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Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

MAP Position Paper

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF RURAL AREAS



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1. Summary and key messages

The importance and relevance of social infrastructure is shared by MAP stakeholders. It is recognised that it is a less studied subject. Few actions have been undertaken to address the real needs of social infrastructure in rural areas in a systematic way.

In this paper, when we discuss the social infrastructure, we also consider health-related services, education and training, social care and sponsorship programmes, security and other judicial infrastructure, public services, entertainment and leisure capacity. Having in mind the broadness of the concept for the social infrastructure, we made an additional prioritisation and focusing with the participation of our MAP members to highlight the most important elements for rural areas in Bulgaria. The key elements that nowadays really matters and determine the rural development are ranked to: health care, education system, social cares and administrative services. It is unambiguously underlined that social infrastructure in rural areas lags behind the same in urban areas and some of the cause for it is the limited public funding.

With the exception of the Rural Development Program, in other Operational Programs of EU, there is no special priority for rural areas. The key components of the social infrastructure (health care, education, social care, etc.) are included in the field of those programs' implementation but very little is allocated to rural areas. It is very often that due to demarcation, rural areas are excluded from some interventions. At the same time, the funds for social inclusion and social infrastructure in the Rural Development Program are not sufficient to meet the growing needs for social services in rural areas, which is serious disadvantage eventuating many of people to prefer to stay and move to urban areas independently they have conditions and properties in rural areas. The inadequate and less provided social services in rural areas are considerable factor for depopulation and migration and for the increasing gap between urban and rural demography.

It becomes very keen that the public support is indispensable to provide the overall evolvement of social infrastructure and that the efforts should be designated not only to physical infrastructure but also mostly to immediate human beings and communities' needs. Regarding to more efficient use of financial resources and, while noting the real needs and outcomes yielded by different interventions, MAP members agreed that public support to direct social services is more beneficial for local communities than the investment in physical infrastructure. It is underlined that the investment in buildings and material assets is valuable but more useful and beneficial is the investment in providing better access to medical care and educational training and knowledge. The local people are interested to see tangible improvement in health care access, to receive opportunities to study and participate without travelling and movement to other places in the educational programs of best schools. It is very realistic and feasible in the era of digital technologies and innovations, which assumes the success in this direction.

The support must consider the direct needs of local people and communities in rural areas as well as should be oriented to create a social infrastructure, which provides conditions for attracting young people to stay and settle in rural areas. Similar to the measure for set up of electronic services in public administration, it can also be strengthened for rural areas, which are more distanced from the municipal centres and the access to social services, information and opportunities are limited and relatively costly. In order to achieve better outcomes and to target rationally the public funding, it is recommended to do more in-depth analysis in the field of social infrastructure and social capital needs. The rural areas are quite divergent across EU, which imposes a better knowing about specifics, characteristics and needs of different rural types. It will lead to a better understanding of rural areas and will facilitate in outlining more precise and common definitions for rural areas. Altogether, deepening the research, achieving structured classification of rural areas and targeting especially rural areas in all Operational Programs in relation to social infrastructure will contribute significantly to change and revitalise rural communities and their areas.

2. Introduction

This MAP is focused on assessing the state of the social infrastructure in Bulgaria and how it influences the development of the rural areas and villages. The position is formulated and elaborated based on the research and in-depth analysis of the rural environment in Bulgaria and dialogue and ideas generated proposed and acceded within the MAP. When we talk about social infrastructure, it implies and encompasses many different components, aspects and resources. The social infrastructures are created to enhance social comfort and to promote economic activity. According to Gianpiero (2009), these include schools and educational system, parks and playgrounds, public safety structures, waste disposal facilities, hospitals and health care, social assistance, etc. The extended framework we use includes health-related services, education and training, social care and patronage programs, security and other judicial body, public services, entertainment facilities. Some studies and concepts available consider inside the infrastructure such as roads, railways, transportation etc., which helps free movement but we in that paper that infrastructure is not envisaged because it is perceived as an element of physical infrastructure rather than the infrastructure directly contributing to social development and social building.

