

THE VALORIZATION OF FOREST FRUITS IN BISTRIȚA NĂSĂUD COUNTY- A POSSIBLE BUSINESS IN SOCIAL ECONOMY SECTOR

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Abstract: *The diversity of forest fruits in the mountains and hills of Bistrița Năsăud County, coupled with the availability of local people from rural communities to collect and process these fruits is an opportunity that can be exploited in order to reduce the poverty rate in the region. SWOT analysis is the method used to identify solutions to the problems faced by groups of vulnerable women from Bistrița Năsăud area, taking into account the favorable factors (generous offer of forest fruits, various possibilities to process them) and the less favorable factors (the absence of specific legislation, fewer opportunities for funding). The results of the analysis show that creating a social enterprise that has as object the collection, processing and use of forest fruits is an opportunity to create jobs and achieve social inclusion of vulnerable groups in the area.*

Key words: *forest fruits, social enterprise, vulnerable groups, poverty, entrepreneurship*

INTRODUCTION

The EU forestry strategy is based on sustainable forest exploitation, in order to stimulate economic growth and improve the quality of life in rural areas. In addition to the traditional role of providing wood products, EU forests have also an important social role in that they provide employment/income sources for the inhabitants of these areas (<http://enrd.ec.europa.eu>).

In Romania, since 2002, forest management is done 23% by the private forest districts, two thirds of the forest area managed in this way being located in Transylvania (Abrudan, I.V., 2012), on the first place being Bistrita Nasaud. Analyzing the forest indicators related to non-timber forest products (Popescu L., 2011) in the county of Bistrita Nasaud, the existence of a significant production of forest fruits and herbs is found, the main types collected and used being the blueberries, the raspberries, the sea buckthorn, the rose hips and the hawthorn. Starting from the great potential of the area in terms of forest fruits, the availability of the population from the local rural communities to collect and process these fruits was studied. The testing of the occupations was conducted among socially vulnerable women in that area, the results showing that 60% of these women know well and very well the activity of collecting and processing forest fruits, this activity representing one of the favorite domains for starting a business in the social economy (Moldovan-Teselios, C., C.B. Pocol, 2012). The identification of social needs and of the potential existing in a particular region is the first step towards the creation of a social enterprise (Matei L, A. Matei, 2012), after which the possibilities of creating jobs, achieving social inclusion and poverty reduction are analyzed.

The purpose of the present paper is to undertake an analysis of the potential of Bistrita Nasaud County with regard the collection and capitalization of forest fruits by the inhabitants of the rural communities from the hill and mountain areas, as well as the possibilities for creating social enterprises which would lead to the development of the rural communities in these regions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study of the potential of creating social enterprises in order to support the rural communities in Bistrița Nasaud County was conducted in several phases: analysis of the evolution of the employment in Bistrița Nasaud County during the period 2007-2012, especially in rural areas, female unemployment rate analysis, and forest fruits production analysis in 2012. The second phase involved a SWOT analysis, this constituting an important management technique for the future social entrepreneur during the business planning stage.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The employed population and the unemployment rate represent relevant indicators that provide a picture of the economic and social situation at a given time. Statistics show a decline in employment in the period 2007-2011 in Bistrița Nasaud County, both in the urban and rural areas (fig. 1), as well as an increase in the female unemployment rate from 2.5% in 2007 to 7.2% in 2009, with a slight improvement in 2010 (6%). These data provide a picture of the social problems faced by the people of this region: lack of employment, of qualifications required by the market, poverty, social exclusion of vulnerable groups. The more the population is facing severe social problems, the greater is the need to create social enterprises, as demonstrated by other studies. These show the existence of strong correlations, of direct dependence between the number of social enterprises in a particular region and the indicators which characterize the population and the labor force (Matei L, A. Matei, 2012).

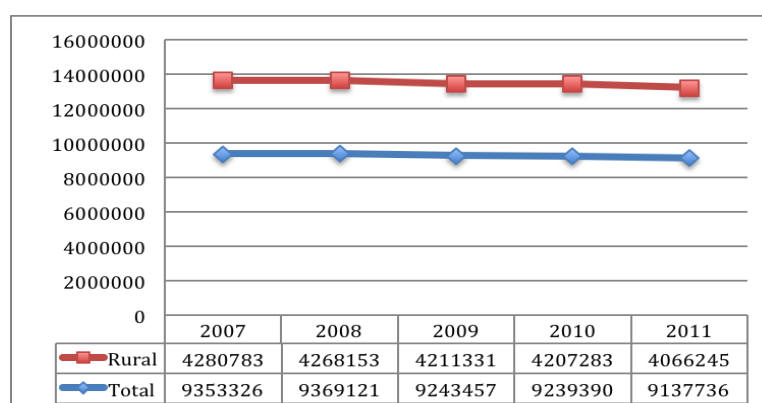


Figure 1 Evolution of total employed population/rural areas in the period 2007-2011

Source: Own processing after data from the National Institute of Statistics, 2012, <https://statistici.insse.ro>

There is a dominant category of vulnerable persons in the hill and mountain villages from Bistrița Nasaud. These are represented by women whose chances of finding employment are extremely limited. At the same time, it can be noticed the existence of resources in the rural communities in the region that could be developed in order to assist the development of these communities, namely: forest fruits, handicraft products, traditional foods. According to data from Bistrița Forestry Department, in 2012, a significant amount of forest fruits was collected (fig. 2), similar to the amount collected in 2011, sold mainly for exports, resulting in a profit rate between 10 and 15%. The Forestry Department collection center takes over about half of the quantities of forest fruits that are harvested in Bistrița Nasaud, the total production reaching approximately 100 tons annually, with fluctuations resulting from weather conditions (Bistrița Nasaud Forestry Department, 2012).

