

LIVING CONDITIONS OF THE PEOPLE INHABITING RURAL AREAS

Ioan Mărginean
University of Bucharest

This study is a diagnosis of the living conditions of the people inhabiting rural areas. It approaches three fundamental domains: dwelling, incomes and consumption and it concludes analysing the self-perception of the conditions of living of the concerned population. The survey reveals the critical state of the living conditions in rural areas, which requires a sizeable practical intervention able to improve largely the conditions of living of the population inhabiting rural areas.

As shown by several European surveys, compared to the EU, Romania ranks last or before last for many indicators concerning the living conditions of the population, the situation in the rural areas accounting for much of the adverse situation of our country (Alber, Jens, Tony, Fahey *Perception of Living Condition in an Enlarged Europe*, Foundation for Living and Working Conditions Improvement, Luxembourg, 2004). On the other hand, I consider necessarily a better management of the high risk situations confronting the population from the rural areas, such as draught and floods. If this year the villagers suffered a lot due to floods, a prolonged draught affected many rural areas during the past years.

Several things have to be said, though, before the actual presentation. The rural population of over 10 million accounts for almost half of the total population (47% of the 21.7 million as shown by the *Census of population and houses, March 18, 2002*, NSI, 2003). 44% of the Romanian households are in the rural; many of these households are cultivating the land or growing livestock (*Living conditions of the Romanian population*, NSI, 2004).

I will not debate here and now the definition of the rural area but, nevertheless, I will consider it an *area of inhabiting and of activities under natural conditions, in open space*, unlike the built area, specific to the urban area. Neither will I question the rigorous character of the criteria defining the difference between the two type of human habitat; it is obvious, however, that there are multiple interferences and gradual transitions from the urban centre, multifunctional by excellence, to the actual village where crops are grown and the various sources of the soil / subsoil are used. This delimitation does not concern so much the different levels of technical facilities, of infrastructure development, of household equipping with various facilities and access to public utilities (although this differentiation exists in the case of Romania), as it concerns the elements composing the way of life and activity specific to one collective or another. The fall back of the rural areas as technical facilities has a multiple historical causality. In the developed societies, however, the living conditions in villages are so close to those of towns that the traditional perception of the rural, as a poorly developed area, has become void of significance. Some areas external to urban centres often provide similar or even better conditions than in towns. This level of comfort is characteristic, so far,

only to a tiny proportion of the Romanian population (the groups of villas built on town outskirts or in various scenic areas of the country).

The present paper approaches the urban / rural (town / village) distinction at the administrative level, even though one may identify several towns with strong rural characteristics. A total of 266 towns and 2689 communes existed in Romania in 2002. A year later (2003) there were 3 more towns (269 in all) and 25 more communes (2714) with about 13,000 villages (*Yearbook of Romania*, NSI, 2004).

Reverting to the brief presentation of the characteristics of the Romanian rural population, the massive migration from agriculture and rural areas to industry and urban areas during the last decades of the 20th century is well known, which threw out of balance the structure by age of the population. This type of migration decreased drastically after 1990, while the reversed migration, from industry and town to rural and agriculture, started. The lack of balance by category of age did not alleviate, though, the rural population being older than the urban population, while the work resources diminished. In fact, both extreme groups of age are stronger represented in the rural. Thus, while the population below 15 accounts for 14.3% of the total urban population, it increases to 18.4% in the rural areas; the people aged 65+ account for same proportion, as compared to just 11.3% in the urban areas livestock (*Living conditions of the Romanian population*, NSI, 2004).

The active population of the rural areas is of just 3.9 million (38% of the total), of which 3.5 million (34% of the total) were occupied at the March 2002 census. We should note, however, that the proportion of occupied population is lower in March than during the summer months. Even so, though, compared to the population of active age (aged 15 – 64), the proportion of occupied rural population is higher, formally, than in the urban areas, which raised the issue, for each situation, to increase the level of occupation including by flexible working hours, by part time employment, by short time employment. For the time being, in the rural, particularly in agriculture, there is a chronic underoccupation, due both to the lack of work during several periods of the year and to the very low work productivity caused by the dependence on seasons of the classical, open air agriculture, by the poor technical facilities available to agricultural activities and by the lack of funds for works and investments.

On the other hand, notable is the low number of registered unemployed, below 4% of the active population, which shows a feeling of deterrence in seeking work.

About 69% of the occupied population works in agriculture and in related services. Over 1/5 of the occupied population worked outside their place of residence (commuters), most of them in towns (about 680 thousands). Compared to the census data, we expect a higher number of population doing agricultural work for various periods of time and of a certain type. Thus, at least part of the almost one million housewives and one million persons in maintenance, as well as part of the 2.6 million retired persons, might perform income-earning activities.