On one hand, the state of the social infrastructure is a consequence of long-standing traditions, implemented policies and corresponding resource accumulations over the path of development of several decades. To a large extent this is also a consequence of the long-term absence of comprehensive strategies with clearly defined and harmonised policies with correspondingly established priorities, mechanisms and legislation in the individual sectors of the social infrastructure. The social infrastructure, which during the communism period was in the core of the social development, it was subject to severe decline in the post-communism period due mainly to lack of adequate funding. The accent after 90's of last century was posed on the private wealth and realisation and little was invested in maintaining and building up the social infrastructure and public used services, which leads to a degradation of the social services. The situation in the rural areas regarding the social infrastructure is more complicated and worsened due to additional disadvantages in these areas connected to depopulation and demographic backdrop.

On the other hand, the state and direction of change of the social infrastructure is a factor of high importance for the social development of the country and especially for its convergence in the regional plan. The favourable influence of this factor is expressed in the attenuation of migration processes, in the creation of conditions for the activation of economic activity and, accordingly, an increase in the economic employment of the population in individual municipalities and regions, in the revival and complex development of settlements. This specific feature of the social infrastructure predetermines the complexity of the solutions to its problems in the context of seeking a balance between national and regional interests.

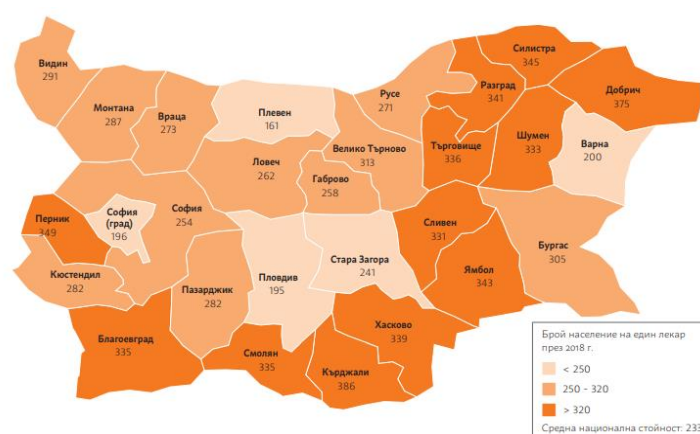
In Bulgaria there are several national policies that are in place that are directly related to the topics of the MAP as well as Rural development policies from the EU. Most of the MAP members conclude that better policies for most of the sub-topics of the MAP should be created. EU policies are designated to improve and expand the level of services in the rural areas predominantly by the Rural Development Program but the needs exceed considerably the resources allocated to social infrastructure. MAP members unanimously agree that more should be done by national funding and counting not only to EU programs but also on straightforward national financing and provisions. The social infrastructure is perceived as an indispensable element in order to achieve change in the rural development and revive rural areas. The backward of social services compared to those in urban areas, the weaknesses in the medical facilities, health care, educational system, possibilities for entertainment and amusement do not help the return of the young population to rural areas and do not create conditions for turning the negative trend. As a guideline, the UN report proposes strategies for harmonising the SDGs as a means of ensuring sustainable and sustainable rural development through investments in institutions, technologies for water and land use, and circular and conservation practices. Creation of better road standards on national level combined with change of structure of budgets of rural areas. EU policy measures should be moved towards investment in big scale infrastructures, creation of small hospitals and schools that are up to modern standards. New infrastructure should be created and

incentives given to doctors, nurses, teachers to move and work in rural areas. Specialisations and free education should be an incentive for working in villages.

