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Interfaces

# A VISION FOR RURAL AREAS

MAP Position Paper



## LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS: CONTRIBUTION FROM 20 SCIENCE- SOCIETY-POLICY PLATFORMS

### MAP POSITION PAPER

RURAL TRANSYLVANIA

ROMANIA

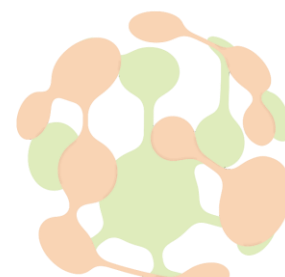
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## 1. Headline message

The main trends in the evolution of Transylvania's rural area differ depending on the particularities of rural micro-zones, namely:

- in the rural areas from the plain, agriculture intensification will continue, alongside with land consolidation, monocropping expansion, loss of biodiversity and decline in the number of jobs;
- the areas with relief fragmentation (hilly and mountain areas covered by protection areas where small-scale farming prevails) are at risk of remaining less accessible and attractive despite the diversity of local resources;
- peri-urban areas (in the proximity of large cities – economic growth poles) towards the status of residential villages with modern infrastructure, attractive for young people and also, agri-food supply basins for town markets.

*The economic and social revitalisation based on a local approach* can be a viable solution for the sustainable development of rural Transylvania through:

- defining SMART rural development based on local opportunity and constraints;
- mobilisation and involvement of all rural actors;
- building / developing / consolidating the rural-urban linkages.

**Keywords:** *SMART village, local approach, participative vision, Transylvania.*

## 2. Key scientific evidence

Diversity is the main characteristic of the territory covered by MAP Transylvania, whether we refer to resources, landscapes, culture, social or economic dynamics. While in terms of development opportunities, diversity translates into multiple potentialities, the ability to perceive and exploit them is different in space and time, which acts against territorial convergence.

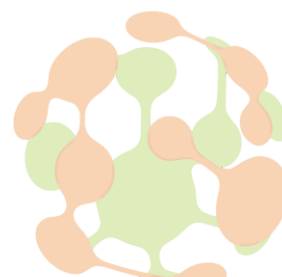
On the basis of the statistical evidence and of the main strategic documents to the horizon 2040, the main trends can be detected, as well as the opportunities and challenges facing the rural area in Transylvania.

The main trends charactering rural Transylvania can be summarised as follows:

- Increase of disparities in the economic development level and in the endowment with transport and technical infrastructure (roads, drinking water supply, sewerage network) and basic services (healthcare, education, culture) between the rural and intermediate regions;
- Population concentration in the proximity of cities with a fast-growing dynamic accompanied by the depopulation of peripheral rural areas, with deficit of services and poor accessibility;
- Agricultural intensification and land operation concentration to the detriment of small farms and of crop and agrarian landscape diversity.

The main challenges facing the Transylvanian rural area:

- The shortage of (skilled) labour that prevents the development and diversification of the rural business sector, generates the concentration of farmland operation on the large farms, the disappearance of small-sized (family) farms, as well as the expansion of monocropping in the plain areas;



- The lack of non-agricultural employment opportunities in the economy of rural communities leads to the acceleration of young generation's migration flows;
- The poor accessibility and deficit in providing basic services for the population (healthcare, education and culture) and enterprises (consultancy) in the peripheral rural areas makes these areas less attractive for living and capital investment;
- The strategic focus on strengthening the (large scale) agricultural sector does not create sufficient premises for the sustainability of rural communities.

The main opportunities that can support the development of Transylvania's countryside are the following:

- Existence of urban poles with accelerated upward economic dynamics that enhance the development of adjacent rural areas, creating premises for the integration of small farmers in the short supply chains and increasing the supply of agri-food products with a low carbon footprint;
- Population concentration in the proximity of large cities and the well-developed IT infrastructure increase access to basic services for the rural population;
- The expansion of NATURA2000 sites and of other natural protected areas creates favourable premises for biodiversity preservation, maintenance of family farming, multiplication of activities and diversification of income sources in the peripheral rural areas (by facilitating the development of on-farm agro-tourism activities, ensuring the necessary framework for the increase of organic farming practices, increasing the attractiveness of rural areas for potential tourists seeking recreation in a less anthropised natural setting).