At the same time, the number of persons working abroad, just 62 thousands persons living in rural areas, must be much higher. It is not baseless to consider that part of the 700 thousands population that was not found during the census (for the whole country), as compared to the current civil state records, may have been abroad. In turn, the rural is workplace for part of the urban people (about 127 thousands persons). By professional status, most of the occupied persons are the employed (43%) or they work in their household (42%). Considering that many of the employed persons living in the rural were working in towns, it results that the predominant type of rural activity is agricultural work, mainly in own household.

The urban – rural discrepancy is strongly visible in the school education and in the access to high school and university education. About 67% of the village population only graduated middle school, compared to just 55% in the urban areas (NSI, 2005).

The analysis of dwelling, income and population consumption is based on several sources¹.

Dwelling in the rural

Although dwelling and performing activities in the rural provide several satisfactions they are also subject to several disadvantages and even to vital risks, due to possible destructive phenomena, given the precarious land arrangement and the management emergency situations that may arise (2005 proved to be a dramatic year in this respect).

Among the disadvantages of the Romanian rural area I note: **the isolation of some human settlements** due to their placement in hard-to-get-to locations, to the deteriorated roads or to the lack of transportation means, which resulted in the depopulation of wide areas situated in hilly and mountain regions mainly; the **lack / precarious character of the means of living**, in general, but mainly in the small settlements, or within several communities among which the Roma populations, more so as the latter do not own agricultural or forestry land and have very low opportunities to get an income-earning activity most often because they do not meet the education and training criteria; **major shortcomings in providing the access to public utilities, poor coverage with social services** in some areas: education, health care, social work etc.

No doubt, the criteria spelling disadvantage often build up at the level of a locality (community), which brings about severe privations in the living conditions. All these disadvantages may end in overwhelming the advantages provided by the natural conditions of living and in making life in the rural not as much an option, but a compelling factor to some people who have no possibility to leave this living environment either due to the lack of access to proper school education, or because those people can not get a job somewhere else, or because they do not have a dwelling in the urban. In other words, we may have negative solutions for dwelling and doing activities in the rural, particularly in agriculture, rather than decisions free of external constraints in choosing the occupation and the living environment.

An argument that can not be neglected when we reveal the difficulties of the population living in the rural is that the average life expectancy is lower than in the urban areas, both overall and by gender. Thus, the average life expectancy in Romania was 71.01 years during 2001-2003 (much lower, however, than the similar values from the developed countries, although it had increased compared to the past decades), 71.8 years in urban areas and 70.08 years in the rural areas; the figures by gender were 66.4 and 74.1 years for the men and women living in rural areas, respectively, compared to 68.2 years and 75.4 years for the men and women living in urban areas, respectively (*Statistic Yearbook of Romania* NSI, 2004).

We must not overlook the fact that although the agricultural land is quite substantial, over 50% of it (almost 15 million hectares) ranks 4 and 5 on a scale of 5 (from 1, very good,

¹ They originate from the investigations conducted by IQL throughout the years, among which the *Diagnosis of the quality of life* (survey coordinated by the author of the present paper). This data is of great importance even though due to the lack of funds, during the last six year, only in 1999 and 2003 we were able to conduct national surveys. I also rely on the results of special analyses and studies conducted within IQL by C. Zamfir, Gh. Socol, A. Bălașa, M. Stanciu, A. Mihăilescu, I. Precupețu, D. Chiriac, S. Ilie, M. Stănculescu, A. Dan, M. Voicu, B. Voicu and by other colleagues on topics of income, consumption, dwelling, community development, human capital, natural disasters etc. I also used NSI data and surveys, FSD investigations and other pertinent related information. I would like to express my thanks particularly to my colleagues Adina Mihăilescu, Iuliana Precupețu, Florina Nicolau and Mircea Dumitrana for their substantial contribution to the preparation of this study.

to 5, very poor). Just 2.8% of the land is of very good quality, and of the 0.4 million ha of agricultural land, 4% is of very good quality while 35% is of poor and very poor quality. Over 7 million ha of agricultural land were, once, arranged for irrigation. At the same time, 3.7 million ha are affected by excessive humidity. The soil on almost 1 million ha agricultural land is polluted with chemicals (*Statistic Yearbook of Romania* NSI, 2004).

A survey of the rural areas (*Rural Eurobarometer*, FSD, 2002) shows that almost one third of the subjects mentioned that their localities are isolated due to heavy snowfall for at least one week. The same proportion claimed the poor state of roads that makes them unusable by cars during the rainy periods. The lack of drinking water during the dry season was mentioned by half (55%) of the subjects, while 9% of them had no drinking water for more than one week, during the past year.