3. Current situation based on background research and evidence

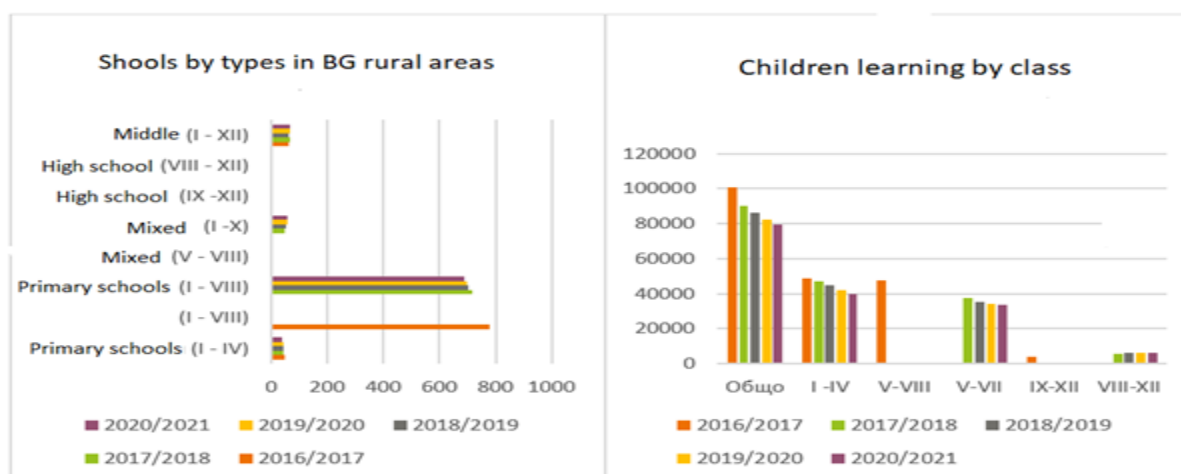
The health care is the pivotal part of the social infrastructure. The main task of health care is to improve the health status of the population by providing quality service in the provision of health care in every geographical point of the country and, accordingly, in its districts and planning regions. The health profile of the Bulgarian rural communes was examined with data from the NSI report on health care for 2021. In Bulgaria, most of the medical facilities are in the big cities and for elderly people because of bad road networks and lack of transportation. Many of the young families who would move to a rural municipality refuse precisely because of the lack of doctors, especially if there is a small child in the family. The high rate of aging population that cannot afford regular visits to big cities and timely intervention also contributes to high premature mortality. The uneven distribution of medical facilities, medical professionals and services across the country also complicates access, with rural areas often disadvantaged while larger cities are oversupplied.

Fig. 1. Regional distribution of doctors



Source: NSI

According to the EU report, in the first place in the social infrastructure, it is education, including and the professional, which plays an active role in the development of human resources and is therefore a very important area of participation of the Structural Funds of the European Union. The primary place and importance of the education system in the social infrastructure, both nationally and regionally, is determined by its role as an essential factor for economic growth, social prosperity and harmonious regional development. Two processes, characterised by a certain contradiction, influence her condition. The number of kindergartens in rural areas is significantly decreasing, with data available only up to 2016, but the process continues to deepen in recent years and the trend is to reduce the number of kindergartens and the number of children enrolled in them in rural areas. The demographic crisis in Bulgaria combined with the decline of the social infrastructure in Bulgaria are fundamental to this trend.



The lack of good education and the older base represent a problem for the development of rural areas and the overall development of the country, due to the lack of well-educated workers. The relative change in the number of schools provides information on access to education and on demographic development in rural municipalities.

A total of 1181 villages have disrupted water supply. There are a total of 353 settlements (villages) in rural areas with water quality issues. This affects both the quality of life and the health status of the inhabitants of these villages, the lack of drinking water and water suitable for needs of the population is unacceptable in the 21st century.

Access to broadband Internet access to the Internet in villages is 58%. Increasing the quality of the connection would improve the work and learning of the robotic hand and facilitate the learning process especially in emergency situations like COVID-19 or disaster situations. Bulgaria has high-speed internet, but there is a problem with coverage in some small towns and remote settlements in rural areas. As a result of uneven coverage and the existence of white areas, there is still a population deprived of the Internet and online services and information, which also places them in a kind of social isolation. In most of the villages, there are community centres that play the role of cultural centres and centres for events in the rural areas. They provide services related to recreation, cultural development, sports, training, etc. Many of the community centres in rural areas have an outdated material base and more and more of them have reduced functions for the implementation of these activities.

In terms of basic services and existing infrastructure, it is stated that there are significant differences between rural and non-rural areas. The growing number and share of old people (aged 65+) pose serious challenges to social assistance and social service systems, which are more severe and detrimental in rural areas. The social patronage provided to lonely old people who live in small settlements is very important and needed in order to prevent those people to fall in a state of social isolation and to meet needs of those people in their daily life. The social cares in rural areas is reported to be underscored compared to non-rural areas, which is due to lack of appropriate logistic and suitable human capacity to be involved. It should be noticed that the distance and cumbered access to villages is a major factor in establishment of a better social patronage in rural areas. For example, it is reported that during the winter months, many of the roads in the country remain unclean and difficult to drive through them, which impedes the accessibility to rural areas. The departments of social services are placed in urban centres and less attention and logistic is ensured to rural areas. By contrast, a growing trend of building hospices for elderly in rural areas is observed along with predominant part of aging population in rural areas has been observed. This demonstrates the discrepancies between the existing structures and organisation and identified needs in terms of social care.

4. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

4.1. Identified needs

The lack of social infrastructure exacerbates an already existing problem. The reality is that in many small settlements, flexible solutions have become necessary. They are often outside the legislative framework. Such a solution would be to make the mayor or the deputy mayor be responsible for access to medicines, including collecting the prescription books of the elderly population. There are very dangerous examples of illegal trade.

According to the preliminary evaluation of the European Social Fund and its "Human Resources Operational Program", part of the main challenges facing Bulgaria is the high level of unemployment and the high proportion of students who drop out of schools. Statistics show that these problems are much deeper in rural areas. The purpose of social infrastructure is to facilitate human interaction and foster a sense of community. This can be achieved through establishing common spaces that can be used for different purposes. These include public places such as libraries, parks and cafes. It can also include public spaces such as sidewalks, highways, and the Internet. Many spaces are public, such as libraries, parks and cafes. These spaces can be used for different purposes and promote a sense of community.

In Bulgaria, there is still a working infrastructure of community centres in rural areas that have further potential. The strong sense of community in the villages allows positive changes to be easily brought about with their help.

The existing structure of pharmacies can benefit from more advanced technologies and supply channels. Existing road infrastructure can be repaired by the introduction of longer lasting materials and new methods to improve road life.

The rural social sphere is a part of the socio-economic complex, determined by the peculiarities of agricultural production. Its formation and functioning rests on the prevailing organisational-economic model. Social infrastructures are created to increase social comfort and promote the economic activity of the population in rural municipalities.

It has also been added (by Dr. Daniela Tsvyatkovska) that Bulgaria faces challenges in a number of social indicators. It still has the highest number of people living at risk of poverty or social exclusion, as well as high levels of income inequality. The education and training system continues to face major challenges, including providing quality inclusive education and tackling early school leaving. The level of digital skills of the population continues to be low, and this was most evident during the COVID pandemic. Despite improvements in labour market outcomes, low-skilled people, Roma and people with disabilities continue to face significant difficulties in finding work. Large regional and spatial disparities continue to exist. The risk of poverty or social exclusion is less prominent in the North-West region than in the South-West region, which includes the capital Sofia. Income levels differ substantially between urban and rural areas; the gap in household income between rural and urban residents is one of the most pronounced in the EU.

The provision of social services is hampered by their low quality, limited accessibility and lack of an integrated approach. The provision of most types of social services within the territory of individual districts is insufficient, necessitating further investments. This is a problem especially in smaller and rural municipalities, where there is a serious shortage of services for children and adults, especially for home care, day care, mobile and integrated services.

Services are mainly provided according to the availability of resources, rather than according to the needs of the vulnerable person. The fragmentation of service delivery reduces the effectiveness of the support they provide, as integrated services can simultaneously address different problems among vulnerable populations. At the same time, the social services sector suffers from high staff turnover, limited training and low

standards for the qualifications of social workers. One of the most important areas is the development of new spheres of activity in rural areas, namely the diversification of the rural economy.

In her view the potential of the social sphere in rural areas is a complex of resources located in a given territory - human, material, natural, which participate in the process of social development, and also include financial resources used for growth and increasing the degree of quality of human life. Showing the problems of the social sphere in the rural areas gives reason to form the conclusion that appropriate "good practices" and mechanisms that could be multiplied in Bulgaria: clear, uniform and concrete principles for all areas.

In the opinion of NGOs, many Bulgarians still face significant obstacles in accessing healthcare. There is a shortage of nurses and general practitioners, and doctors are unevenly distributed. Limited access to health care and low health care costs are among the factors that have a negative impact on the health status of the population.

According to the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (KNSB), the development of the agricultural sector and rural areas, including its scientific and technical support, can be carried out through an integrated approach, using almost all programs co-financed by the European structural and investment funds. Digitalisation and internet connection as well as access to basic social infrastructures are crucial for the development of rural areas and their revitalisation.

