

**TRENDS REGARDING RURAL DEVELOPMENT POST 2020.
CASE STUDY - BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA**

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***Abstract:** Rural development is financed at the level of the European Union within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy through Pillar II. Romania, as a member state of the EU, benefited in the two financial periods (2007-2013, 2014-2020) of 16.14 billion euros for investments in rural development. Bihor County was one of the counties that showed a special interest in accessing the funds related to Pillar II of the PAC. The purpose of this study was to highlight the rural development directions post 2020 at the level of Bihor County through the lens of the 148 people who completed the questionnaire developed in this sense. Thus, it was found an increased interest of those involved in the development of the rural area with the mention that 65% of the respondents believe that major investments should be made in education.*

***Key words:** rural development, funds, Common Agriculture Policy, Bihor County*

INTRODUCTION

Rural development at the European level is financed under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) through Pillar II. Romania, as a member state with full rights, benefited from non-reimbursable funds in the period 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 in the total amount of 16.14 billion euros in order to improve the living conditions in the rural area, respectively the development of the agricultural and non-agricultural activity sectors. The rural space must become an attractive one for the inhabitants in order to repopulate it and reorganize the activities carried out in this sense.

The CAP is a partnership between society and agriculture that ensures a stable food supply, protects farmers' incomes and the environment and maintains the vitality of rural areas [1]. Rural development implies the creation of new products/services, new markets, and new ways of bringing down costs, which in general coincides with the needs and expectations of the society [2].

The CAP contributes to the sustainable development of rural areas by pursuing three long-term objectives [1]:

- stimulating competitiveness in agriculture and forestry;
- ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources and actions in the field of climate;
- achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities, including the creation and maintenance of jobs.

At the present time, Romania is approaching the completion of the projects financed under the PNDR 2014-2020. The National Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 is one of the key vectors that pushes the rural areas of Romania towards a more sustainable future [3] [4].

The CAP post 2020 is redesigned and new priorities related to innovation and green growth are addressed. The financial support under Pillar I and Pillar II is important for farmers and contributes for their income stabilization and business development [5]. The European Commission is proposing the implementation of a new model to achieve results for the CAP in which Member States to have more flexibility to personalize their decisions and to adapt them to national needs [6].

Post-2020 rural development must follow the principles of sustainable development and continue to emphasize the three basic principles presented, principles that can also be

found in the National Strategic Plan (PNS) 2023-2027, developed at the level of our country in compliance with the guidelines of the CAP 2023-2027.

Also another issue to be taken into consideration is that of EU level conditionalities that may impact the projects, conditionalities that requires an active EU-wide and national collaboration, in other for them not to impact the projects, while we can also perceive them as stimulus for a holistic approach to a better management and better governance [7].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of the present study was to highlight the rural development directions post-2020 at the level of Bihor County and citizens' interest in them. In order to achieve this goal, a questionnaire was developed that was completed online between 25 October – 3 November 2022 by the residents of the Bihor County. The questionnaire was completed by 148 respondents from the analysed area, that have shown interest in the topic addressed.

At the same time, we analysed the official documents on the European Commission's website regarding the CAP for the period 2014-2020, respectively 2021-2027 in order to highlight the main objectives related to rural development in the next programming period.

Another stage in the elaboration of this study was the analysis of the specialized literature on the topic addressed, precisely to highlight its importance in the current context of the analysis and approval of the New Strategic Plan through which rural development will be financed at the level of Romania in the period 2023-2027.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The Romanian rural area-can be characterized as having [8], [9]:

- (a) a high potential for development which is not efficiently used;
- (b) a decreasing, aging and not uniformly distributed population;
- (c) low levels of economic activity and low entrepreneurial initiative;
- (d) a high employment rate in agriculture, forestry and fishery;
- (e) poverty and a low quality of life;
- (f) deficient basic social services provision;
- (g) a poorly trained and under-educated population with poor access to education and training facilities, and
- (h) deficient basic and social infrastructure

Rural development implies the creation of new products/services, new markets, and new ways of bringing down costs, which in general coincides with the needs and expectations of the society [2].