### 3. Summary of the outcomes of the Delphi

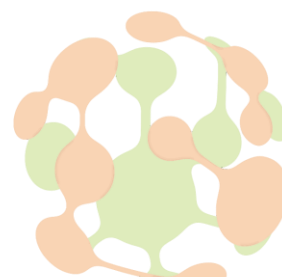
The Delphi method was used for outlining a common vision for rural Transylvania for the next 20 years. 3 methodological steps were followed throughout the year 2020, namely:

- step 1 (focus group and/or interviews) brought together 11 stakeholders representing the main categories of rural actors (policy, society and science) to draw a general perspective on the future of Transylvania's rural area;
- step 2 (questionnaire-based survey applied online) intended to prioritise the regional problems and solutions from the perspective of the three categories of regional actors. The field survey was answered by 104 persons, 60 civil society actors, 23 representatives from the political arena and 21 representatives of the academic sector;
- step 3 (online debate) brought together the members of MAP Transylvania to discuss and reach an agreement on an integrated vision for the future of rural Transylvania towards 2040.

#### 3.1. Challenges and opportunities in the next 20 years

On the basis of the three rounds of discussions with rural stakeholders, the main premises underpinning the long-term vision of the future were outlined in the form of opportunities that could be truly exploited by rural areas and of the main challenges that could impact the putting into value of regional opportunities in the next 20 years.

The main **weaknesses** that hinder the ability of rural areas to take advantage of the available opportunities are, to a large extent, determined by the limitations of the current policy approaches to agriculture and rural development as well as by the multitude of public intervention instruments and the lack of synergy between them.



- The prioritisation of public investments in the development/modernisation of rural infrastructures and services towards rural communities considered demographically “viable” (with a large number of inhabitants (with more than 2000 people) and high population density – WB, 2014) and the low focus on integrating the investments in rural infrastructures and services lead to maintaining *the low access of small rural communities outside the sphere of influence of large cities* to transport and technical infrastructure and to basic services serving both the local population and business. These make villages less attractive for living (mainly for the young generation) and for investors (that seek to place their investments in the areas that facilitate the production and sale of their products and services).

Unlike the other rural actors, the civil society representatives placed a particular focus on the difficult access to advisory services in the rural area that could support both agricultural and non-agricultural businesses.
- Prioritising interventions through CAP and national programmes to consolidate large-sized farms, on the grounds that these are commercially oriented, *has limited and continues to restrict access to finance (credits / subsidies, etc.) of small-scale family farms, reducing their chances to develop*. In the conditions of small-scale farming prevalence in the peripheral rural areas and the prevalence of agricultural employment in villages, the lack of funding leads to the abandonment of agricultural activities and makes it difficult to imagine the multifunctional orientation of small family farms. Also, limited access to financial resources hinders consolidation, specialisation and market orientation of the family farms that continue to work. The continuation of land consolidation into large farms, as well as the abandonment of (traditional, extensive) farming activities can have significant consequences on the diversity of rural habitats and landscapes, as well as on deepening social exclusion in villages.

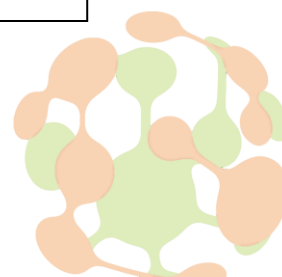
In this context, the societal respondents emphasised that directing subsidies and other financial aids to consolidate large-sized farms results in a significant decrease of small farms and monocropping expansion, with negative consequences on biodiversity, mainly in the plain areas. There are also minority views that support the continuation of public interventions in their current formula.
- The LEADER approach to rural development is still in the stage in which it is looking for the most effective operation mechanisms in Romania. As a consequence, there is a *limited functionality of local governance* that leads to adopting generic solutions that in many cases respond only partially to the specific local needs. The representatives of all rural actors agreed on the fact that in the countryside there is an acute lack of local leadership, public-private partnerships are dysfunctional (even formal in many cases) and the development strategies are generic, without a clear vision on capitalising on the concrete potential of rural communities. Moreover, there is a great reluctance to horizontal and vertical cooperation in the private sector (illustrated by the lack of cooperation in the agri-food chain) which leads to the dysfunctionality of the rural business environment.

In this context, the academics representatives emphasized the focus of rural strategies on primary agricultural production (considered as a driver of development) as a factor that does not stimulate sustainable growth.

Considering the main constraints mentioned above, **the main opportunities** that Transylvania’s rural area can capitalise on in the next 20 years are the following:

- Integration of rural economy at micro-regional market level based* on the changing trend in attitude of both consumers and rural entrepreneurs. On the one hand, the demand for local products and the preference to buy (directly) from local rural producers is growing (mainly in the big cities – growth poles). On the other hand, the small and medium rural producers are getting primarily oriented towards short distribution channels, which facilitate a better understanding of market signals and increases the chances of adaptation to the changing preferences of final consumers.