The quality of the natural environment was assessed rather positively, as shown by IQL surveys on the quality of life. Thus, on a scale from 1 to 5, the mean value of the responses from the rural subsample in 2003, was 3.8 (8% regarded the environment as having a poor quality, 17% considered it to be *satisfactory*, 60% considered it *good* and 14% *very good*).²

The quality of the dwelling also ranked above the theoretical mean on a scale from 1 to 5, scoring 3.6 in 2003: 64% of the subjects considered the dwelling good and very good, while 9% considered it to be poor (We should mention here that the surveys using general samples, even larger than the ones used by us, do not include the extremes, they do not cover the homeless subjects or the subjects that dwell there without formal papers; as a consequence these categories were not included on the election lists. We used the same framework to perform the multistage random sampling).

The NSI surveys show that almost all (98%) the rural households own the dwelling (*Living conditions of the Romanian population*, NSI, 2005). The construction materials, however, are of low quality for most dwellings, which makes them highly vulnerable to extreme weather conditions and shortens their life span. Thus (according to the same source), 42% of the rural dwellings (46% in the case of agricultural workers) are built of adobe reinforced with wood poles, 30% are made entirely of bricks, 18% of bricks and concrete, 11% of wood.

If we consider the main facilities that define the modern dwelling comfort, except for the electric power present in almost all (99%) rural households, the other facilities are in low and very low proportions: in June 2004, only 2.4% of the rural households have a (public and own) boiler for heating; 4% were connected to the public sewage system and 13% had their own sewage system; 8% had cooking gas installations while 89% of the households were heating the dwelling with wood / coal, or petrol stoves also used exclusively for cooking; 12% have inside toilet facilities and 19% had outside toilet facilities; 13% had warm water supply and 17% had bathroom/shower facilities; 17% had tap water facilities and 9% tap water supply in the yard; the balance of households either had their own tap water facilities in the

² Notable is the fact that the mean value of 3.7 is among the highest recorded in the over 60 indicators of perception used in quality of life diagnosis. These values are exceeded only by the values regarding the perception of family and neighbourhood relations, whose mean exceeded slightly 4 on the same scale from 1 to 5, this situation showing that people consider their quality of life to be rather modest, more so as the mean value of other indicators, particularly those concerning the living conditions, ranges between 1 and 2 (I. Mărginean, A. Bălaşa, coord., 2002 *Quality of life in Romania*). The subsample from rural areas surveyed during 2003, consisting of 475 persons, was selected from 39 villages belonging to 26 communes spanning over 23 counties. Regarding this low number of surveyed persons, satisfactory though for our analysis particularly since the population is quite homogenous, we will stress particularly the large differences between the characteristics of the indicators (variables). Although the values for 2003 were slightly better than the values for the previous period, we will not insist, however, on the comparative analysis, because in 2003 to, the general situation of the living conditions of the population remained quite serious.

yard, or they took the drinking water from a well; 27% of the dwellings brought water from outside their yard; just 25% of the households had phone sets.

We will conclude the reference to the rural areas with some subjective indicators for quality of life assessment used by IQL surveys.

When asked about the satisfaction brought by the every day life (June 2003) the subjects stated to be discontented rather than contented. The mean response on a scale from 1 to 5 was 2.8, below the theoretical mean: 38% were dissatisfied, 32% were neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied and 29% were satisfied by their every day life.

The subjective state for the days preceding the field survey (a period without special event at the national and/or local level) was worry: almost one third of the subjects (31%) had serious sorrows, over half (55%) were not at ease (there was something wrong, small sorrows) and just 13% stated not to have problems. The more favourable areas of the people's life were the family and the relations with the neighbours: 85% of the subjects had good and very good relations within their families and with the neighbours, with a mean of 4, in both situations, on the scale from 1 to 5.

The mean of the answers concerning the manner in which the town hall administered the locality was on the positive side of the scale with 3.2 (20% *poor*, 31% *satisfactory* and 49% *good* and *very good*). However, most subjects considered that they can not influence the decision-making process in their locality: 74% of the subjects considered they have low and very low influence and just 5% considered they have high influence (a mean of 2.1 on the scale from 1 to 5, one of the lowest means in overall quality of life diagnosis). In exchange (if there can be such an exchange) the people expect to be properly treated by the town hall officials: 82% expect kindness, 13% perceive the indifference of the officials and just 4% expect hostility. The possibility to solve a problem at the town hall is quite high: 37% responded *certainly* and 47% responded *probably, yes*, while 10% responded *probably, no* and 4% responded *certainly not*.

