investments in technological education, creative education, support and infrastructure policies dedicated to businesses development. It is worth mentioning, in this respect, the development of vocational training forms and craft schools, extremely useful for the rural area.

The rural world and the need for its sustainable development represent an extremely vast and complex reality, being approached under its different aspects by many research institutions and researchers. Thus, the terminology used for describing the rural space and the presentation of the sustainable rural development particularities in this area is extremely rich, and the sustainable rural development continues to represent a challenge and a priority research goal. Education in the rural area is a necessary actual research theme, the development of sustainable rural communities not being possible in the absence of educated people, of civic, ecological and social education.

The conducted research revealed a series of negative aspects that characterize the Romanian rural area at present, namely: the continuous diminution of the number of young people (from the age category 15–49 years) who are effectively living in

the Romanian rural area, not necessarily of those who have their domiciles in the rural area on their identity card; the deterioration of the active population/inactive population ratio (1 : 1.2); maintaining a high percentage of the population working in agriculture (27%); the diminution of the number of education units in the rural area and of the educational level of labour force (mainly the young people), etc.

In the developed countries, the current strategies of the economic development of rural territories have in view the reshaping of rural economies, in the context of agriculture restructuring and of the economic and social changes related to it. These changes firstly presuppose imposing certain bottom-up development strategies, by involving the local resources and the rural communities. As a result, the partnerships and the collective participation are now the words of order in the rural development discourse. The present rural development philosophy emphasizes the importance of the participation of all local actors to this long-lasting process, with implications at all levels (economic, ecological and social levels). This approach has brought some positive changes to the sustainable rural development process, with focus on the rural community.

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