The societal representatives appreciated to a greater extent the COVID experience than the participants in the other groups, as a future opportunity through: rural facilities for organising telework’ suitable places; short supply chains operated online, to provide urban population with agri-food products; rural tourism.



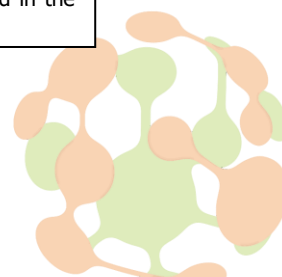
- *Better capitalisation of local (natural and anthropic) resources* through sustainable use of agricultural land and putting into value the natural protected areas, pastoral landscapes and cultural heritage (especially, in the peripheral rural areas). Both directions meet the growing demand for local agricultural and agri-food resources on the regional and local market, as well as for (agro)tourism services for national and foreign tourists looking for pristine landscapes or tourist villages, willing to experience country life in a traditional form.
- *The general European trend towards a rural economy with a lowest impact on the environment* is appreciated as a relatively accessible opportunity in an area where the use of chemical inputs in small-scale farming is limited (mainly in peripheral rural areas). Also, there is a large volume of agricultural by-products and non-agricultural resources at low cost that could be mobilised in circular economy and in the production of green energy anywhere in the countryside.
- There is a *high potential to use quality schemes for agri-food products* in Transylvania but its fruition depends on increasing awareness, information and advertising among consumers.

### 3.2. Desirable future for 2040

The socio-economic revitalisation of rural Transylvania in the next 20 years has at its centre **the local approach of strategies and intervention measures** whose order of priorities is presented below.

- **Improving the access** of population and enterprises from all rural communities **to modern infrastructures and services:**
  - Increasing accessibility, mainly for peripheral rural communities, by expanding the modernised road network to facilitate the movement of people and goods and reduce the risk of depopulation generated by rural isolation;
  - Expanding the technical infrastructure and facilities (drinking water supply, sewerage network, natural gas supply network, electricity, internet), education and health services or their modernisation will increase the comfort and living standards in rural settlements. Thus, creates a favourable setting for business development and ensures favourable conditions for carrying out tele-work activities;
  - Improving the knowledge transfer through advisory services and other rural multipliers (including foreign citizens who settled in the rural area) to stimulate local entrepreneurial discovery and boost the rural business environment.
- **Local rural economy diversification:**
  - Encouraging and supporting rural business environment diversification and vertical integration of economic operators (primary production with processing and the tertiary sector – tourism, marketing, trade). Thus, the employment opportunities get diversified and the new non-agricultural jobs become attractive for the young generation;
  - Encouraging and supporting the local brands (based on local heritage or specificity), promoting these local brands and consolidating the business environment around these specificities This approach can contribute to the recognition, assuming and assertion of local identity as a symbolic capital with high potential to be exploited / to acquire economic value;
  - Encouraging and supporting the openness to innovation and digitalisation in the rural communities while maintaining local specificity. Resistance to change is an intrinsic human characteristic and to overcome people's reluctance to adopt new ideas, techniques and technologies it is necessary for them to understand the costs, benefits,

In the opinion of representatives from the political arena, innovation and digitalisation represent the most important direction that can support rural revitalisation, yet from the perspective of societal actors, it ranks last in the hierarchy of actions to be followed in the next 20 years.



advantages and risks involved by the adoption of innovation. The use of new innovations often involves acquiring new skills, which raises the issue of lifelong learning programmes that take into account the technological advance;

- Supporting the creation and development of functional public-private partnerships and promoting the structured dialogue for the harmonisation of local actors' interests so that the local development plans can be assumed by all the involved rural actors.
- **Strengthening family farming** by facilitating the capitalisation and market integration of this category of farms:
  - Supporting the development of agro-ecology and consolidation of medium-sized farms, integrated into agri-food chains, can contribute to generational renewal and stop the demographic decline in the countryside;
  - Strengthening the urban - rural links through the development of short supply chains and increase of rural residential supply offer favourable to teleworking can lead to maintaining the viability of rural areas in the proximity of large cities;
  - Encouraging the orientation towards circular economy leads to a more efficient use of agricultural by-products (suitable for processing into green energy sources) that family farms have in abundance and they only partially use.

### 3.3. Enablers to achieve the vision

The factors that could contribute to achieving the long-term vision, in the opinion of MAP Transylvania members, target two categories of conditions:

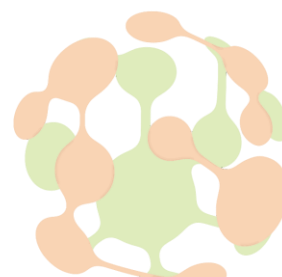
- pre-existing conditions that facilitate the achievement of the vision;
- partially satisfied conditions at MAP territory level that need to be improved to achieve the vision.

