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**Conference Paper**

## Sustainability of the Romanian rural area: An approach from a demographic and social perspective at the level of the South-Mountain region

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

The Research Institute for Agriculture Economy and Rural Development (ICEADR), Bucharest

*Suggested Citation:* Bucur, Sorinel Ionel (2021) : Sustainability of the Romanian rural area: An approach from a demographic and social perspective at the level of the South-Mountain region, In: Agrarian Economy and Rural Development - Realities and Perspectives for Romania. International Symposium. 12th Edition, The Research Institute for Agricultural Economy and Rural Development (ICEADR), Bucharest, pp. 175-183

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/263038>

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# **SUSTAINABILITY OF THE ROMANIAN RURAL AREA - AN APPROACH FROM A DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE AT THE LEVEL OF THE SOUTH-MOUNTAIN REGION**

**SORINEL IONEL BUCUR<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

*As a basic element of the sustainable development of an area, the demographic component plays an essential role, being considered, most of the time, as representing its backbone. The stock of demographic resources, as well as their structure is a starting point in elaborating any alternative for sustainable development, not only from an economic but also a social perspective. The changes in the structure of the rural population, to which is added the dynamics of economic activities, also influence the social policy measures to be implemented, both at national and local level. In this context, the present approach aims to make an analysis of the demographic and social system at the level of the South-Muntenia region.*

**Keywords:** rural area, sustainability, demography, social policies.

**JEL Classification:** R10,R23, R29.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of local development, regardless of the environment of residence (urban or rural) has over time been the object of study of both public institutions with responsibilities in this regard, but also of specific research conducted by research institutions or civil society. Such studies, whose objectives have derived in most cases, from projects, strategies and development plans at the national level, come to bring to the forefront of each approach, a SWOT analysis, as a basis for outlining strategies at the local level.

In shaping local development strategies, the stock of resources plays an important role, among them being the demographic resource related to each local community, considered as the backbone of any economy. In relation to these considerations, the demographic system, whether viewed at national or local level, has over time been the subject of multiple discussions related to the need to ensure an adequate demographic structure that responds to economic and social challenges in a sustainable manner.

## **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

The evaluation of the demographic system at the level of one of the largest development regions - the South-Muntenia region - is based on the public information provided by the national statistics, through the Tempo - Online database. 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 2007-2021, limited by the existing statistical support at regional level.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Addressing demographic issues has been the subject of numerous studies and research over time, both internationally and nationally, the importance of the demographic system, but also its quality, being considered key elements for achieving the goals of any sustainable development. (MDRMAP, 2014).

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According to specialists (Ghețău, 2007), in Romania, the maintenance of the current demographic policy will only have the effect of maintaining the negative demographic behavior, respectively of a low birth rate and a continuously decreasing fertility rate.

Without minimizing the importance of traditional studies in the demographic field, it should be noted that while traditional models of economic growth were until recently oriented towards the development and amplification of created wealth, new approaches to sustainable growth focus on predominantly qualitative criteria. growth must serve predominantly human, social and environmental dimensions (Ștefea, P and others).

Without further detailing the theories and studies in the field of demography, returning to the present approach, it should be noted that, lately, more and more specialized works are paying special attention to the demographic factor. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly important at the local level, in the attempt of the authorities / institutions and civil society to develop sustainable development models, starting from the existing stock of resources.

Speaking of the South-Muntenia region, it should be noted that it brings together seven counties with different demo-economic, geographical and spatial characteristics (Bucur, 2020), ranking third among the eight development regions in terms of performance recorded economic growth. However, speaking about one of the pillars of a sustainable, sustainable development, respectively about the demographic potential, things are different, both from the perspective of the stock of demographic resources, but also of the pressure exerted by certain demographic categories on the labor force.

Speaking about demographic resources, it should be noted that in the period 2007-2021, the population of the South-Muntenia region, both in total and locally, recorded a divergent evolution by area of residence.