The development policy of the European Union's rural economy appears as interdependence between agricultural policy, structured environment, and environmental policies, being a very complex instrument [10]. The sustainable and complex development of the rural space means the implementation of some measures which should meet the need to eliminate the whole range of drawbacks of agriculture, respectively the gaps present between the different areas [11]. This is also highlighted in the study carried out at the level of Bihor County.

In order to answer the purpose of this study, it was necessary to analyse the primary information that was collected within the questionnaire structured on a sample of 148 respondents residing in Bihor county.

Based on the research, it appears that 97.9% (142 people) answered the questionnaire in a professional capacity or in the name of an organisation. Among them, 34.5% (50 people) are residents of a rural area. This highlights the importance given to the topic (figure 1).

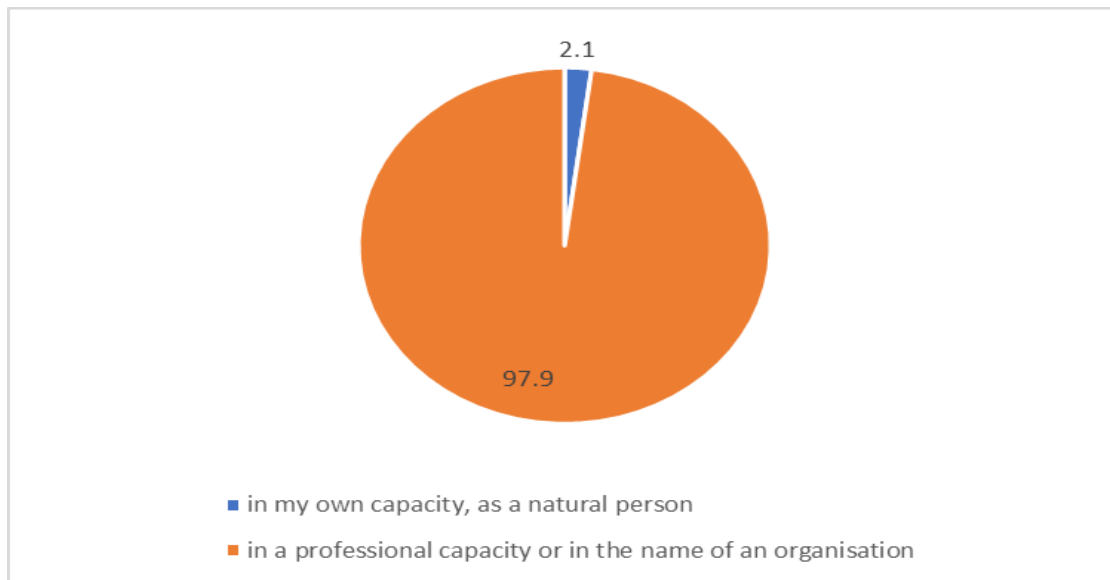


Figure 1. Category of respondents

Source: Own processing after the questionnaire

Regarding the rural development projects in the respondents' region, it is observed that 64.8% (94 people) are aware of the existence of these projects. This also highlights the interest of the inhabitants regarding the stage of rural development and the investments made in the rural environment and underlines the need for a better communication in order to reach the other 1/3 of respondents. (figure 2).

