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EDUCATION - BASIC PILLAR OF THE SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT. EVOLUTIONS AND GAPS IN THE SOUTH-MUNTENIA REGION

SORINEL IONEL BUCUR¹

Abstract: *The sustainable development of an economy, either viewed as a whole or at the local level, is based on at least two essential pillars, namely the stock of human resources and the educational system. If the demographic system is the backbone of development, education plays an important role at least in terms of building a system of values related to structural changes in the economy. Although at the level of rural communities there is often opposition to further studies, generated either by the local behaviours, specific to each area, or by the lack of motivations in this field, investments in this field should be in the first place. In this context, the present approach aims to carry out an analysis of the educational system in the rural area of the South-Muntenia region, as an essential element of the local sustainable development process.*

Keywords: *educational system, gaps, regional dimension.*

JEL Classification: *Q01, Q19, R11, R19.*

INTRODUCTION

Over time, the Romanian education system has been the subject of multiple discussions related either to the need to ensure an adequate material base, an appropriate level of salary for teachers, but also to reduce the gaps between urban and rural areas. All these discussions come against the background of a declining school population, but also of a deficient infrastructure.

In the current conditions generated by the pandemic situation, the problems of the Romanian educational system are even more accentuated, on the one hand, by the limited access or poor training of teachers and students in using of modern IT equipments, but especially for approx. one third of schools lack access to infrastructure (electricity and internet). Even insofar as the state intervention in the latter aspect may seem to have positive effects, it should not be overlooked that, at this time, in Romania there are 52,233 households that do not have access to electricity. Or the problem of developing the education system, in accordance with current limitations, is becoming more and more acute, accentuating the existing gaps between urban and rural areas.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The evaluation of the educational system at the level of one of the largest development regions - South-Muntenia region - is based on public information provided by national statistics, through the Tempo-Online database, but also information of local and central authorities, founded in the analyzes in this domain. From a methodological point of view, the approach uses established statistical methods, such as structures and comparisons, with the identification of existing gaps either interregional or intra-regional, depending on the availability of statistical data. In order to ensure the uniformity of the data, the analysis period is 2007-2019, limited by the existing statistical support at regional level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Grouping a number of seven counties with different characteristics, both from the perspective of geographical location, but especially of the economic activities (mono or multi-activities), the South-Muntenia region occupies an important position in the overall national economy. Within the seven component counties, four are located in the plain area, the main activity

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being agriculture. The other three counties (Argeş, Prahova and Dâmboviţa) are characterized by an economic system based on multi-activities, with an impact on the level of local development.

In relation to the educational system, it should be noted that the present approach was based on the analysis of some primary indicators, namely the number of school units, school population, teaching staff and the educational infrastructure.

From the perspective of the number of education units, the period 2007-2019 is characterized by a visible downward trend both in total and in the main types, respectively: primary and lower-secondary, upper secondary, vocational and undergraduate education. Thus, for example, in the urban environment, on the total of primary and lower-secondary education, we witness a regional rebound of 20.4%, with oscillations at county level between -7.2% (Argeş) and -30.2% (Dâmboviţa).

It should be noted, however, that at the level of upper education, except Prahova and Teleorman counties, during the analyzed period the number of education units increased by percentages between 2.4% (Argeş) and 21.4% (Călăraşi).

However, unlike the urban environment, in the rural area, the number of education units in upper school registered a significant increase in Călăraşi and Giurgiu counties, so that in the other counties the decreasing trend is maintained as in the case of urban ones (**Table no. 1**).