**Table 1. Population dynamics of the South-Muntenia region in 2021 compared to 2007, by areas of residence (%)**

Region/couty	Urban	Rural
South-Muntenia	-5.01	3.26
Argeș	-5.24	4.92
Călărași	-3.73	3.51
Dâmbovița	-1.48	5.94
Giurgiu	0.87	6.94
Ialomița	-5.05	2.77
Prahova	-6.13	3.12
Teleorman	-11.98	-5.40

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

Thus, if the urban population registers a visible decline, with percentages ranging between -12% (Teleorman) and a slight increase of 0.9% (Giurgiu), in rural areas we are witnessing after the date of accession to the European Union an increase of demographic resources with an oscillation range between 2.77% (Ialomița) and 6.94% (Giurgiu), the only county that registers on a negative slope being Teleorman (-5.4%) (Table 1).

In fact, the South-Muntenia region is characterized by a high degree of rurality, over 50% of the region's population being in rural areas. At local and county level, the rural population oscillates practically between 49.7% (Prahova) and 67.8% (Dâmbovița), all the seven component counties being on an ascending slope from the perspective of the rural population (Table 2).

**Table 2. The share of the rural population in the total population at regional and county level during the period 2007-2021 (%)**

	2007	2010	2011	2016	2020	2021	2021/2007
South-Muntenia	52.0	52.9	53.2	54.8	56.2	56.5	4.5
Argeş	45.2	46.3	46.7	48.3	49.6	50.1	4.8
Călăraşi	54.9	55.4	55.8	57.4	58.7	59.0	4.1
Dâmboviţa	63.1	64.1	64.5	66.2	67.5	67.8	4.8
Giurgiu	62.5	63.1	63.4	64.8	65.9	66.3	3.8
Ialomiţa	47.4	47.9	48.2	49.5	50.9	51.3	3.9
Prahova	45.2	46.1	46.5	47.8	49.3	49.7	4.5
Teleorman	57.1	57.9	58.3	59.7	61.0	61.4	4.3

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

The issue of the sustainable and sustainable development of rural communities in the South-Muntenia region is hit, first of all, by the existence of a deteriorated demographic structure, an aging population and a high pressure of the elderly population on the working age, but also of a disproportionate base in relation to the other categories of population.

Thus, for example, the rate of economic dependence, established as a ratio between the population over 65 years and that between 15-64 years, has increased both in the region and in the component counties, which reflects the deterioration of capacity. working age population in the effort to support the elderly population, amid the more pronounced growth of the latter category compared to the population between 15-64 years.

From this perspective, even if in dynamics, three of the seven component counties (Argeş, Prahova and Teleorman) exceed the regional average of increasing the economic dependency rate, at county level, Giurgiu and Teleorman counties were above the average annual value of the region, with percentages ranging between 29.3% (Giurgiu, 2007) and 36.2% (Teleorman, 2021) (Table 3).

**Table 3. The evolution of the rate of economic dependence at the South-Muntenia region in the period 2007-2021 (%)**

	Sud-Muntenia	Argeş	Călăraşi	Dâmboviţa	Giurgiu	Ialomiţa	Prahova	Teleorman
2007	22.4	20.1	9.3	21.4	29.3	23.2	22.6	31.9
2010	22.5	20.6	11.4	21.2	27.9	23.4	22.8	31.8
2011	22.5	20.6	12.0	21.0	27.3	23.2	22.9	31.4
2016	23.9	23.4	10.3	22.7	27.4	24.0	24.7	33.6
2020	25.9	26.5	10.3	24.8	27.6	25.9	27.5	35.8
2021	26.4	27.1	10.2	25.2	27.7	26.2	28.0	36.2
2021/2007 (percentage points)	4.0	7.0	0.9	3.8	-1.6	3.0	5.4	4.4

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

The aging index of the population, calculated as a percentage ratio between the population over 60 years old and the one between 0-14 years old, is on the same increasing trend but with much higher intensity. Thus, in 2021 compared to 2007, the aging index of the rural population of the South-

Muntenia region and the component counties was on an increasing trend with percentages between 11.2% (Giurgiu) and 67.9% (Prahova) (Table 4).