International Social Service (ISS) notes with concern that with the introduction of new technologies, a process of increasing inequalities in income, wealth, intellectual property, etc. is observed. This NGO also notes that access to connectivity and social infrastructures are a decisive factor for the economic and social development of rural and mountainous areas, where the influence of the demographic crisis is particularly strong.

Increasing investment in skills, education, training and social inclusion is important for improving productivity and generating long-term inclusive growth. The persistently high level of early school leaving and the low educational outcomes of part of the population highlight the need for significant investment, especially in early childhood education, school and vocational education and training, including in the relevant infrastructures. Active inclusion and targeted support for vulnerable groups, including Roma, as well as improving the accessibility and quality of integrated social and health services while paying due attention to geographical disparities.

Dr. Rositza Mikova stated that the development and maintenance of the educational infrastructure in rural areas is directly related to the optimisation of the network of educational institutions in the structure of education. The low birth rate and the decreasing number of children are reasons for the systematic closure of dozens of educational institutions. The decreasing number of the educated population leads to a decrease in the number of students, and therefore - in the number of teachers and schools. The decrease in the number of children in rural areas of the country is also related to the designation of «protected schools». Sheltered schools are an possible approach to optimising the school network. The availability of schools is an issue - they are mainly located in cities where the number of students is greater than in the villages. Pupils who live in villages without schools and kindergartens move to larger cities in rural areas or to schools with protected status.

The state of the health infrastructure is extremely important, as it depends on the population's access to health services. In her opinion negative natural growth and migration to large cities and outside the country, aging of the population in rural areas, are factors that determine the type of health services. The number of medical facilities in rural areas is decreasing, including multi-specialty hospitals and diagnostic-consultative centres in rural municipalities, and outpatient medical facilities are increasing. The population living in some of the rural areas do not have equal opportunities to access hospital facilities, due to the distance of the settlements from the place of offering medical assistance (primary, specialised, hospital, emergency and urgent). The number of doctors (general practitioners) and health care medical specialists is declining. Access to specialised medical services for the population from villages in rural areas is difficult, due to the state of

health infrastructure, basic medical equipment and concentration of health care in the municipal centre or large cities, this adversely affects the health and health prevention of the population.

In the opinion of Petar Marinov the policy of the EU related to the development of SR does not coincide with that of Bulgaria in a number of socio-economic activities. When developing the EU funded Rural Programmes, the specific natural, socio-economic, demographic, religious, ecological and even geopolitical (border) features of these areas must be taken into account.

4.2. Existing interventions and actions

The lack of social infrastructure exacerbates already existing problems of the health system in rural areas. The National Health Strategy for the period up to 2020 lays down two priorities that are of key importance for people in rural areas: a) Targeted regional policy with special attention on the support of medical facilities in remote and small regions in the country and priority; b) Reorientation of the health system towards the prevention and prevention of socially significant diseases.

Failure to provide adequate and sustainable community infrastructure has long-term costs and consequences. These problems are particularly prominent in areas that are already disadvantaged or show signs of potential to become increasingly disadvantaged in the medium to long term. In Bulgaria, the rural areas are in a disadvantaged position. The municipal budgets are targeted to a greater extent towards large cities. As a result rural municipalities are again disadvantaged. The restructuring of municipal finances would have a positive effect for them. . The lack of sufficient budgets in rural municipalities leads to the decline of social infrastructure (closing of schools and kindergartens, lack of medical facilities, deterioration of the road network and ultimately depopulation). The Ministry of Regional Development and Welfare has prepared a Strategy for Decentralisation 2016 – 2025, which aims to introduction of preventative changes to avoid the aggravation of existing problems and as well as promoting the reduction of administrative burden. Healthcare and education, as key sectors in the social infrastructure, are one of the priority areas of the National Strategy for Regional Development (2012-2022).

One of the main policies that has impact on rural development is the EU Rural Development Programme. Different measures target different aspects of rural development. The present analysis focuses on measures related to improving the quality of life and diversifying the rural economy from the two Bulgarian rural development programmes for the successive EU budgetary periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2020.