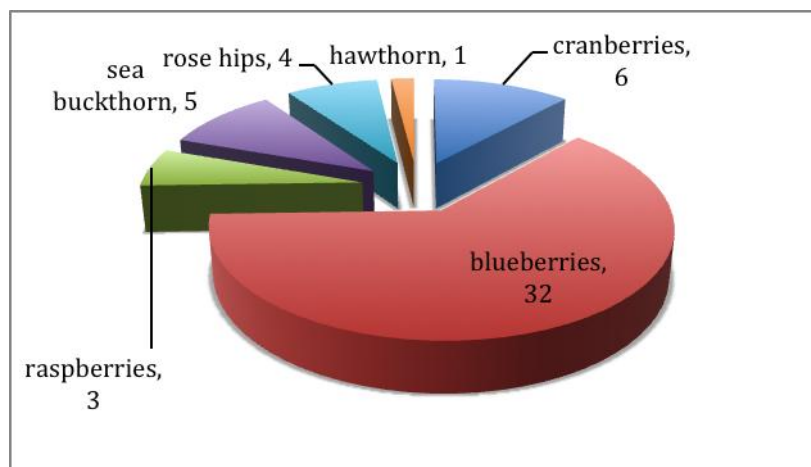


Figure 2 The quantities of forest fruits collected by the Forestry Department of Bistrita Nasaud County in 2012 (tones)

Source: Own processing after data from the Forestry Department of Bistrita Nasaud, 2012

Creating a social enterprise that has as object of activity the collection, processing and use of forest fruits can help rural communities fight against poverty. Similar research demonstrates the ability of social enterprises to integrate social vulnerable groups into the labor market, an example of good practice being the Agapis Foundation that capitalized honey and dried fruits, influencing the development of the rural areas of Barcău Valley from Salaj County (Pocol C. *et al*, 2012). According to a study conducted by the European Economic and Social Committee, the concepts related to social economy are little known in Romania (especially the concept of “social enterprise”). During 2009-2010, the number of jobs from social enterprises reached 163354, a figure which represents only 1.16% from the total number of jobs of social enterprises in this sector in the EU 27 (Monzón, J.L, R. Chaves, 2012). In the region under study - Bistrita Nasaud - firstly the familiarization with this concept was needed and the formation of social economy experts. Promoting social inclusion in the rural communities in the region was supported by the implementation of projects financed by the European Social Fund which led to the strengthening of social entrepreneurship for the residents of these communities. Training people regarding what social entrepreneurship means was a first step in starting social enterprises. Conducting a SWOT analysis is the next step, which represents a basic tool for the future social entrepreneur. The results of the present analysis reveal the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats:

Strengths: important surfaces of forests in the area of Bistrita Nasaud County, especially in the mountain ranges Țibleș, Rodna, Suhard, Bârgău and Călimani; great variety of forest fruits: blueberries, raspberries, sea buckthorn, rose hip; the existence of a tradition in the collection of forest fruits for the rural population in the area; entrepreneurial skills acquired following the training courses conducted in the local rural communities by experts in social economy; skilled workforce available among socially vulnerable women who know traditional recipes for processing fruits forest (jams, syrups, stewed fruits) weak competition in the region in the collection - processing of forest fruits.

Weaknesses: forest fruits production seasonality and perishability; their inability to ensure constant raw material; not enough financial resources for starting a business; insufficient entrepreneurial intentions; excessive bureaucracy; lack of marketing strategies to promote the consumption of these products; difficulties related to an efficient distribution of the products obtained; relatively low interest from consumers on buying products produced in social enterprises.

Opportunities: the ability to create high value added forest fruits and sell them on the domestic and foreign markets, the increase of organic food consumption and the interest in a healthy lifestyle, capitalization of products obtained simultaneously with the development of tourist accommodation facilities in the area, the need to work in groups and receive the help of others, the implementation of projects to strengthen women social entrepreneurship in the area of Bistrita Nasaud.

Threats: climate change; lower profitability due to higher unit cost of collecting forest fruits; lower domestic purchasing power; the emergence of other competitors in the collection-processing of forest fruits; abandonment of traditional occupations (eg forest fruits gathering); reduction of forest areas due to illegal cutting of woods; competition of cheap products, coming from the import (eg jams, syrups), but which do not offer the same quality; the decrease of the active rural population due to migration, especially the external one; and insufficient legislative and fiscal support.

CONCLUSIONS

Creating a social enterprise is an opportunity for the rural communities from the hill and mountain regions of Bistrita Nasaud. Exploitation of local resources represents a solution for the socially vulnerable groups in the area. The opportunity to create social enterprises is given by the implementation of human resources development projects that have led to the formation of entrepreneurial skills for the residents of the target area. However, the creation of these enterprises depends upon the identification of additional funding sources and ensuring legislative and fiscal support from the state.

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