If confronted with a hypothetical difficult situation in the street, the expected assistance of the passers-by is moderate: 28% do not count on help in the case of a street aggression, 46% count a little and 25% count a lot on such help. Yet, many subjects consider they are quite safe at home and in the street, which does not exclude a given degree of worry for this aspect (3.5 mean on the scale from 1 to 5: 16% consider they have low security at home and in the street, 37% respond *satisfactorily*, while 45% consider they have a high personal security). Although the crime rate is lower in the rural areas than in the urban areas (95 thousands persons charged in 2003, compared to 110 thousands – *Statistic Yearbook*, 2004), homicide was more frequent in the rural than in the urban areas. Police activity scored a positive mean (3.8), 77% of the subjects expecting a kind treatment from the police and 3% of the respondents expecting a hostile treatment.

The analysis of the subjective and assessing indicators in quality of life analysis will continue with population income and consumption.

Incomes and consumption of goods and services in rural households

The investigation of population incomes and consumption is a real challenge. On the one hand, they have to be determined at the macrosocial level (society as a whole, areas, human communities), while on the other hand, the determinations at the microsocal level (individuals, households) also are of interest, just in order to know what happens with the resources created in the society, how are they distributed and finally, what are the living conditions of the population.

The various surveys that were conducted, by IQL too, revealed the drastic shrinking of the macroeconomic resources of the standard of living during the first decade of transition to market economy. I consider here the values of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and of the Fund of Final Consumption of the Population (FFCP). According to the Statistical Yearbooks of Romania, 10 years after transition started in 1999, per capita GDP was just 80% of the 1989 level (the most drastic shrinkage was in 1993 and 1994 with just 76-77% of 1989). Per capita GDP started to increase continuously since 2000 and it reached the 1989 level in 2002 (overall population decreased by 1.5 million persons during the same interval). FFCP after a slight increase compensating for the pre-1990 period, shrunk to 77.5% in 1992, only to increase to 98% in 1996 and to fall back to 90% in 1999, compared to 1990. The lag is cancelled in 2001 and FFCP reached 112% in 2003, as compared to 1990.

The distribution of the macroeconomic aggregates is relevant to public policies characterisation. For instance, the end consumption of the public administration displayed a much higher dynamics than the end consumption of the population and than the gross accumulation of fixed capital. If in 1992, the end consumption of the population reached a low of 77.5% compared to 1990 and the gross accumulation of fixed capital reached a low of 75.9% also compared to 1990 (the minimal value was reached in 1991 with just 68.4%), the end consumption of the administration was 113% compared to 1990, reaching 132% in 1996. The number of institutions within the public administration has also increased during this period, but the public functions, the staff and, ultimately, bureaucracy have also been oversized. Otherwise said, the public administration, starting with the Parliament and Government, have drawn funds as if there were plenty of resources, with no concern for the diminished resources allocated to other uses, particularly to the social domain, health care, education, population consumption etc.

The purpose of this paper is the income and consumption of the population from rural areas, more precisely of the rural households, because it did not had available data on units of joint inhabiting (homes, army bases etc.). The challenge stated at the beginning of the paragraph is even more serious when the income and consumption of villagers are surveyed. Although they have a precise form (expressed in monetary numeric values), the determinations are not always exact (totally correct), because non-systematic errors appear in recording the input from the various sources of income. Some of these sources are individual, other are at the household level, hence the higher relevance of the latter unit of income and consumption analysis (the household consists of one or several persons that usually have a joint budget and live together). Most often we meet family households, but not only, and not with all family members, so that it remains an open unit, of variable size at different stages, and with variable structures concerning the number of income-earning persons and the sources of their income, concerning the number of persons in care, etc. If one or several income-earning persons within a household are missing for a shorter or longer period, or if some of the persons cared for are missing, or if the household has income inputs from other family members or it transfers resources towards persons from another households, the effect is different. When interviewed, the subjects may forget and/or leave out to declare some incomes to the persons doing the interview or even to the other family members (in order to use it personally). Finally, there are two more elements to be discussed (of course, not the only ones to be considered): the first concerns the fact that some households have just monetary incomes, other have monetary and in kind incomes, while other have just in kind incomes; the conversion of in kind incomes into monetary incomes is done with a certain approximation; the second aspect concerns the economic profile of the households, some of them are strictly consumption units, other are production and consumption units, the production being sold,

sold and consumed within the household or just consumed within the household (the so-called self-consumption), either by the people, or by the people and animals within the household.