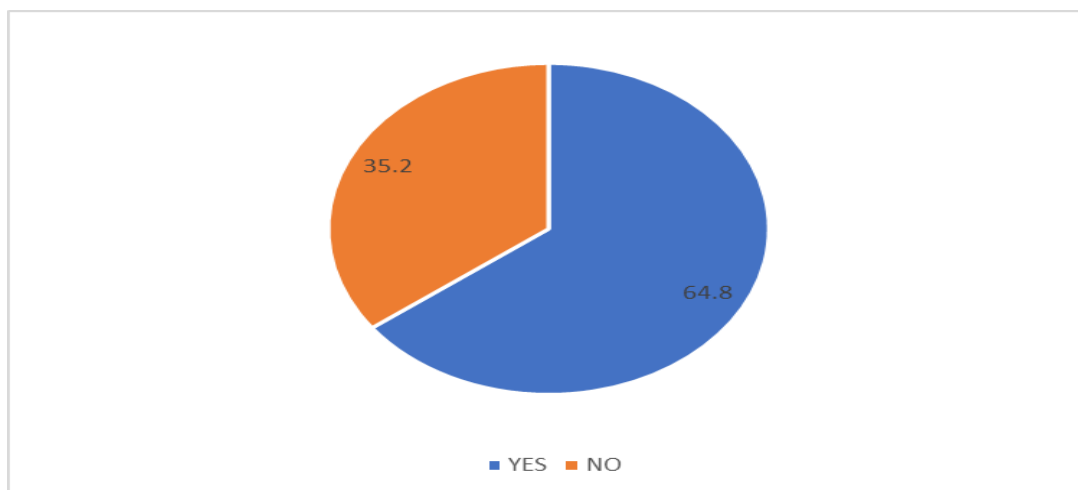


Figure 2. State of knowledge of development projects

Source: Processing according to the questionnaire

A high percentage of respondents believe that the Rural Development Programs had a very strong, strong positive contribution, respectively a moderate positive contribution to the development of the rural area (figure 3).

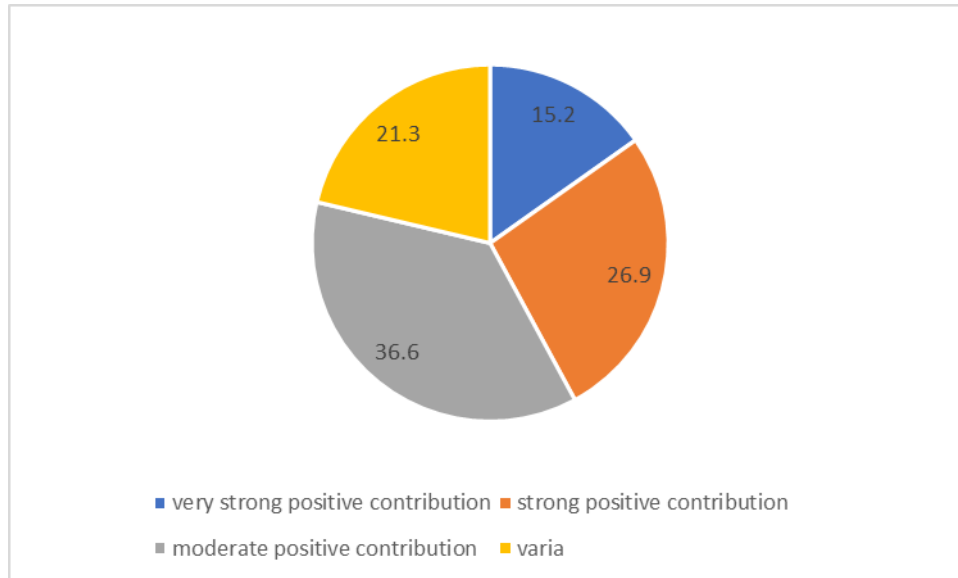


Figure 3. The contribution of the Rural Development Programs to the improvement of the conditions in the rural area

Source: Processing according to the questionnaire

The economic development in the rural area is also analysed from the perspective of the respondents, so that most of them consider that the degree of economic development of the rural area is average. We emphasize that the analysis is carried out at the level of Bihor County of the Northwest region of Romania. 49.7% (72 people) consider that they have an average level of development in the rural area.

