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Krisztina Melinda Dobay

Romanian Academy, Iasi Branch
Economic and Social Research Institute "Gheorghe Zane"
Rural Economy Department
Codrescu no. 2, Iasi, 700481, Romania
dobaykrisztinamelinda@yahoo.com

New challenges for rural development in Vaslui County (North-Eastern Romania)

Abstract: *The aim of this article is to present the results of a project implemented in Romania between December 2006 and March 2008. The project entitled "Study Regarding the Prospective Valuation of the Socio-Economic Development of the Rural Space in Vaslui County" was driven by the Vaslui County Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in order to establish the local policy for promoting and approaching the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).*

There were elaborated 84 studies for 81 communes, 1 city and 2 towns with rural areas. The studies highlighted the particularities of each community and the trends for their rural development.

Keywords: *rural development, prospective valuation, local economic development, Vaslui County, Romania*

Introduction

Vaslui County is located towards the eastern – north-eastern extremity of Romania, at the border with the Republic of Moldova (E), between Iasi County (N), Neamt County (NW), Bacau (W), Vrancea (SW), Galati (S) and has a surface area of 5,318 km². The county has a total population of 456,686 inhabitants – data refers to 1 July 2006 (INS 2007) – with 59.4% of the population living in rural areas. The population density is 86 inhabitants per sq km (close to the national average which is 90 inhabitants per sq km – INS 2007). Vaslui city is the county residence (70,884 inhabitants – INS 2007). There are two cities Barlad (70,499 inhabitants) and Husi (29,371 inhabitants), two towns, Negresti (10,271 inhabitants) and Murgeni (7,808 inhabitants) and 81 communes with 460 villages

The relief is characterised by strong fragmentation and a general slant from north to south, being made up of hills and large valleys ensembles that belong to the central-eastern area of the Moldavian Plateau. The water network has an average density of 0.37 km/sq km and is represented by two large rivers, Prut and Barlad, whose springs and discharge mouth are outside the county. The natural resources are very low, being represented only by some building stone, small forested areas and some mineral water springs.

Vaslui County has a total agricultural surface of 401,236 ha (75% of the county surface). The structure of the agricultural surface is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Agricultural land distribution in Vaslui County

Agricultural land, by use	Surface (ha)
Arable land	291,290
Grazing lands and meadows	95,180
Vineyards	12,243
Orchards	2,906

Source: VCC 2004 – updated in 2007 with data for 2006

The most important crops are: grain cereals; cash crops – sunflower, sugar beet, soy, tobacco and medicinal herbs. Vineyards and wine production is an old tradition in Vaslui County. The Vaslui vineyards are part of the “Moldova Hills” wine growing area, with renowned vineyards such as Husi, Averesti, Vutcani, Murgeni and Tutova Hills. The orchards, growing on 2,806 ha, produce annually 20 thousand tons of fruit (apples, plums, cherries, sweet cherries, apricots) (VCC 2004 – updated in 2007 with data for 2006).

Animal breeding represents about 35% of the county’s economy. The livestock in 2006 amount to 76,300 cows, 71,000 pigs, 235,500 sheep.

In Vaslui County, there are 450 food production and processing companies, five companies active in fish breeding (VCC 2004 – updated in 2007 with data for 2006).

The number of households is quite large, amounting to 218,517 in 2006. The average size of a household is about 1.8 ha. Only 209 companies from a total of 182,000 agricultural companies (commercial farms) are larger than 50 ha. Most of them (84 representing 40%) are between 100 and 300 ha; 33% of them are between 50 and 100 ha; 15% are larger than 500 ha (VCC 2004 – updated in 2007 with data for 2006).