The type of income should also be stated, making the difference between the income earned from activities, the so-called market income (factor-income), transfers to the public budgets (dues, taxes), social transfers or transfers from various organisations and persons to the household budget. If from the factor-income we subtract the compulsory payments and add the transfers, then we get the income available to consumption (the available income is of utmost interest for analysis of household incomes and consumption – it is the object of socio-economic surveys, within IQL included). The net income within the available income is obtained by subtracting the indirect taxes (VAT) paid on goods and services. The distribution of the net income of the population and the ratio between the categories of population change radically, the inequalities being often large.

The NSI records (data of utmost importance since they can not be supplied by other institutions) on family budget consider all the income inputs and all spending outputs, including the spending for production and investment, for the consumption of the animals within the household. This is, no doubt, useful, only that, if we want to determine the income available to human consumption and the related expenditure, we have to discern those values from the total.

NSI publication *Living conditions of the Romanian population, 2005* (with data from January 2003 to May 2004) shows the level and distribution of the total incomes of the Romanian population, which reveal the precarious state of the living conditions in general, but also marked inequalities between the urban and rural. Thus, 11% of the households (4% in urban and 20% in rural) earned less than 19 million ROL in an year (less than 475 euro), that is about 1,6 million ROL (40 euro)/month; 31% of the households (18% in urban and 48% in rural) earned up to 39 million ROL in an year (975 euro/year, 81 euro/month), while 13% of the households (19% in urban and 6% in rural) earned over 125 million ROL in an year (3125 euro/year, 260 euro/month).

NSI has also calculated the average total monthly income per rural household (9 985 600 ROL) and per person (3 262 000 ROL). The earned monthly available income drops to an average value of 7.4 million ROL after subtracting the taxes, the production expenses and the expenses with the household animals. According to the source this amount consists of 73% monetary incomes (27% social transfers, 24% wages +12% incomes from agriculture +6% sale of properties +4% incomes from independent non-agricultural activities) and 29% the equivalent of the food and non-food products produced and consumed within the household. The monthly expenditure averaged 6.9 million ROL, which means the household can save in average 0.5 million ROL monthly.

In fact, just 8.7% of the households managed to save, 67% spent the available income, 5% used previous savings, while 19% borrowed. However, just 7.4% of the households had running loans (70% from banks). The credits were used to buy long-term household appliances (31%), to cover the consumption expenditure of the household (29%), or for personal needs (25%).

The household that exceeded the level of incomes account for 13% of the total (house renovation, 36%; buying long-term household appliances, 28%). At the same time, 17.4% of overall households could not make the due payments (59% for electrical power, 25% for utilities, 23% for radio and TV subscriptions).

One can also observe the low frequency of some long-term household appliances. If the TV set, refrigerator and cooking stove are widely spread, in 2004, with 92% of the households owing BW and colour TV set, 85% owing cooking stoves and 77% refrigerator, the other items are less frequent: washing machine (simple and automatic) 38%; radio

(cassette player) 25%; vacuum cleaner 17%; car 16%; mobile phone 7%; computer 4%. Beyond the actual values, we should note that part of the long-term household appliances are of poor quality. The people want either to change them, or to buy, for the first time such goods: 17% of the households intend to buy a colour TV set, 16% intend to buy an automatic washing machine, a computer or a gas cooker, while 14% want to buy a car.

Supposing that their intentions would materialise, the level of household endowment with long-term household appliances would still not reach the desired level and the monetary availabilities of the population will still be used to buy such goods. However, if in 2003, 21% of the households would have decided to buy a computer, the overall level of endowment with this type of goods would only increase by 2 percent points (from 1.8% to 3.8%); this also goes for cars: 18% of the households would have wanted to buy one, but just about 2% managed to do so. Unfortunately, much of the population declared that it can not afford, due to financial problems, to acquire long-term facilities and goods: 78% of the households can not afford to install a boiler, although the comfort would be higher and the house heating would be better.

The 2003 IQL survey showed that in 42% of the studied households the income was not enough to cover the strict necessities, while 37% hardly manage to cover the strict necessities. It follows that 79% of the households stand below the level of a decent living and just 21% stand at a decent level of living. The most dramatic situations exist in the households formed entirely of retired people (43% below the strict necessities; cumulated, 96% are below the level of a decent living), in the household formed entirely by agricultural workers, or by agricultural workers and retired people (92% below the level of a decent living, in each case). It results that the presence of wages leads to the most favourable assessment of the standard of living.

Overall the 2003 rural subsample, 74% of the subjects are dissatisfied with the incomes they earn, while 14% are satisfied; on a scale from 1 to 10 expressing poverty at one end and wealth at the other end, 85% of the subjects stand on the first 5 positions.

As it may be observed, both the objective and the subjective data converge to show a completely dissatisfying level of the incomes and consumption of the population living in rural areas.