The aim of Measure 321 "Basic services for the economy and population of rural areas" during the 2007-2013 EU Programming period was to support investments in infrastructure for the development of the following types of services for the rural population and economy in 178 rural municipalities:

- Cultural activities for the population of rural areas (cultural centres, theatres, libraries);
- Services related to leisure, recreation and sports (including sports centres, youth centres, etc.);
- Training (training centres);
- Social services - care for children (kindergartens, crèches), elderly and disabled people (day care centres), specialised transport services for the population in rural areas;
- Services for the population related to the use of information and communication technologies and centres for business, training and services based on information technologies (training, health advice, business support, municipal services, etc.);
- Installations/capacity for the production of heat and/or electricity for the municipality from renewable sources; distribution network for bio-fuels or biomass heat/electricity.

Measure 322 "Renovation and Development of Villages" provided support for: investments in road infrastructure, water supply and sanitation, parks and green areas, and buildings. It will be applied in 178

municipalities that are not included in urban agglomeration areas. Water supply and sewerage infrastructure will be supported in settlements throughout the country with a population of less than 2,000 equivalent inhabitants.

Type of supported activities:

- Construction, reconstruction and rehabilitation of municipal roads and bridges;
- Construction, reconstruction and rehabilitation of street network, sidewalks, squares, lighting;
- Construction and rehabilitation of water supply systems and facilities;
- Construction and rehabilitation of sewage systems and facilities;
- Restoration of public green areas - parks and gardens;
- Reconstruction and renovation of public buildings with historical and cultural significance;
- Renewal of the facades of private buildings (if they are included in an integrated plan for the renewal of the village).

For the 2014-2021 programming period, Measure 7: "Basic services and rural renewal" aimed to stimulate growth and improve the environmental and socio-economic sustainability of rural areas through the development of infrastructure and basic local services in rural areas. It included the following activities: renewal of settlements and aimed at the restoration and upgrading of cultural and natural heritage in settlements and their surroundings; Investments in the creation, improvement or expansion of all types of small-scale infrastructure, including investments in renewable energy and energy conservation; Creation of Broadband infrastructures, including its creation, improvement and expansion, as well as passive broadband infrastructure and measures to access solutions through broadband infrastructure and e-government; Investments in the creation, improvement or expansion of basic services at local level for the population in rural areas, including for recreation and cultural activities, as well as relevant infrastructure; Investments in recreation infrastructure, tourist information and small-scale tourism infrastructure. It also involved studies and investments related to the maintenance, restoration and improvement of the cultural and natural heritage of villages, rural landscapes and sites of high natural value, including relevant socio-economic aspects, as well as actions to increase environmental awareness.

Table 1 – Examples of actions taken by local actors

Local government
Municipal fund to support local initiatives
NGOs
NGOs like Big hearted people and help people in poverty by charity events. Provide food, pay household, medical or food bills. They function all over the country and especially in small rural villages with aging population.
Local groups
Yearly or biannual cleaning of the villages and help with maintaining of public property.
FB groups
Many small villages now have FB groups to discuss problems or events that have to be taken under consideration in the villages.
NGOs

Association of Bulgarian Villages - ABV is the first non-governmental organisation of its kind in Bulgaria, which for 14 years has represented before society and abroad the opportunities for the development of Bulgarian villages.

The main ABS activities:

- attracting investment in villages
- improving local, decentralised governance
- ensuring media coverage of hot topics affecting villages
- legislative initiatives concerning agriculture and regional development
- stimulating the processes of migration to the villages
- support initiatives for sustainable organic agriculture
- support for the development of rural tourism
- improving the security environment
- improving information awareness of farmers through professional agro news
- introduction of agro-innovations in agricultural holdings deployment of a Mentoring Program for personal support for village settlement

4.3. Recommendations from the MAP

Social infrastructures are a crucial and significant element to achieve a better well-being and welfare in rural areas. The severe disadvantages of rural areas that triggered their depopulation and diminishing of the social vitality. The unsatisfactory and degraded conditions of social infrastructure are more prominent in rural areas in comparison to urban settlements.

MAP Bulgaria members have taken a considerable interest in formulating and reviewing possible measures aimed at improving social infrastructure. The activities and steps undertaken to identify and write down the particular measures and instruments took place through in several stages.