Vaslui County has economic and social problems (traditionally underdeveloped – GV, MAA, 1998) due to the combination of high rates of structural unemployment (11.3% in Vaslui County and 5.2% country average in December 2006; see INS 2007) and high percentage of labour force employed in agriculture. More than 5% from the total number of employed persons in the

economy of Vaslui County are employed in agriculture, hunting and forestry – the country average is 2.8% for 2006 (calculations based on INS 2007). These two factors are correlated significantly with a rate of infant mortality (25 cases from 1000 – Adevarul 2006) higher than the national average (14 cases from 1000) and with a tendency of population migration to other regions, in the country and abroad, in search of jobs. The underdevelopment of the area is highlighted by other indicators with regard to basic infrastructure and level of direct investments per inhabitant (indicator which approximates the impact of the market forces on local economy).

Vaslui County suffers from a lack of foreign investment, due to its geographical position but also to the low level of investment in the promotion of economic potential. The total amount of foreign investment was in 2005 over 32 million € (i.e. around 70 €/inhabitant - VCC 2004 – up dated in 2007 with data for 2005). The most significant investments were made in mechanical engineering, textiles and the food industry. The industry is concentrated in towns and cities, while the rural area has an agricultural profile.

Vaslui County being one of the poorest counties in Romania, could become more attractive if it can increase its absorption capacity for the funds that are channelled to Romania and take advantage of the opportunities that exist.

In 2006, Vaslui County Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (DADR Vaslui), in order to improve the efficiency of its activity in promoting the funding opportunities for the rural areas, contracted the project, entitled “Study Regarding the Prospective Valuation of the Socio-Economic Development of the Rural Space in Vaslui County” with the Romanian Academy, Iasi Branch, Economic and Social Research Institute “Gh. Zane”, the Rural Economy Department. The same research staff implemented a similar project between 1997 and 1998 for the rural area of Iasi County, contracted and funded by Iasi County Council, entitled “Studies regarding the economic and social development of the communes in Iasi County – Horizon 2004”. The aim was to make a diagnosis of each community and to establish the development directions according to their strengths and weaknesses (Bohateret, Dobay and Gherasim 1999).

The purpose of the current project implemented in Vaslui County was to diagnose the rural space and to outline the development trends for each community.

Methodology

The diagnosis comprised a three level approach:

1. The vision of the County level organisations and public institutions regarding the development of the rural areas
2. The vision of the local public administration for each administrative unit
3. The rural people’s vision about actual needs and their future

The main undertaken steps were:

- designing the tools for collecting information and data for the diagnosis;
- testing the questionnaire;
- preparing the field data collection and instructing the operators;
- collecting and analysing the data;
- elaborating the diagnosis and establishing the development areas;
- forecasting the development trends;
- estimating the funds' absorption capacity of the communities.

The data collection started by gathering available information about Vaslui County from all the organisations and public administration bodies. In order to get thoroughly into the analysis at community level, a document called "The Documentary File of the Commune" (Appendix 1) was elaborated which was distributed to the local public administration. The document contained 78 questions/topics and its main role was to obtain local level data about the community and to see the development perspectives of the localities from the local public administration's point of view.

The greatest challenge, from the point of view of processing the information, was the questionnaire used for perceiving the peoples vision about their real needs and their opinion about the development perspectives of the communities. The questionnaire comprised 47 questions, out of which 37 were open-ended. 2,530 questionnaires were validated representing 1.73% from the total number of households. The coverage was at each village level and the respondents were selected by the operators (DADR Vaslui staff – County Directorate for Agriculture and Rural Development - and OJCA Vaslui – county public extension service), on the basis of a statistical step of about 1 from 180. The targeted respondents were teachers, priests, business men, farmers, recognised informal leaders, housewives, young farmers etc..

84 studies for the 81 communes, one city and two towns with rural areas has been elaborated.