Assessment by the rural population of the effect of post-december changes on the living conditions

It is well known that the assessment people do on the state of fact have a multiple relevance because we deal here with a personal perspective (a personal filter of relation) on those states of fact. The way people approach the characteristics of the assessed state is dependent on their capacity for objective judgement (which, although not evenly distributed, does not lack in any person, except for the cases of psychological nature). The assessments also represent, however, a state of spirit, because they are influenced by the personal expectations and systems of values.

Adequate methodological research procedures may bring the assessments of a collective (or representative sample) as close as possible to the actual state of facts. The quality of life surveys rely on these considerations, catching both the individual and collective dimension of an assessment, of the life situations in which people live; such a perspective can not be replaced by other means. The people themselves, can best tell what they feel and think about their life, no external factor can ask them to say they are happy if they are miserable, and vice versa, but one can act to change the conditions that are a source of discontent and frustration. Bearing in mind such an objective I included the image people have on their status

and on the status of their fellows, on the changes in society, in the analysis of the living conditions of the rural population.

When the people were asked to compare the current situation of their living condition with the past situation and to predict the future status, it is quite surprisingly to find out, for instance, that 66% of the subjects from the rural area (according to IQL survey of 2003) consider that the current living conditions are worse than in 1989 and that just 28% consider they have improved (the negative difference between the two values is of 38 percent points). Displaying, however, a moderate optimism, 35% of the subjects consider that in 10 years the living conditions in Romania will be better than the current ones, compared to 27% who stated the opposite (positive difference of 8 percent points).

The assessment of the current personal living conditions compared to 1989 also yielded a strongly negative balance (62% considered the current state is worse, while just 29% considered the current state has improved). 2003 was not a better year than 2002, the negative balance being 34 percent points (46% considered the current state has worsened, while just 13% considered the current living conditions have improved).

The inequity of the post-December changes is another element strongly highlighted by the subjects, the most disfavoured category of population being the workers, followed by peasants, with 73% and 64% responses claiming a disfavoured status (the negative balance of the assessment being 66 percent points for the workers and 46 percent points for the peasants). The intellectuals seem not to have been significantly affected by changes: 25% of the subjects responded with *favoured* and *disfavoured*, while 29% considered that the intellectuals have been neither favoured, nor disfavoured (20% NA).

The politicians (86% of the subjects), directors and other management staff (81%) and the entrepreneurs (69%) are regarded as being favoured by the changes. The assessment of the odds of success in life is another component of the population's state of spirit. The results are again strongly negative: while 61% of the subjects considered that they have low odds of assertion in life, just 10% are confident and consider their odds of assertion to be high, the proportion reaching 34% if we also add the *satisfactory* response.

78% of the subjects consider they have low chances to get a job.

The access to the desired forms of education is perceived more favourably. However, 32% of the subjects perceived a low accessibility, while 25% perceived a high accessibility for themselves or for the people next to them (together with the *satisfactory* response, the value reaches 60%). Present here is both a feeling of discouragement and a quite low horizon of expectations related to the attendance of several forms of education.

As a matter of fact, the most stressing preoccupations of the population concerned the prices, taxes and unemployment. Thus, 89% of the subjects stated they fear most the soaring prices, 83% taxes and 42% unemployment (the latter response has to be related to the 20% proportion of employees within the sample and 30% within overall surveyed households).

The prices and taxes are, of course, related to the available incomes. Thus, when asked whether they feel to be threatened by something (although the balance is positive, 45 percent points: 21% responded *yes*, while 66% responded *no*, while 11% do not realise whether they are threatened by something), on top among the mentioned threats are the low incomes followed by poverty (50%); cumulated on three variants of response, 57% of the people felt threatened by the low incomes, followed by unemployment, low security, war in the region or disease (6 – 8%).

The proposals of the population to improve the quality of life also converge to this area. **Job creation** ranks first, with 29% of the subjects and 34% of the persons that answered the question. Cumulated on three requests (first, second, third), 40% of the respondents indicated the job as a means to solve or improve the quality of life. Better wages rank second with 20% of the subjects, reaching 32% when cumulated.

We stop here with our analysis of the objective and subjective factors describing the living conditions in the rural households. The analysis is, of course, incomplete but it is, nevertheless, relevant for a situation at least worrying, if not explosive. The fact that we ended in this situation is due, even partially, to the manner in which transition was done, the introduced changes not being able to improve overall the living conditions of the rural population.

Final considerations

No doubt, Romania is among the countries, many or few, worldwide, that have natural conditions that are favourable to human life and activity. I consider both the geographical location of Romania, the distribution of the forms of relief, the climate, the vegetation and fauna, the natural resources of the soil and subsoil, to mention just the most important factors. These favourable elements have drawn an early and continuous human inhabiting which lead in time to the development of a sedentary and predominantly agricultural population. The conditions for living in open space lend the rural its perennial character in the Romanian society, which cannot be set against the requirements of modern development, much less invoked for the utterly insufficient state of development in Romania.