Table no. 1. Dynamic of the number of school units by levels of education in 2019 comparing with 2007, urban/rural areas (%)

		Total	Primary and lower-secondary education	Upper secondary education
	TOTAL	-14.9	-15.7	2.9
Urban	Sud-Muntenia	-20.4	-20.4	1.1
	Argeş	-5.3	-7.2	2.4
	Călăraşi	-28.0	-25.8	21.4
	Dâmboviţa	-22.0	-30.2	0.0
	Giurgiu	-18.7	-25.3	9.1
	Ialomiţa	-21.7	-21.1	5.9
	Prahova	-22.1	-24.7	-6.5
	Teleorman	-28.7	-8.4	-5.0
	Rural	TOTAL	-17.0	-15.5
Sud-Muntenia		-24.6	-21.0	19.2
Argeş		-6.7	-6.3	-14.3
Călăraşi		-31.7	-28.6	300.0
Dâmboviţa		-28.1	-31.1	20.0
Giurgiu		-23.4	-26.7	100.0
Ialomiţa		-16.9	-16.9	0.0
Prahova		-29.8	-25.8	-14.3
Teleorman		-29.5	-9.2	33.3

Source: Calculation on the Tempo-Online database, 2020.

If in terms of the number of education units things are different by levels of education, in terms of enrolled population, we are witnessing in the last 13 years a significant decline in all levels, the most pronounced decline being found in vocational education and tertiary education, both in urban and rural areas.

An explanation of this phenomenon is represented, on the one hand, by the changes in the demographic level, but mainly in the permanent changes in the local economy.

To these are added the local behaviours specific to each community, the habits and customs maintained in most areas (**Table no. 2**).

Table no. 2. Dynamic of the enrolled population, by levels of education in 2019 comparing with 2007, urban/rural areas (%)

		Total	Primary and lower-secondary education	Upper secondary education	Vocational education	Tertiary education
	TOTAL	-19.9	-9.3	-21.9	-54.3	-70.3
Urban	Sud-Muntenia	-20.6	-15.2	-20.1	-62.1	-88.3
	Argeş	-19.4	-11.4	-17.0	-61.0	-64.2
	Călăraşi	-21.0	-13.5	-27.5	-59.7	-78.9
	Dâmboviţa	-21.0	-17.8	-19.2	-55.8	-59.9
	Giurgiu	-17.5	-16.4	-8.8	-68.7	-59.6
	Ialomiţa	-23.1	-18.0	-23.6	-60.2	-96.0
	Prahova	-17.3	-8.5	-21.4	-59.9	-55.1
	Teleorman	-29.9	-28.9	-22.3	-78.3	-60.1
Rural	TOTAL	-25.1	-22.3	-14.9	-59.9	-65.2
	Sud-Muntenia	-25.9	-23.2	-8.5	-70.5	-21.2
	Argeş	-26.6	-24.6	-0.7	-70.3	-58.6
	Călăraşi	-20.0	-16.3	-13.7	-88.3	
	Dâmboviţa	-27.1	-26.2	3.8	-64.2	-56.8
	Giurgiu	-19.4	-18.4	15.9	-78.9	-26.2
	Ialomiţa	-28.5	-26.2	-58.5	-59.9	-65.6
	Prahova	-21.6	-16.8	-22.7	-59.6	
Teleorman	-38.2	-35.1	-7.5	-96.0		

Source: Calculation on the Tempo-Online database, 2020.

The number of classroom teachers is on the same decreasing trend, both by areas of residence and especially by levels of education. Thus, in the rural area of the South-Muntenia region, with the exception of Călăraşi and Giurgiu counties, where the number of teachers has increased in upper secondary education, we are witnessing a strong setback on all levels of education. As previously mentioned, the lack of a proper salary of teachers, incentives for those who settle in rural areas, correlated with the demographic decline and the enrolled population have had the effect of significantly reducing the classroom teachers (**Table no. 3**).