Each study had the following content:

I Synthesis

- 1.1 The rural development zones*
- 1.2 The development level of the commune*
- 1.3 Rural development directions*

II The analytical study on the commune

- 2.1 General presentation*
 - 2.1.1 Chapter I Introduction (history, geography)*
 - 2.1.2 Chapter II Natural resources*
 - 2.1.3 Chapter III Human resources*
 - 2.1.4 Chapter IV Material resources*
- 2.2 The county institutions' vision about the development perspectives of the commune*
- 2.3 The local public administration's vision about the development perspectives of the commune*
- 2.4 The people's vision about the development perspectives of the commune*

III Types of eligible projects for rural development (2007-2013)

IV The identified projects classified by programmes, measures and axis

V The research results – next steps for the community development

- 5.1 Guiding principles for elaborating the Local Economic Development Strategy*
- 5.2 Establishing partnerships*
- 5.3 The LEADER approach*
- 5.4 Writing and implementing projects*

References

Results

The studies highlighted the particularities of each community and the trends for the rural development. The major development directions identified were:

- rural infrastructure modernisation (roads, water supply)
- development of non-agricultural activities
- farm modernisation
- improving life quality
- specialising agricultural activities
- improving the quality of the environment
- developing forestry
- lifelong learning
- developing tourism

In each commune, based on the questionnaires and the commune documentary file, we identified several project ideas in different domains. There were 11,263 project ideas, out of which:

- 42% - related to village modernisation
- 26% - for developing agriculture
- 21% - diversification of economic activities
- 9% - on environmental topics
- 2% - for addressing social problems

From the total number of identified project ideas, 10,537 might be funded through the EAFRD. 55% of these project ideas were identified on axis III, 28.4% on axis I, 11.7% on axis IV and 4.9% on axis II (Table 2).

Table 2. The distribution of the identified project ideas on the EAFRD axis

EAFRD axis	Number of identified projects	% from total programme
Axis I development of the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector	2989	28.4
Axis II improvement of the environment and the rural areas through the sustainable use of agricultural and forestry land	517	4.9
Axis III developing quality of life in rural areas and rural economy diversification	5800	55.0
Axis IV LEADER	1231	11.7
TOTAL	10537	100

Source: CER 2008, Final Report (vol. I-V)

The rural space of Vaslui County was classified in 11 rural development areas (zones) based on the polarisation structures, communication flows and the local development potential. The mapping in 11 zones was made by considering the following elements:

- Subtype zone
- Localisation

- Composition
- Physic and geographical potential
- Demographic potential
- Economic potential
- Accessibility
- Agricultural production potential (soil mapping)
- Development possibilities
- Development perspectives of the zone
- Indicators and indexes for economic and social valuation (i.e. population, households, active population, land fund by use, utilised agricultural surfaces, livestock, number of tractors, soil category, infrastructure quality, water quality etc.)

Each of the 11 zones has different development potential as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Main features of the 11 rural development areas

Zone	Localities within the area	Features
1	Negresti town and 7 communes: Bacesti, Dumesti, Todiresti, Rafaila, Osesti, Vulturesti, Rebricea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is an agricultural area; - the population is generally decreasing with the exception of the villages with Roma population; - the area is underdeveloped; - the development might be generated by the diversification of economic activities in Negresti town;
2	4 communes: Codaesti, Dudesti, Tacuta, Miclesti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is situated relatively far from the main cities; - the development potential is related to the development of Codaesti commune as polarization centre (traditionally farmers' market place);
3	6 communes: Botesti, Bunesti-Averesti, Tatarani, Cretesti, Oltenesti, Albesti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - orchards and vineyards with development potential; - middle polarization degree from the cities;
4	6 communes close to Husi city: Dranceni, Arsura, Duda Epureni, Padureni, Stanilesti, Lunca Banului	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high potential for agriculture (grains, technical plants) and forestry; - tradition in wine production;
5	Vaslui city and 15 communes: Solesti, Tanacu, Muntenii de Sus, Muntenii de Jos, Deleni, Lipovat, Puscasi, Laza, Balteni, Cozmesti, Delesti, Stefan cel Mare, Zapodeni, Feresti, Valeni	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - it is the periurban area of Vaslui city; - good soils; - high potential for diversification;
6	8 communes: Voinesti, Gherghesti, Puiesti, Iana, Dragomiresti, Garceni, Ivanesti, Pungesti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - isolated area; - low agricultural potential; - decreasing population;
7	7 communes: Alexandru Vlahuta, Bogdana, Bogdanesti, Bogdanita, Costesti, Ibanesti, Poienesti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - available labour force; - bad infrastructure; - low polarisation degree;