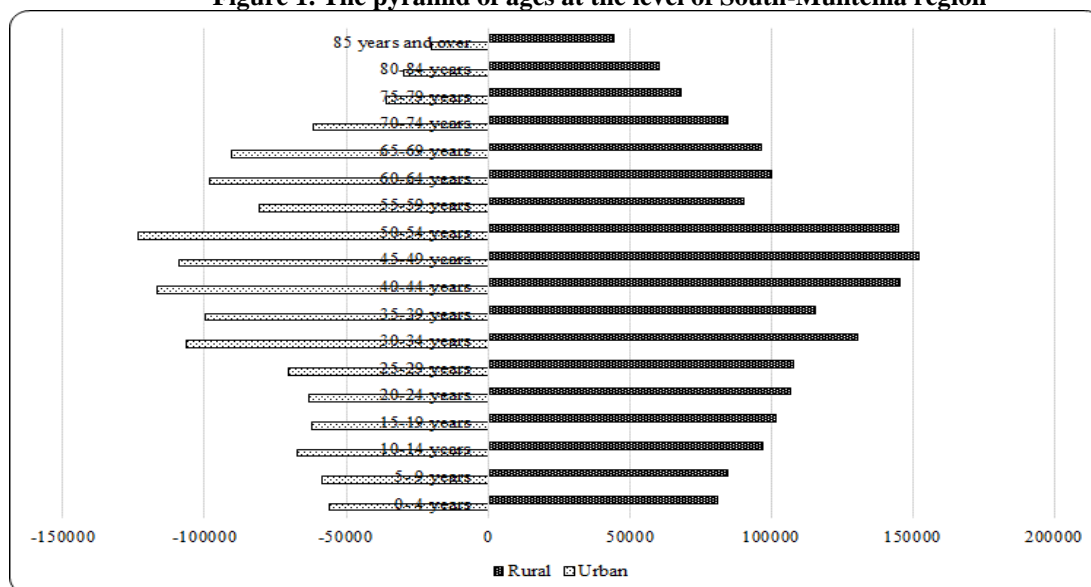
**Table 4. The evolution of the demographic aging index at the level of the South-Muntenia region during the period 2007-2021 (%)**

	South-Muntenia	Argeş	Călăraşi	Dâmboviţa	Giurgiu	Ialomiţa	Prahova	Teleorman
2007	137.3	127.3	128.4	118.2	153.0	120.4	139.8	186.1
2010	144.9	139.9	131.0	126.5	158.5	123.5	146.0	199.6
2011	147.3	143.6	132.3	128.7	159.6	124.9	148.9	203.2
2016	164.7	168.0	143.5	146.2	167.5	136.2	170.0	222.7
2020	176.1	182.1	152.7	160.0	170.2	144.0	184.1	233.3
2021	178.8	184.8	155.6	162.4	170.1	145.9	188.1	237.3
2021/2007 (%)	30.3	45.2	21.2	37.3	11.2	21.2	34.5	27.5

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

As mentioned above, the involutions in terms of the rate of economic dependence and the demographic aging index are the result, among other things, of the significant increase in the elderly population, especially the over 80s, as well as some pyramids of ages unbalanced in all the analyzed counties (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The pyramid of ages at the level of South-Muntenia region**



Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

Thus, in the rural area of the South-Muntenia region compared to the urban environment, the share of the population by age categories constantly exceeds the values registered in the urban area, highlighting an aging population.

The evolutions registered in the indicators presented above are the effect, among others, of the significant oscillations regarding the birth rate, fertility and mortality rate registered in the post-accession period at the level of the South-Muntenia region and of the component counties.

Thus, within 19 years, the birth rate has been on an upward trend, both regionally and locally. By areas of residence, the analyzed period highlights a significant decline in the region as a whole,

so that in rural areas the birth rate decreases by percentages ranging between -1.5% (Teleorman) and -19.6% (Prahova) (Table 5).

**Table 5. The evolution of the birth rate at regional level, by areas of residence, during the period 2007-2020 (no. live births / 1000 inhabitants)**

		2007	2010	2011	2016	2020	2020/2007 (%)
Total	South-Muntenia region	9.1	9.1	8.4	8.7	7.6	-16.5
	Argeş	8.9	8.9	8.1	8.6	7.8	-12.4
	Călăraşi	10.4	10.1	9.3	9.5	8	-23.1
	Dâmboviţa	9	9.7	8.8	9	8	-11.1
	Giurgiu	9.1	9.4	9.3	9	7.9	-13.2
	Ialomiţa	10.9	10.6	9.9	9.6	8.2	-24.8
	Prahova	9	8.6	7.9	8.4	7.1	-21.1
	Teleorman	7	7.5	6.9	7.4	6.3	-10.0
Rural	South-Muntenia region	9.1	9.2	8.6	8.8	8.1	-11.0
	Argeş	8.6	8.9	8.4	8.7	8.3	-3.5
	Călăraşi	10.4	10	9.7	9.4	8.7	-16.3
	Dâmboviţa	9.4	10	9.3	9.3	8.6	-8.5
	Giurgiu	9.3	9.5	9.4	9.3	8.2	-11.8
	Ialomiţa	10.3	10.7	9.9	9.6	8.7	-15.5
	Prahova	9.7	8.8	8.1	8.6	7.8	-19.6
	Teleorman	6.8	7.2	6.6	7.3	6.7	-1.5

*Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.*

As an indicator that expresses the sustainable regeneration capacity of a nation, the general fertility rate, calculated as representing the number of newborns compared to the number of fertile women (aged 15-49 years) registered a significant decline both in the whole region, as well as of the component counties.

Although economic theory and literature estimate that the number of newborns / fertile women should be around 2.2 children, the demographic reality of the seven counties confirms that the number of newborns does not exceed, on average, one child (Table 6).

**Table 6. The evolution of the general fertility rate at regional level, by areas of residence, in the period 2007-2020 (no. live births / 1000 women of fertile age 15-49 years)**

		2007	2010	2011	2016	2020	2020/2007 (%)
Total	South-Muntenia region	36.4	37	34.2	35.4	33.1	-9.07
	Argeş	34	35	32	34	33.5	-1.47
	Călăraşi	42.2	41.2	37.8	38.3	34.7	-17.77
	Dâmboviţa	35.5	38.6	35.1	35.8	33.7	-5.07
	Giurgiu	39	39.7	38.8	36.9	34.5	-11.54
	Ialomiţa	44.1	43.4	40.7	39.4	35.8	-18.82
	Prahova	35.4	34.5	31.6	34	31.4	-11.30
	Teleorman	31.7	33.7	30.8	33.1	30.3	-4.42
Rural	South-Muntenia region	41.1	40.7	37.9	37.4	36.2	-11.92
	Argeş	38.2	39.1	36.6	36.4	36.8	-3.66
	Călăraşi	47	44.5	42.8	39.9	38.3	-18.51
	Dâmboviţa	39.8	41.6	38.5	37.8	36.7	-7.79

		2007	2010	2011	2016	2020	2020/2007 (%)
	Giurgiu	44.1	43.3	42.5	39.9	37	-16.10
	Ialomița	48.3	49.2	45.2	41.5	39.1	-19.05
	Prahova	41	37.2	34	35.5	34.2	-16.59
	Teleorman	35,7	36,8	33,1	34,9	33,4	-6,44

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

Compared to 2007, in 2020, the number live births/fertile women decreased in the whole region by 9.07%, so that, in rural areas, the decrease is about 12%. It is worth mentioning that in the rural area the most accentuated reduction is registered in Ialomița county (-19.05%), followed at a short distance by Călărași, Prahova and Giurgiu. The deterioration of this indicator cannot be broken from the general context of the economic and social situation characteristic of each rural area.

Thus, the changes that occurred after 1989, both economically and socially, over which the rigors of the community space overlapped, without there being, at national level, an adequate policy for the protection of the population, had as an effect the deterioration of demographic indicators.

This process is even more visible in the counties in the plain areas where, due to the existence of mono-activities in the sphere of the agricultural sector, the adaptation to the new economic and social realities has hit both the existing features of each area and sometimes even the opposition to change.

Calculated as the number of death births per 1000 live births and deaths in a year, the mortality rate registered a different evolution on the total of the region, compared to that in rural areas. Thus, if in the whole region, Teleorman county occupies the first place in terms of increasing the mortality rate, in rural areas we see in the last 19 years a significant increase of this indicator in three of the seven counties (Dâmbovița, Giurgiu and Teleorman), for the counties of Călărași, Ialomița and Prahova to register an improvement of the mortality rate (Table 7).