Table no. 3. Dynamic of the classroom teachers, by levels of education in 2019 comparing with 2007, urban/rural areas (%)

		Total	Primary and lower-secondary education	Upper secondary education	Vocational education	Tertiary education
	TOTAL	-15.2	-16.7	-13.2	-74.8	
Urban	Sud-Muntenia	-20.8	-23.1	-19.6	-74.8	
	Argeş	-20.5	-21.0	-19.8		
	Călăraşi	-13.2	-19.0	1.5		-68.9
	Dâmboviţa	-24.3	-30.2	-19.3	-55.6	-3.3
	Giurgiu	-6.9	-7.9	1.0		-17.3
	Ialomiţa	-21.8	-21.2	-23.6	-47.6	-28.7
	Prahova	-16.3	-15.0	-25.9	-58.5	-32.6
	Teleorman	-35.9	-39.7	-23.9		-18.2
Rural	TOTAL	-20.4	-19.9	17.0	-80.5	-32.1
	Sud-Muntenia	-25.7	-26.5	-10.2	-63.2	-25.0
	Argeş	-30.6	-29.9	-18.6		0.0

	Călărași	-14.2	-18.9	360.0		0.0
	Dâmbovița	-29.7	-32.3	-12.7		0.0
	Giurgiu	-8.1	-8.1	46.9	-68.9	0.0
	Ialomița	-22.0	-21.5	-25.0	-3.3	0.0
	Prahova	-18.8	-17.4	-49.3	-17.3	0.0
	Teleorman	-41.2	-42.2	-7.7	-28.7	0.0

Sursa: Calculații pe baza datelor din Tempo-Online, 2020.

In the context of the current crisis generated by the pandemic, the education system is more than ever in the presence of real challenges, related, on the one hand, to the large number of localities which are not connected to electricity, but also to the existence of communication networks, necessary to allow access at the Internet.

Even trying to address these issues cannot ignore the ability of residents to bear additional costs. If we refer, for example, to the relative poverty rate, it should be noted that within 13 years, in the South-Muntenia region, this indicator decreased by only 1.1 percentage points, respectively from 26.8% (2007) to 25.7% (2019).

Although Romania has the highest rate of internet expansion, there are still a number of 52,233 households without electricity, located, compared to the distribution network of operators, as follows [1]:

- 26035 households under 500 m;
- 19062 households between 500-2000 m;
- 7136 isolated households, located over 2 km away.

Of the 7136 isolated households, for which funds were allocated for the installation of photovoltaic panels, 5% are in the South-Muntenia region (356 isolated households), respectively (Table no. 3) [2]:

Table no. 3. The number of isolated households of the rural area of region South Muntenia without electricity in 2018

	Number	% in total
Argeș	13	3,7
Călărași	99	27,8
Dâmbovița	13	3,7
Giurgiu	109	30,6
Ialomița	3	0,8
Prahova	110	30,9
Teleorman	9	2,5
Total	356	100,0

Source: Ministry of Energy, 2018.

What is worrying is the fact that out of the 356 isolated households, 58.4% are located in two counties characterized by a high degree of poverty (Călărași and Giurgiu), followed by Prahova with no less than 110 isolated localities, without electricity.

Regarding the access to the internet, in 2019 compared to 2007, the share of the rural households with internet access increased by 66.4 percent, reaching practically 66.7%, by 9 percent below the total levels the country.

Although there is a high degree of expansion of the internet network, currently approx. 5000 education units are not connected to the internet. In these conditions, the development of online educational activities is quite difficult, having a direct impact on the quality of the educational act and the knowledge acquired by students.

CONCLUSIONS

The evolutions of the current educational system of the rural area of the South-Muntenia region do not give it sustainability. As an essential pillar of the development of a given nation or local area, education must be a real priority among decision makers.

Basically, the education system must be reformed in accordance, first of all, with the requirements of the labour market. Although at the level of rural communities there is often opposition to further studies, generated either by the local behaviours specific to each area or by the lack of motivations in this field, investments in this field should be in the first place.

Equipping education units with adequate infrastructure, ensuring a proper salary of teachers, changing the *curriculum* to be oriented to the vocational education, can be a starting point in the sustainable development of the local education system.

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