The pre-existing conditions that can facilitate the achievement of the vision are the following:

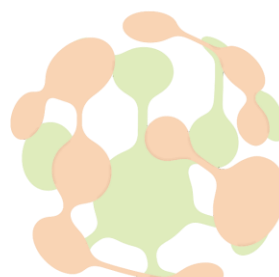
- *Existence of good practice models in sustainable rural development.* Successful models in community development exist and their promotion and dissemination on large scale provides examples to follow that can be adapted in other rural areas;
- *Digitalisation.* The upward trend in the expansion of networks and internet access, including the isolated rural areas, facilitates access to IoT services as well as to e-education, e-healthcare and favours tele-working, representing an important asset for rural areas;
- *The European guidelines and programmes* that support the economic and social convergence, as well as green deal is a fulcrum for the development strategies based on local approach, as they focus on decentralisation and address problems and solutions in a regional context;

The second category of conditions is considered a priority by Transylvanian stakeholders and includes:

- *Partnerships / cooperation between local actors.* For a local approach-based vision to become effective, the involvement of all rural actors is necessary to co-discover, co-create and co-implement local strategies. This exercise still needs support mechanisms to facilitate structured dialogue and reaching a consensus;
- *Professionalisation of local actors.* The development of rural actors' skills and abilities is needed, mainly of public service employees, to animate the territory and mobilise the community, so that all rural actors can be actively and effectively involved, from the bottom up, in formulating long-term strategies. The poor entrepreneurship education does not make it possible to discover new business ideas and maintains the rural area dependency on agriculture;



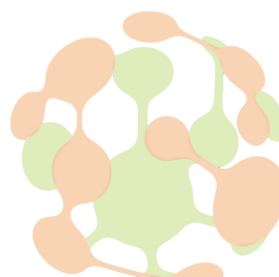
- *Increasing involvement (of rural actors) in active civil society actions in the rural area.* In Transylvania there are several NGOs with community involvement and a greater adherence to civil society activities can be a good starting point in building functional rural partnerships;
- *Raising public awareness of the socio-economic implications of local development in rural areas.* In the last ten years, a series of initiatives to promote the local specificity by affirming the gastronomic and cultural traditions as well as the archaic pastoral landscapes have contributed to the increase of the general public interest in the products and services offered by the rural areas and at the same time stimulated their diversification.



## Annex 1. Methodology used in the MAP

To synthesize the vision on the future of Transylvania's rural area, the 6-step Delphi method has been used, implemented in the period April – October 2020.

- Step 1 – Contextual analysis (April – June):
  - analysis of secondary statistical data to identify the main socio-economic and environmental trends that characterise the area covered by MAP Rural Transylvania, both overall and in territorial profile;
  - content analysis of the main national, regional, sectoral strategic documents that directly or indirectly address the future of rural area in order to highlight their main orientations;
- Step 2 – Focus group / interviews with MAP members (first half of June 2020). MAP members were selected to represent the 3 categories of rural actors involved in rural development (research / education, political-administrative arena, civil society). Two focus groups with 5 participants each and an individual interview were organised to discuss the main challenges and opportunities in the next 20 years, as well as MAP members' opinions on the future of Transylvania's rural area towards 2040;
- Step 3 – Synthesis of results from the contextual analysis and interviews in the form of a Discussion Paper (first half of July 2020). The Discussion Paper presents the regional opportunities and constraints both in terms of statistical indicators and from the point of view of MAP Transylvania members, as well as the development directions in Transylvania's rural area;
- Step 4 – Questionnaire-based survey (July – August). The synthesis achieved in the previous step documented the formulation of the questionnaire whose main purpose is to establish a hierarchy of regional challenges and opportunities as well as of the factors that can act as catalysts in the future development of rural Transylvania. The questionnaire was disseminated online and collected the opinions of 104 respondents, out of which 60% are respondents from the societal arena, 20% are representatives of the political arena and other 20% are representatives of research / education sector;
- Step 5 – Analysis of field survey results and formulation of the draft Position Paper MAP Rural Transylvania (September 2020);
- Step 6 – Validation of field survey results with the MAP members and reaching a consensus on the vision for rural Transylvania for the next 20 years in order to finalise the Position Paper of the region. This methodological step is implemented in the form of a consensus meeting, organised online, with the participation of 9 MAP Transylvania members (mid-October) supplemented by individually points of view transmitted via e-mail by all MAP members.





## Annex 2. References

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