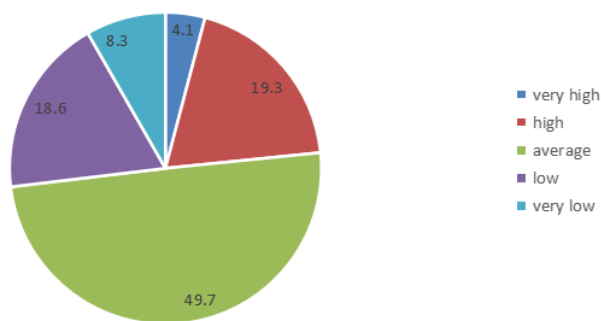


Figure 4 The degree of economic development of the Rural area in Bihor County

Source: Processing according to the questionnaire

The fields of the future in the rural area that are in the first places in the view of the respondents are represented by agriculture (35.9%), the processing of local products (20%), the development of rural tourism and agritourism (18.5% +11%).

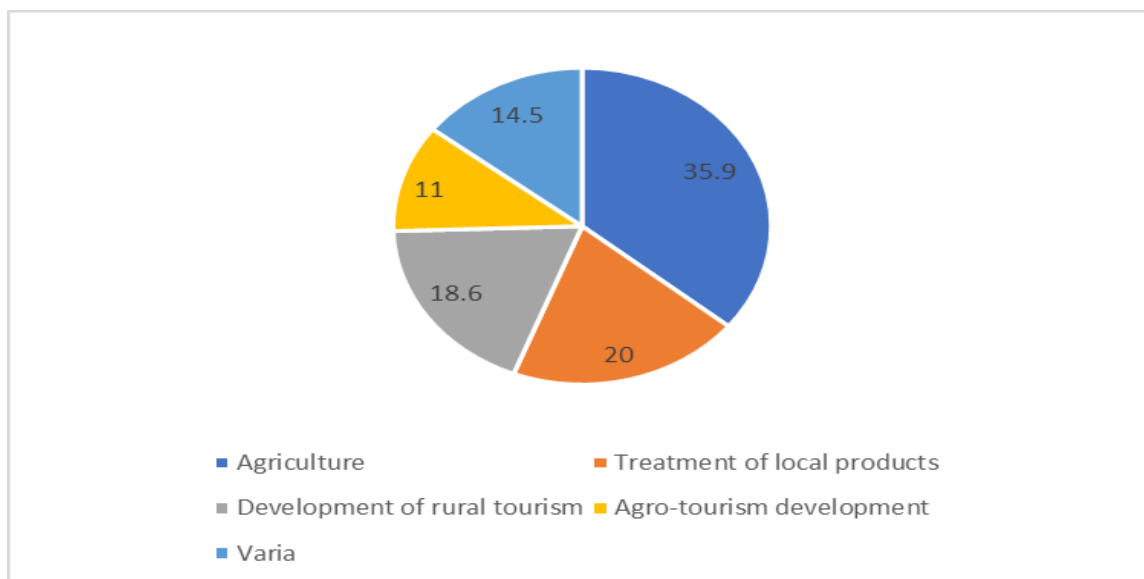


Figure 5. Areas of interest for rural development

Source: Own processing according to the questionnaire

Education, economic development, physical and social infrastructure play an important role in rural development [12]. According to the National Support Plan 2023-2027, for a harmonious development of the countryside, the financial education of the inhabitants of the rural environment is also important, so that "in order to increase access to financing, financial education is needed among farmers, so that relations with banking institutions and non-banking to be better" [13].

Considering the previously mentioned, we conclude that education plays an important role in the development of the rural area, this fact is highlighted by the high percentage of respondents who rank education in the first place in order to improve living conditions in the rural environment.