Zone	Localities within the area	Features
8	7 communes: Dimitrie Cantemir, Gagesti, Hoceni, Vutcani, Dodești, Rosiești, Vișoara	- high agricultural potential; - lack of infrastructure;
9	3 communes: Berezeni, Falcu, Vetrisoara	- potential for processing agricultural products; - is medium developed area with potential for diversification;
10	Murgeni town and 4 communes: Blagești, Epureni, Maluțeni, Suletea	- agricultural area with potential for diversification; - the development pillar is Murgeni town, but slowly developing due to the high percentage of Roma population;
11	14 communes close to Barlad city: Ciocani, Coroiesti, Ivesti, Pochidia, Pogonesti, Tutova, Banca, Bacani, Fruntiseni, Grivita, Perieni, Vinde-rei, Zorleni	- high potential for agriculture; - tradition in vegetable growing; - favourability for sunflower, oilseed rape.



Figure 1. Rural Development Areas
Source: CER (2008)

We noticed that (CER 2008, Final Report Synthesis):

- The highest development potential is in zones 5 and 11 (located around the biggest cities from the county);
- Zones 4 and 9 have high potential for agriculture;
- Zones 1 and 10 have as development engines small towns with diversified activities;
- Zone 2 is developing as an isolated area but with real development potential due to its location on the national road;
- Zones 3, 6, 7 and 8 are underdeveloped.

Regarding the coverage of the projects identified, we observed that 22% of the projects identified were in zone 5; 18% in zone 9; 13% in zone 4; 11% in zone 11 – those are the areas already identified with the highest development potential due to the polarity of the cities and towns and due to the communication flows and infrastructure.

In order to rank the localities for trying to identify the “active communities” and to separate the “dreamers” from those who are really committed and want to develop, we used the following criteria:

1. How seriously and detailed was filled in the Commune Documentary File by the local public administration - LPA (marked with 1 for many lacking information and without strategic/clear vision about the community's future development; marked with 5 the complete and detailed answers with clear understanding);
2. Number of NGO's in the locality (with headquarters and/or with activities in the area);
3. Number of projects implemented by public bodies/in public sector;
4. Number of projects implemented by private entities (mainly on SA-PARD);
5. Provisions constituted in the local budget for co-funding future projects (if yes – mark 1; if no – mark 0);
6. Number of informal leaders (identified based on the way how they filled in the questionnaires – strategic thinking; community development ideas).

The average mark for a community is 10.7. We could state that the communities with higher marks than the average have real potential for development.

In the individual ranking, the communities with the highest development potential, in our opinion, are Berezeni, Zorleni, Stanilesti, Banca, Falciu, Voinești, Rebricea, Ivesti, Tutova, Pungesti, Padureni, Pogonesti, Hoceni and Muntenii de Jos. Those communities already implemented projects, have informal leaders and reliable local public administration staff.

Table 4. Ranking zones

Zone number	Mark for the LPA	NGO's (number)	Public projects (number)	Private projects (number)	Provisions (number)	Informal leaders (number)	Total mark	Average mark per community*	Rank
1	25	1	35	5	2	3	71	8.8	VIII
2	10	0	5	5	1	7	29	7.8	XI
3	14	0	21	4	0	11	50	8.3	X
4	20	2	25	10	4	19	80	13.3	II
5	49	2	45	27	8	39	171	10.7	V
6	22	0	27	4	2	20	76	9.5	VII
7	26	1	20	5	1	8	61	8.7	IX
8	29	0	28	4	5	19	85	12.1	III
9	13	2	18	10	0	11	54	18.0	I
10	17	0	13	5	0	13	48	9.6	VI
11	37	1	54	32	4	29	157	11.2	IV

* the average mark for the communities was calculated by dividing the mark for zone to the number of localities from that area