The poor economic development of the rural and its effects on the living conditions of the population has, first of all, historic and political causes. I say historic causes considering the excessive prolongation of the feudal (semifeudal) relations in agriculture during the modern period (as clarified by socio-historic and economic analyses). As the political causes are concerned, I mean, chronologically, the delay in adopting the measures of agricultural reform after World War I and particularly the brutal intervention during the communist regime, with compulsory quotas, then with the abolishment of the private property in agriculture and the organisation of the socialist forms of agricultural exploitations (ending with the State Agricultural Enterprises and the Cooperatives of Agricultural Production), only to end during its final decade of existence with the so-called systematisation that narrowed the rural by evicting and dismantling the isolated villages and that built blocks of flats in the rural. These changes could only affect the economic behaviour of the people, discouraging the individual initiative and leading to equanimity and orientation, mainly, towards survival.

In a certain kind of meaning, the rural and agriculture are the least developed parts of a society insufficiently developed itself. In fact, as shown by several analyses of the *Human Development Reports*, Romania did not manage to use adequately its material and human potential of development, lagging much behind other countries with less favourable conditions. What can neither be understood nor accepted is the perpetuation of the state of the rural. After all, along time, it was the rural and the agriculture that supplied most of the resources for the development of Romania, much as it was, only that the benefits did not return on it, or returned much less than on the towns. During the whole modern history (19th – 20th centuries) the village was disadvantaged in relation with the town, not being included in the path of development and modernisation, being used instead as pool of human and economic resources.

After 1989, except for the restoration of property on land (other former socialist countries have maintained permanently the right to private property on the land, irrespective of the forms of agricultural exploitation), which did not finished yet, the rural population is left to manage by itself within the very difficult process of transition to market economy, including to buy the whole agricultural inventory. Meanwhile, in industry, the trade companies received the production means in administration, with the state keeping the banking capital, domain that brought the highest profits during the transition years. 15 years after the restoration of the private property in agriculture, the activity here is still largely unprofessional, there are a lot of peasants and just a few farmers, in an preponderantly subsistence economy. The agricultural

production still depends overwhelmingly on the weather: whether it rains in time and in optimal amounts, of the productions are good; whether there is draught or, on the contrary, excess humidity and floods now and then, like this year, then the productions drop. But not even when production is high, it can not influence to the better the economic state of the producers. The harvests remain in storage because they can not be valorised, and what is sold, is below the cost of production. This is why there are a lot of barren fields.

Under such circumstance, it was obvious during the past years that agriculture was no more used as source of development in society, the foreign trade passing from the forced export of agricultural products before 1989, to the other extreme – imports - to the detriment of the domestic production, but to the advantage of the importers and, to a certain extent, of the consumers.

Directions of action

The following years, by accession to the EU, become decisive for the reconfiguration of the rural and of its economic activities, agriculture included. We can not obtain what many people want, that is a significant rural, with strong economy, with an agriculture and farmers integrated within the EU, without adopting sustainable economic, social and environmental policies. There will be more resources for investments in the future, but they are not all. We need to develop the human capital by proper education by turning the agricultural activities into a profession and by diversifying the occupations from the rural environment. The EU accession offers the chance to modernise the agriculture, although this will be done at an important cost to be born by the agricultural workers, provided the processes to take place are managed with utmost attention.

There are several directions of action required, in my opinion, to develop and modernise the rural turning it into a favourable living environment and into an active factor in society, which involve variable time spans for different actions, irrespective of the election cycles.

The field of public administration

Improve the existing administrative-territorial division based on the fundamental criterion of facilitating and multiplying the contacts between the composing units (villages within a commune, areas within a county) by shortening the distances and by developing the premises for as good as possible management.

Establishment of new communes

The distance the villagers have to travel to the town hall and the town hall officials have to travel to get to the villagers has to be shortened considerably. This distance should not exceed 5 km (one-hour walk). Correlated with a minimal number of inhabitants, the criterion of taking the villages out of the physical isolation may lead to the establishment, within a reasonable time span, of several hundreds or even thousands new communes with town halls.

Structuring the metropolitan areas

The inclusion of the neighbouring localities (those urban-rural continuums) within the metropolitan area of the towns with important regional functions, while preserving their distinct administrative status (own town hall and related institutions). The danger of such an action would be financial transfers done to the benefit of the town: the resources from the neighbouring localities would go to the centre rather than the resources from the latter to go to the former rural.