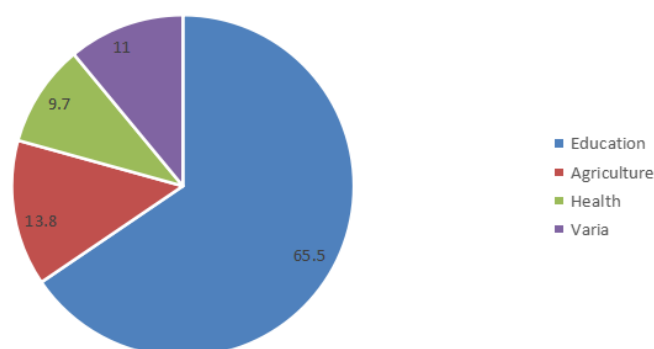


Figure 6. Sectors that need to be improved in the rural environment

Source: Own processing according to the questionnaire

Also, the development of the rural areas requires a change of population behaviour and mentality, more involvement of the decision makers both at national and local level to find the best solutions for stimulating the multifunctional development of the rural space [14].

35.9% (52 people) claim that the lack of investments is the main obstacle standing in the way of rural development.

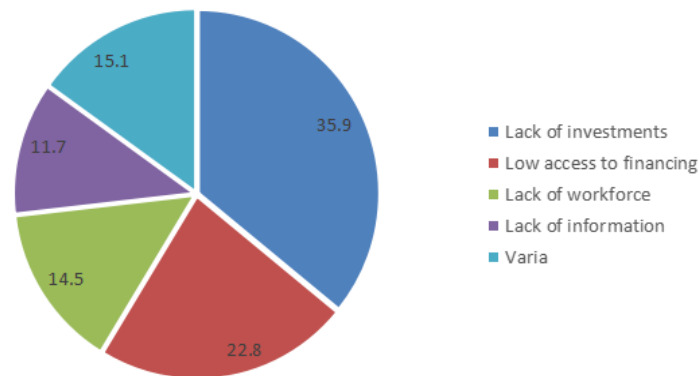


Figure 7. Problems in rural development

Source: Own processing according to the questionnaire

There are in line with the rest of the findings from the applied questionnaire as seen below. The problems identified above (see Figure 7) are all transversal problems that need an *all-hands-on deck* approach, with everyone being involved in finding solutions and providing answers.

For that education is of outmost importance thus 40% (50 people) state that rural development programs could further improve the living conditions in rural areas through the funds absorbed by those programs. Part of the money should be invested in the creation of educational activities and the creation of school circles with activities specific to the development of innovation skills: the tech area (IT education), the music area, the visual arts area, the development of communication skills (debating activities on various topics):

- ❖ 80% (90 people) would apply for funding in the future to start/develop a business in the countryside under the national support program 2023-2027.
- ❖ 60% (80 people) believe that there must be a relationship based on trust and a lot of support between citizens and the municipality of rural areas.
- ❖ 54.6% (77 people) claim that production activities are activities necessary for the development of the rural area.

At the end of the day, it is important to find the better solutions that help advance the rural development in the Member States and most important at local level. For that purpose, a better knowledge is important and the applied questionnaire like is the case here can help this process of advancing of knowledge and most important to translate them into practice.

The results shown above prove that there is a lot of interest in the public for that but also a lot of misunderstandings that need clarification.

Another indirect advantage of the proper implementation can be that of addressing the demographical challenges of the Romanian agricultural. The constant demographic decline can be stopped and even reversed if the EU funds are being properly used and the rural infrastructure and health and educational system are being developed as well as the installation of young farmers, with the support of these funds, is being encourage [15].

CONCLUSIONS

The financing of post-2020 rural development at the level of Romania is a necessity in order to continue the development of the rural space in its entirety. Romania will benefit from non-reimbursable funds in the period 2023--2027 under Pillar II of the PAC for the improvement of living conditions in the rural environment through the funds allocated under the National Support Program.

The interest of the respondents is an increased one regarding the financing of the key fields in the rural area at the Bihor County level, they consider that agriculture, the processing of local products and the development of rural tourism, respectively agrotourism, are the three fields of the future in the development of the rural area.

At the same time, we note the importance of education in the development of rural areas. This fact is highlighted by the high percentage of respondents who rank education first in order to improve living conditions in the rural environment.

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