Conclusions

We may state that this project is unique in Romania due to its complexity. The results are interesting and, as generally speaking about rural development, hard to be measured, at least not in such a short time since the projects implementation (March 2008). But here are some facts:

- DADR Vaslui – The County Directorate for Agriculture and Rural Development - promoted the EAFRD measures focusing on the communities with higher potential for development;
- The targeted persons were first of all the informal leaders identified in the communities;
- There are two LAG's in the legal establishment process and their identification, structuring was done accordingly to the findings from the commune studies and the criteria used in zoning Vaslui County's rural area;
- After the value of the eligible projects funded under the EAFRD measures launched so far, Vaslui County was ranked on the fourth position on measure 121 in March on total country, on the 6th position on the same measure in April 2008 and on the second position on measure 322 (April 2008).

Table 5. Approved projects on EAFRD in 2008 for Vaslui County (March, April and May 2008)

Measure	Beneficiary (location)	Zone	Eligible value of the project in Ron*	Mark from the ranking system
121 – farm modernisation	Banca (1)	11	4,663,376	18
	Lunca Banului	4	45,330	12
	Pochidia	11	1,727,834	7
	Albesti	3	269,245	10
	Murgeni	10	1,243,601	12
	Vaslui	5	3,745,616	18
	Falciu (1)	9	7,494,721	18
	Berezeni	9	5,521,200	24
	Bacani (1)	11	234,860	7
	Costesti (1)	7	1,782,305	11
	Balteni	5	759,300	14
	Falciu (2)	9	880,335	18
	Costesti (2)	7	1,769,743	11
	Tutova (1)	11	4,973,438	16
	Stefan cel Mare	5	701,044	10
	Muntenii de Jos (1)	5	11,017,440	14
	Falciu (3)	9	941,735	18

Measure	Beneficiary (location)	Zone	Eligible value of the project in Ron*	Mark from the ranking system
123 – increasing added value for agricultural and forestry products	Banca (2)	11	14,141,120	18
322 – rehabilitating and developing villages	Laza	5	8,744,815	9
	Perieni	11	8,659,425	6
	Muntenii de Jos (2)	5	7,431,905	14
	Padureni	4	9,181,251	16
	Bacani (2)	11	8,226,290	7
	Tutova (2)	11	4,917,249	16

* exchange rate 3,6262 Ron/€ – National Bank of Romania, www.bnr.ro (October 30th 2008)
Source: DADR Data base (as of October 2008)

From the 17 communities who managed to have so far eligible projects on EAFRD, 12 were identified from the ranking system used in the study as localities with high development potential.

Rural development is facing new challenges and the answers are more and more complex. Sharing experience is the solution for overcoming common problems.

The aim of this paper was to present a Romanian case study of approaching rural development in one of the poorest rural regions from Europe. In the globalisation context, when the labour force is migrating across Europe it is important to find solutions for sustainable rural development, for our common future.

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Appendix 1. Documentary file - commune

1. Commune structure

Locality (commune/ village)	Total sur- face	Distance to the commu- ne centre	Total inhabi- tants	Active population nr.		Househol- ds
	ha	km	No.	To- tal	out of which in agriculture	no.

2. Number of registered unemployed persons
3. Legal entities with the headquarters in the commune or with working points in the commune
4. NGOs with activity in the commune
5. Main Romanian investors and investments in the last 5 years in the commune
6. Main foreign investors and investments in the last 5 years in the commune
7. Number of wells and the water quality
8. Social function places (communal baths, parks, sports grounds, play grounds etc.) in the commune
9. Children under 18 years abandoned (no.)
10. Social assistance for children under 2 years (no.)
11. Socially assisted persons
12. Personal assistants
13. Causes of death from the main diseases
14. Chronic sick people from the main diseases
15. Delinquency level in the commune
16. Waste management
17. Public transport modes crossing the commune (frequency and the villages crossed)
18. The closest railway station

