REGIONAL POLICY AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN FUNDS ABSORPTION

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Abstract: The purpose of the hereto study is the analysis of the role of the local development strategies as regional political tools in Romania. The local development strategy represents a participative tool that involves the entire community and which goal is to provide economic development. In most of the cases, a local development strategy is a long-term step, a future community projection. This vision of the community, related with its future development must be shared with all relevant actors at a local level and transposed in a set of specific objectives and a clear action plan. By means of this paper, I parsed the practical modality of the local development strategy achievement in Anina, a town from Caraş-Severin County where I participated as local expert in the StrategVest Project, financed by the European Union through 2004 Phare Program, Civil Society.

Rezumat: Strategie regională și dezvoltare locală în România în contextul absorbției fondurilor europene. Scopul acestei lucrări este analiza rolului strategiilor de dezvoltare locală ca și instrumente politice regionale în România. Strategia de dezvoltare locală reprezintă un instrument participativ care implică întreaga comunitate și care are drept scop asigurarea dezvoltării economice. În cele mai multe cazuri, o strategie de dezvoltare locală este un demers pe termen lung, fiind o proiecție în viitor a comunității. Această viziune a comunității cu privire la dezvoltarea sa viitoare trebuie să fie împărățită de toți actorii relevanți de la nivel local și transpusă într-un set de obiective specifice și un plan de acțiuni concret. Prin această lucrare am analizat modalitatea practică de realizare a strategiei de dezvoltare economică în Anina, un oraș din județul Caraș-Severin, unde în calitate de expert local am participat la proiectul „StrategVest”, finanțat de Uniunea Europeană prin intermediul Programului Phare 2004, Societatea Civilă.

Key words: regional policy, local development, development strategies, West Region
Cuvinte cheie: politică regională, dezvoltare locală, strategii de dezvoltare, Regiunea Vest

1. INTRODUCTION

The regional development policy is one of the most complex policies of the European Union because through its main objective, the reduction of the economic and social disparities that exist between the regions of the Member States takes action on significant fields for the development of the entire society. Regional development represents a complex process that includes series of institutional and legislative interdependent components that establish relations between different sectors and activity domains and between authorities and communities.
One of the European Union’s basic values is the social, historical and cultural diversity of its regions, but between these ones there are some disparities concerning their economic development. In this way, the making of a communitarian regional policy has proved its vitality for the assurance of a balanced economic development of the entire community space and for a gradual reduction of the economic and social disparities that exist between the regions of the Member States.

The generally accepted definition of the regional policy is “the ensemble of measures taken by the central governmental authorities in favour of the social and economic development of the defavoured regions”\(^1\).

The implementation and evaluation framework of the regional policy is the development region. The European Parliament has offered a far-reaching definition for it: “a territory that geographically speaking forms a net unity or a suchlike ensemble of territories where there is a continuity, where the population owns common elements, wants to preserve this specificity and to develop it towards a cultural, social and economic stimulated progress”\(^2\).

The application of the regional development law in Romania in conformity with Romania’s and European Union’s economic and social cohesion objectives within regional development policies domain led to the eight development regions being created on Romania’s territory.

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1. ANTONESCU, Daniela, Dezvoltarea regională în România, Oscar Print Publishing House, București, 2003, p. 62
2. PASCARIU, Gabriel, Politica de dezvoltare regională în UE și în statele membre, in Sociologie Românească, No. 3-4, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2000, p. 76
Romania’s development regions do not represent administrative-territorial units and do not have legal personality. The regions, the counties or/and the localities within counties can make associations for the achievement of objectives of common interest between regions and/or within districts.

The West development region is situated in the Western part of Romania, at the border with Hungary and Serbia. Administrative-territorial speaking, it is formed of four counties: Arad, Caraș-Severin, Hunedoara and Timiș. West region’s surface is 32,034 km², aprox. 13,4% of Romania’s surface, a number comparable with Republic of Moldova or Belgium.

2. THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES - REGIONAL POLITICAL TOOLS IN ROMANIA

The concept of “social development” refers to the guidance of a community or institution towards the achievement of a desirable state, an objective to be attained in a planned in time process, result of a set of conjugate actions. The Strategy is defined as the framework that guides the elections, that determines the nature and direction of a community. It helps to the establishment of an unitary direction for the community in the terms of its operational objectives and it provides the foundation of the allocation of the necessary resources for its guidance towards achieving these objectives.

The Strategic Plans represent long-dated elaborated documents that are periodically revised and that join planning the actions efforts. An exercise like this allows to a community carrying out a prioritization, a hierarchization of the problems depending on the available resources.

The basic principles concerning the strategical planning are:
- the chances of the community to have success go up when there exists a strategic plan that includes the use of the opportunities appeared externally;
- the chances of the community to have success go up if its leaders project their vision together with the members of the organization and thereby all of them are involved in the process of achieving the perspective.

The local development strategy represents a participative tool that implicates the entire community and which goal is to provide the assurance of economic development. In most of the cases, a local development strategy is a demarche for a long term, a future projection of the community. This vision of the community regarding its future development must be shared by all relevant actors from the local level and transposed in a set of specific objectives and a concrete action plan.

If a community does not have a well defined strategy, she will be obliged to confront everyday events at the time they appear and any change will represent a major challenge. On the other hand, in the terms of an existing strategy, the leaders of the community and the community on the whole have the possibility to concentrate upon the

pursued objectives and upon the actions that must be done for achieving those objectives. Therefore, by pursuing the initially planned objectives, the resources within the community can be efficiently coordinated and guided. Meanwhile modifications and adjustments can appear, but these ones do not modify substantially the objectives and actions previously foreseen.