**Table 7. Evolution of the mortality rate at regional level, by areas of residence, in the period 2007-2020 (number of death births per 1000 live births and deaths in one year)**

		2007	2010	2011	2016	2020	2020/2007 (%)
Total	South-Muntenia region	5.1	4.2	5.2	4.1	4	-21.6
	Argeș	5.2	3.5	5.6	4.3	3.2	-38.5
	Călărași	7.5	6.3	5.9	2.7	4.1	-45.3
	Dâmbovița	2.9	1	2.7	3.8	4.4	51.7
	Giurgiu	3	3	4.9	3.2	2.4	-20.0
	Ialomița	6	6.2	6	6.7	5.1	-15.0
	Prahova	6.4	5.8	6.9	4.9	3.6	-43.8
	Teleorman	3	3.8	3.5	2.1	6	100.0
Rural	South-Muntenia region	5.1	4.6	6.1	4.3	4.5	-11.8
	Argeș	4.5	4.3	5.7	6.3	4.5	0.0
	Călărași	8.2	7.6	5.8	3.3	6.2	-24.4
	Dâmbovița	2.6	0.6	3.3	4.2	4.3	65.4
	Giurgiu	1.7	3.3	5.6	4.6	2.7	58.8
	Ialomița	6.6	5.8	7.6	3.4	4.6	-30.3
	Prahova	7.4	7.2	9.7	4.7	4	-45.9
	Teleorman	4.3	5.2	4.6	2.2	5.8	34.9

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

A favorable evolution is found in the infant mortality rate. The literature (Bădescu, 2008) defines four cascades of infant mortality, respectively:

- the first waterfall with a rate level of 4-6 dead children / 1000 newborns;
- the second waterfall with a rate level of 6-9 dead children / 1000 newborns;
- the third waterfall with a rate level of 9-15 dead children / 1000 newborns;
- the fourth waterfall with a rate level of over 15 dead children / 1000 newborns.

From the analysis of the available statistical information, it should be noted that over the whole period 2007-2020 there is a visible trend of improvement of this indicator, both in the region as a whole and in areas of residence. At the level of the rural area, the infant mortality rate decreased during the analysis period with percentages that vary between -18.4% (Prahova) and -65.4% (Teleorman) (Table 8).

**Table 8. Evolution of the infantile mortality rate, by areas of residence at the regional level in the period 2007-2020 (number of death births under one year/ 1000 live births in one year)**

		2007	2010	2011	2016	2020	2020/2007 (%)
Total	South-Muntenia region	11.4	10.9	10.3	7	5.6	-50.9
	Argeş	14.4	11.2	9.1	7.2	5.5	-61.8
	Călăraşi	13.4	15.1	10.9	12	7.3	-45.5
	Dâmboviţa	8	8.2	7.8	5.7	4.6	-42.5
	Giurgiu	12.6	12.3	13	9.7	4.7	-62.7
	Ialomiţa	9.9	10.6	12.7	8.8	6.9	-30.3
	Prahova	9.2	9.3	10.5	4.4	5.5	-40.2
	Teleorman	14.9	13.5	11	5.9	5.2	-65.1
Rural	South-Muntenia region	13.1	12.4	11.1	7.9	6.2	-52.7
	Argeş	17.9	13.3	10.3	8.4	7.9	-55.9
	Călăraşi	13.2	17.9	11.1	12.3	5	-62.1
	Dâmboviţa	9.1	8.3	7.1	4.8	5.3	-41.8
	Giurgiu	11.2	14.4	15.7	11	4	-64.3
	Ialomiţa	11.4	12.3	15.2	11.5	9.3	-18.4
	Prahova	12	10.7	11.3	5.6	6	-50.0
	Teleorman	18.8	14.6	11	7.2	6.5	-65.4

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

Compared to 2007, when all seven counties were included in the third waterfall, in 2020, infant mortality placed one county in the first waterfall (Giurgiu), six counties in the second waterfall and only one in the third waterfall (Ialomiţa).

In the context of important structural changes in the demographic structure, any attempt to develop a sustainable development strategy must have as an essential starting point the existing stock of demographic resources. Even in these conditions, the current employment rate must not be overlooked, nor the pressures on the workforce for at least two reasons, namely the number of pensioners, but also the granting of social assistance.

In this context, over 19 years, the total employment rate, calculated as a share of the employed population in one age group in the total population in the same age group, declined in the whole population aged 15 and over, even if, at certain intervals, there is a slight tendency to increase. However, unlike the whole region, in the rural area we are witnessing in the period 2007-2020 a significant decline in the employment rate on all age groups, with percentages ranging between -2.4% (35-54 years) and - 7% (15 years and over) (Table 9).



