

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE ON SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN HARGHITA COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Harghita county initiated the creation of fifteen microregions on its territory in the year 1999. Almost every settlement belongs to one (and only one) microregion today. Pogány-havas Microregion Association is one example of this. These microregions aren't part of the national or EU administrative system (NUTS 4, LAU 1) but they were created as NGOs, funded by municipalities, local enterprises and NGOs. There is no doubt that our county has assured an advantage by establishing its system infrastructure through this microregional programme. These microregions play an active role in rural development especially in the perspective of LEADER. Promoting the microregions is one of the most important capacity building and local governance development initiatives in the country.

Today we can see that the formation of the microregional organizations is one of the best accomplishments within the institutional building processes of the past ten years. Although the efficiency of the microregions differs from one place to the other, and some are fighting self-sustainability issues, the overall institutional building process can be regarded as successful. And there is a lot more at stake here than merely the setting up of 15 microregional organizations! But this is an accomplishment in itself, since microregional organizations in Romania were first set up in Harghita County – all of them being grounded in local requirements – with no support and/or initiative coming from the national planning authorities. This building process has generated several outcomes, which – in the mid- and/or long term – may be crucial to the future of the region.

This multi-actor and multi-level work has launched irreversible processes in the region. It is possible that some microregions will cease to operate sooner or later, but the ideology and methodology of regional development has already been settled, and can no longer be disregarded. The principle, that development requires an accurate identification of the existing situation, as well as local initiatives and planning, has become widely known in the region. Fewer local self-government-related actors need to keep explaining that waiting for „central” money is not a useful strategy, and that we must learn how to win resources. And that no progress is possible without an efficient cooperation framework, as none of the localities is strong enough to manage on its own. Another result of the long-lasting preparatory and ground work is the fact that the sixth group of students studying regional development at Sapientia University in Miercurea Ciuc will graduate this year. If we add all of these accomplishments to the several organizations, associations and foundations involved in local and/or micro-regional development, and if we list their programs, as well as their activities, then we are entitled to say that the idea and also the practice of regional development in Harghita County has already become an outstanding feature.

However, the most important element of this multi-factor process is the existence of an efficient and operational microregional institutional structure. During the past ten years we have managed to create an institutional and human resource network that is ready and able to act as an efficient receiver of all the know-how targeted to our region.