Methodologically speaking, it is recommendable for every locality to elaborate its own economic and social development strategy in order to have a clear image of the initial situation and of the point to be acquired in a certain horizon of time. The development strategies are elaborated on well determined time periods, from one year to four, seven or even many years.

In the European Union strategies are elaborated for a seven-year period, but due to the fact that the local representatives carry on their activity in four-year electoral periods, shorter horizons of time can be chosen.

The development strategies of the localities must be integrated into the districtual and regional strategies and in the same time the director guidelines from Romania’s National Development Plan for 2007-2013 must be taken into account for finding coverage in the financial instruments available for the prioritary identified projects.

The main characteristics of a local development strategical planning:

- it regards development, with the help of the already existing practices and the insertion of new opportunities for action too;
- it operates within a territory well defined geographically and administratively;
- it approaches problems at the macro level and does not concentrate upon isolated problems;
- the political support represents an essential component;
- it brings new elements in the technical, managerial and financial domains, adapting experiences that proved to be successful;
- it generates resources, making a direct connection between planning and implementation.

3. CASE STUDY: ANINA

Anina City benefits by a local development strategy made within “Local strategies for global opportunities and for an European future of the Western Romanian local communities: the consolidation of the elaboration and implementation capacity of the social and economic development strategies at a local level in the West Region” project, in short StrategVest, a project won and implemented by the West Regional Development Agency and the Rural Assistance Centre and financed by the European Union through 2004 Phare Programme, Civil Society.

The general objective of “StrategVest” project is to support the enactment of the communitarian acquis in the social and economic development domain through the consolidation of the capacity to elaborate development strategies among the local communities from West Region. Thus, through the coalition in this project of the most

4 MUNTEANU, Nicolae (coord.), Ghid metodologic de elaborare a unei strategii de dezvoltare locală, ARTPRESS Publishing House, Timișoara, 2007, p. 29
important West Region’s NGOs which are active in the social and economic development domain and through the transfer of competences from these organizations to diverse local communities is aimed the consolidation at the local level of the competences and the abilities that will allow these communities to identify development projects well adapted to the proper needs and to the exigences of the new institutional and legislative framework resulted after the integration of Romania into the European Union.

The second objective pursued by this project is to obtain a correlation of the local development strategies and efforts undertaken in West Region between themselves and with the national programmatic documents and with European Union’s strategic objectives too. Under the circumstances, the project aims at contributing to the increasing of programming process’ efficiency in partnership at the regional and national levels, especially when it comes to elaborating the future regional development plans.

As local expert in this project, I carried out together with the work team from the local level and with West RDA experts a social and economic analysis (of potential) and on basis of this a SWOT analysis that represents an analysis of the strong and weak points and of the opportunities and threats. By virtue of those two analyses I elaborated Anina town’s development Strategy, taking into account the following strategical documents elaborated at the local and regional levels too: 2007-2013 Regional Development Plan, the Strategy of Caraş-Severin County, the Improvement Plan of Caraş-Severin Territory and Anina General Urbanistic Plan.

The general objective was “The harmonious development of Anina town in the context of laying-off the mining activity through the capitalization of the available natural and human resources.”

In addition to the general objective there were identified a range of specific objectives that regard:

a). – the inveiglement of investments for the modernization and rehabilitation of the transport infrastructure at the local level;

b). – the development of the business environment and entrepreneurial spirit at the community level towards the stimulation of Anina’s economic development;

c). – fostering the development of the turism sector by capitalizing the existent natural resources;

d). – the preservation and protection of the environment with the purpose of assuring the necessary premises for Anina’s solid development;

e). – the acceleration of the efforts for fulfilling partnerships and institutionalizing Anina’s territorial cooperation relations.

Those objectives will come to life in a seven-ten-year time horizon by the implementation of development projects, which benefit of finances from the European funds.

As a consequence of the partnership analysis made in Anina town for the 2007-2013 period, it have been identified the sequent five strategical priorities:

- the transport infrastructure;

5 MARICIUC, Adrian (coord.), Strategia de dezvoltare locală a orașului Anina, ARTPRESS Publishing House, Timișoara, 2007, p. 76

6 MARICIUC, Adrian (coord.), ibid., 2007, p. 76

7 MARICIUC, Adrian (coord.), ibid., 2007, p. 77
the economic development of the town;
the tourism development;
the environmental protection;
the territorial cooperation.

The priorities stipulated by Anina town’s Strategy are compatible with the intervention domains that were established within the Regional Operational Program and within the Sectorial Operational Programs: Economic Competitivity Increasing, Transport Infrastructure, Environmental Infrastructure, Human Resources Development, Administrative Capacity Development.

4. CONCLUSIONS

After Romania’s integration into the European Union, the local communities which intend to benefit by European finances must justify the necessity of those projects by the fact that they are part of a well fundamented and favoured by community strategic plan. By the time of writing StrategVest project, the competences necessary for elaborating those strategic plans were still not that present at the local communities level, especially the ones from the rural area and from the small cities.

By implementing this project, these competences have been improved and a portofolio of well done projects has been identified at the community level. Attended with an adequate co-finance, this portofolio will assure the effective absorption of the Structural Instruments available for Romania starting with January 1, 2007.

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