**Table 9. Evolution of the total employment rate at the total and rural regional level (%)**

	2007	2010	2011	2016	2020	2020/2007 (%)
<b>Total</b>						
15 - 24 years	30.9	24.9	23.1	23.9	28.2	-2.7
25 - 34 years	78.3	75.7	70.2	70.3	74.3	-4
35 - 54 years	76.8	77.2	72.8	77.3	80.2	3.4
25 - 54 years	77.4	76.8	72	75.3	78.7	1.3
55 - 64 years	45.8	44.1	37.1	41.5	47.5	1.7
15 - 64 years	62.5	61	56.4	59.9	64.4	1.9
15 years and over	53.7	51.2	47.1	48.3	50.2	-3.5
<b>Rural</b>	2007	2010	2011	2016	2020	
15 - 24 years	38.6	27.6	25	27.1	32.4	-6.2
25 - 34 years	78.6	72.9	65.5	66.3	72.3	-6.3
35 - 54 years	79.2	78	71.3	75.3	76.8	-2.4
25 - 54 years	79	76.4	69.5	72.7	75.6	-3.4
55 - 64 years	58.5	56.3	43.8	47.5	52.6	-5.9
15 - 64 years	66.9	63.1	55.9	59.6	63.7	-3.2
15 years and over	56.7	52.4	46.3	47.6	49.7	-7

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

The evolutions registered in demographic profile, including the level of employment, registered a much more accentuated rhythm than that of the number of pensioners or of the number of families for which social benefits are supported.

Thus, although the period 2007-2020 is characterized by a decline in the number of state social insurance pensioners, in the South-Muntenia region there are a number of 711854 pensioners, Prahova and Argeş counties being on the first two positions in this point of view. Basically, the number of employees per pensioner increased from 6.9 (2007) to no less than 7.6 (2020), representing an increase of approx. 10.6%.

Moreover, although the number of families receiving social benefits is decreasing, it should not be overlooked that in 2020, in the South-Muntenia region were in payment a number of 29320 families, 26% of them being registered in Teleorman County, followed at a short distance by Argeş, Dâmboviţa and Prahova (Table 10).

**Table 10. Evolution of the average number of social benefits paid (families) at the level of the South-Muntenia region and local (county) (no.)**

	2011	2016	2020	2020/2011 (%)
South-Muntenia region	35,205	47,155	29,320	-16.7
Argeş	6,372	8,305	5,446	-14.5
Călăraşi	4,067	5,141	2,863	-29.6
Dâmboviţa	6,685	8,620	4,713	-29.5
Giurgiu	3,152	4,294	2,316	-26.5
Ialomiţa	2,903	4,144	2,632	-9.3
Prahova	4,575	5,633	3,740	-18.3
Teleorman	7,451	11,018	7,610	2.1

Source: Own calculations on the Tempo – Online database, NIS, 2021.

## CONCLUSIONS

The evolutions of the current demographic 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, the demographic system must be a real priority among the decision-makers.

The high degree of uncertainty regarding the improvement of the demographic structure of the population, in the context of the existence of totally unbalanced age pyramids, the deterioration of demographic indicators, the increase of life expectancy are elements that will generate additional pressure on labor, but also on labor costs. social assistance.

In the context of the involutions registered in the demographic system of the South-Muntenia region, we consider necessary the implementation of measures aimed, first of all, at increasing the birth rate, correlated with support measures for mothers for faster reintegration into activity, as well as ensuring the necessary support. childcare, in particular through the development of the childcare system through nurseries or homes.

The simple financial support given to mothers who give birth to more children, either in the form of higher allowances, or the reduction of the retirement age, does not solve the problem in the context in which the level of economic development and the ability to support a larger family of children differs significantly from one community to another, depending on the level of income obtained.

On the other hand, the creation of new jobs, through financial support provided from public or private resources, or even as a result of the public-private partnership, will be able to ensure a higher degree of employment among young people. This aspect is all the more important as the increase in life expectancy generates an increasing pressure on the working age population, as an alternative to support, among others, the funds allocated to the pension system.

Closely related to the demographic system, but also as part of social policy, the need to implement measures to protect the elderly, but also the current policy of granting social assistance has proved completely ineffective.

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