19. The closest railway station with commodity transport facilities:
20. The closest city – distance
21. Main problems to be solved in the commune:
22. Investments made in the last 5 years by fields and funding sources
23. Projects implemented in the last 5 years: (PHARE, SAPARD, RSDF, ISPA etc.)
24. Financial contribution of the public local administration to the projects/studies done in the last 3 years
25. Balance/result of the local budget in the last 3 years
26. Total incomes in 2006 at the local budget
27. Percentage of the local taxes in the local incomes
28. Percentage of the income tax from physical entities in the local incomes
29. Percentage of the income tax from legal entities in the local incomes
30. Priorities for investments in the commune
31. Projects/studies elaborated by the local public administration waiting for funding
32. Reserves constituted, from budget source for projects in 2007
33. Land surfaces of the commune:

- ha -

	Type of land	Total	Households from the commune	People living in other localities	Legal entities
1	Arable land				
2	Natural pasture				
3	Hey				
4	Vineyard				
5	Producing vineyards				
6	Orchards				
7	Producing fruits				
8	Total agricultural land (1+2+3+4+6)				
9	Forest				
10	Buildings and courts				
11	Other lands				
12	Total surface (8+9+10+11)				

34. Fruit trees:

- nr. -

	Species	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
1	Total (2+...+11)					
2	Apple					
3	Pear					
4	Quince					
5	Plum					
6	Apricot					

	Species	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
7	Peach					
8	Sweet cherry					
9	Sour cherry					
10	Nut					
11	Other trees					
12	Nursery (young trees)					
13	Mulberry					

35. Irrigated land

36. Land exploitation forms:

Village	Individual ha	%	Association ha	%	Rented ha	%	Other forms ha	%

37. Land in the village (for construction):

38. Property titles issued (no.)

39. Average price of the land outside the village (agricultural land)

40. Average price of the land inside the village

41. Number of selling contracts established in 2006

42. Land sold

43. Main land buyers outside from the village

44. Degradation of the land:

Village	Name of the degradation process	Phase (incipient, medium, high)	Surface	Location
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45. Necessary investments in land improvement and irrigation

46. Agricultural activities with high development potential

47. Processing, storing, transport activities necessary to be established or reactivated in the commune

48. Main farmer markets organised in the commune and the type of products transacted

49. Localities outside the commune where there are farmer markets (where the inhabitants are going to) – location and distance

50. Natural resources from the commune exploited in the past

51. Investments needed for the exploitation of the local resources

52. Investments to be done in forestry and wild habitat (animal) preservation

53. Investments to be done for the water management

54. Tourist attractions (historic monuments, art, natural reservations)

55. Possibilities for developing tourism

56. Production, trade or services activities initiated in the last 5 years

57. Non agricultural activities which could be developed in the locality

58. Services needed by the inhabitants

59. Necessary infrastructure works in the commune
60. Investments in social activities needed
61. Environmental projects necessary to be promoted in the commune
62. Common projects and activities done with the inhabitants from neighbour villages and communes
63. Common projects that could be done with the neighbour villages/communes
64. Religions in the commune
 - Churches (no.)
 - Chapels (no.).
 - Cemeteries (no.)
65. Ethnic minorities in the commune, by village
66. Problems that the ethnic communities are facing
67. Strengths of the commune
68. Weaknesses of the commune
69. Opportunities
70. Threats
71. How could the County Council and Prefecture help more the development of the commune?
72. Subsidies received from the upper levels of public administration in 2006
73. Do you think that this commune is rich in local resources at the public administration disposal that could attract funding?
74. Fixed assets which could be used with economic purpose
 - Land, buildings in the property of public administration
 - Assets leased/rented
75. Labour force migration abroad
 - Persons working outside the country (left in the last 3 years)
 - Destination countries
 - Activities/jobs abroad
 - Number of persons returned from abroad
76. How do you think that the population in the commune will
 - ☐ decrease ☐ stay constant ☐ increase ☐ don't know Why?
77. Urban plans/ development strategies/ decisions of the Local Council regarding the commune development issued in the last 3 years
78. Please mention, according to their importance, the main development directions of the commune