Establishment of new counties

Taking some areas out of isolation and establishment of new counties. I mean particularly the mountain areas separated from the rest of the territory by natural conditions. Ilfov County, surrounding Bucharest, is inadequately placed. It should only be located east of Bucharest. I don't think we should return to the historic counties just to satisfy local egos. It may not be necessary to establish more than 6-7 new counties, but with some of the best effects for the inhabitants of the currently isolated areas undergoing a process of fast depopulation.

At the same time, we should consider the use of more consistent resources to develop the country, the rural areas included, by public loans, more so as the level of the public debt is much lower in Romania, as proportion of the GDP, than in many EU countries.

Reorganisation of the regions of development (NUT I-III)

The counties should still represent the basic level of the organisation of the regions of development and be the only ones to have administrative functions too. As far as the current regions of development are concerned, the idea that they are simply areas of statistical reports should be banned altogether. Otherwise, they can not be integrated into the NUT system on 3 levels because they are too many for the region of development of the highest level in relation to the number of inhabitants (the only EU criterion, which requires a population of 3 to 7 million). We will not need more than 4-5 regions of development (compared to the current 8). These regions of development only have attributions of fund administration. At the intermediary level a number of 20-25 regions of development might be designated, by grouping 2, may be 3 neighbouring counties. The delimitation criteria are exclusively territorial. No distinct institutions of administration are needed, those functions being performed by each county administration for the project initiated in collaboration with the other county(ies).

The field of economy

a. Development of the local road infrastructure concomitantly with the national infrastructure. The separation of road administration by the national, county and communal components does not justify the non-involvement of the central authorities in the construction of roads outside the so-called national system. Ultimately, all the roads are national, because anybody can use them. Taking the villages out of the forced isolation due the lack of bridges and roads is a primary condition if we expect the villages to develop.

b. Decisive and differential public intervention in favour of the agricultural workers owning small properties of agricultural land, ranging from the free supply of mechanical agricultural works for the households of elder agricultural workers owning 1-2 hectares of agricultural land, to consistent subsidies on the product in the case of the agricultural workers that join the market in agreement with the EU practice. Special attention should be given to the measures needed to materialise the planned and necessary concentration of the agricultural exploitations, so as to prevent a new spoliation of the agricultural workers.

c. Develop (by public/private partnership) service units marketing agricultural products and making exports

d. Support for the non-agricultural sector, in order to complete and develop the economic structure of the rural, which is now preponderantly agricultural

e. Environmental protection and pollution control, land arrangement, construction of pools and river bed regularisation, tree planting, meadow seeding, etc.

The social field

a. Sizing the network of schools according to multiple criteria and not just according to the number of pupils; most of the children should attend the primary education in their villages. Alternative systems of providing for the presence of the pupils in the schools from other localities, by transportation and/or accommodation in homes, placing the children in the families of fellow pupils at least during the winter season and covering the incurred costs.

b. Substantial aid provided to the specialists working in the rural areas who want to remain in that locality, irrespective of their previous domicile.

c. Setting up resource centres to develop and manage projects of local development.

d. Provide material aid (fellowships) to the pupils from rural areas so as they can attend agricultural education throughout all professional levels.

e. Expand the system of initial and continuous professional training for the adults living in rural areas.

f. Provide subsidised places in the higher education for the students coming from poor agricultural families.

g. Sizable increase on the allocation for children, possibly additional allocations. Expanding the system of benefits used to raise the children up to the age of 2, to the people not earning a wage produces adverse effects, meaning that many children are born in families with low economic status and with low orientation towards building human capital. In exchange, substantial allocations should be given to help the children and their families for longer periods, including during the school.

h. Increase the pensions for the former CAP members.

i. Develop the territorial network of social work services

j. Intervention for the relocation, upon demand, of the inhabitants of isolated, hardly accessible hamlets, by reconstructing their houses on proper locations.

The argument that there would be no resources for such expenses is not unsurpassable. On the one hand, by decentralisation, the central and county institutions will have fewer attributions and therefore fewer staff and expenses, while the available resources should be assigned based on the administrative structure. On the other hand, the European funds may be involved for achieving a profound reform of the public administration, for investments in infrastructure and for sustainable development in the rural environment and to increase the social spending. At the same time, we should also consider the use of resources to develop the country including by public indebteding, more so as the value of the public debt is much lower in Romania, as share of the GDP, than in some EU countries.

At the root of these proposals is my belief that:

- a settlement, even with few hundreds inhabitants, having a town hall, school, health care unit and drugstore, church, public services, specialised staff, offers much more opportunities of improving the living conditions by conjugated and diversified actions of the population and authorities, than an isolated village where the population is left to manage by itself.

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