First of all, the Institute for Agrarian Economics (IAE) project team reviewed the existing and currently implemented public interventions as well as those run in previous periods. Then, an analysis was made of various sources of evidence related to the social infrastructure, which are available in the statistical databases, as well as other data that provided a picture of state and the development, maintenance and distribution of social infrastructure. The preliminary study paid attention to what has been achieved through public funds, as these are one of the main sources through which social infrastructure projects have been financed in recent years.

The main source of information and data to draft the preliminary study of this Position paper was the socio-economic analysis. The needs assessment was derived from the SWOT analysis that preceded the strategic planning and elaboration of the Strategic Plan 2023-2027. From this body of analysis and further discussions within the MAP-Bulgaria itself analyses made and from the advisory work in MAP-Bulgaria, it became clear that before proposing specific measures and programmes it is important to have a clear strategic vision. This needs to address what is important to do in terms social infrastructure, exactly what types of infrastructure must be to encourage to be built, how to prioritise among the different types infrastructure and how to achieve more synergy and coordination between the different ways, funds and lines that will be used. The team provide summaries of the strategic directions that were put forward to MAP-Bulgaria members for their discussion and eventual approval. The reason for this is approach was that MAP availabilities were fairly limited in terms of having enough time and capacity to collecting information define strategic measures by

themselves. Reaching a consensus in drawing up proposals and conclusions was a decisive and pivotal aspect of the MAP's work. MAP members had the opportunity either to agree and endorse the proposals made to them and to propose alternative ones. The role of the IAE team was to prepare and implement the overall process by carrying out the studies, schematising the constructive proposals and summarising the results of the discussions of the MAP and shaping the finished outputs. This organisation of work allowed the MAP to achieve sufficient depth in terms of gathering evidence while ensuring that the involvement of MAP members was effective in carrying out their expected roles and functions.

4.3.1. Recommendations for future rural policies

The main consensus and shared opinion of MAP-Bulgaria is that delivering adequate and sufficient social infrastructure in rural areas is a key factor not only to preserve human potential, as well as having attractive living conditions for living that can entice newcomers to arrive and stem outward migration. Whatever potential rural areas may have in terms of natural resources, good atmosphere and available space, without sufficient and underlying social infrastructure, the opportunities in rural areas lag behind those of urban areas. At the same time, the social infrastructure directly influences the decisions of local people in rural communities to stay..

MAP-Bulgaria found social infrastructure should be prioritised among the various other actions to address the needs of people and communities. The main focus should be on measures and interventions that support the construction of infrastructures that are directly used by and benefit local communities. These priorities include health infrastructure, infrastructure for care of the elderly and infrastructure for better access to education and administrative services. For people from rural areas, it is quite important that the investments are targeted to individuals by catering their direct needs, thereby contributing to the quality of life and living conditions.

Thus, the following social infrastructure services are those in higher and more frequent demand. They are the key factors that influence the decision of where to live:

1. Providing expanded and improved access to health and medical care in rural areas

Predominantly rural areas have poor access to medical care and emergency care. This is due to their relative distance from the main towns with well-developed hospital and medical infrastructure. All stakeholders recognise that this is a very complex issue and that it is difficult to find a sustainable solution. This problem cannot be solved without greater public support and targeted measures.. On the one hand, it is clear that it is financially very expensive to have a dedicated and advanced medical service that is based in areas that are relatively sparsely populated and with dispersed settlement. A purely economic approach to this matter cannot solve the problem. What was recommended instead was to provide public funding to private practitioners so that they deliver medical care to communities in remote and less populated areas. The current public healthcare system is too heavy, slow and bureaucratic. Because of its burden, a different approach is needed.

2. Adaptation of social care services to make them closer to people's needs and demands

Having in mind the structure of the aging rural population and communities building a care system that is better adapted for elderly people and those needs for special assistance is very important. Rural areas have potential and are developing as areas and places capable of attracting people no longer in active working age. These are returning to rural areas after their retirement to live permanently or for a longer part of the year. It has also been noted that in Bulgaria rural areas are preferred locations for building up hospices and homes for the elderly.

On the one hand, it creates opportunities for the development of dedicated businesses and the wider economy of these areas as well as for the creation of employment opportunities. Over time, the number and share of elderly people and people who need some help and are unable to rely on their families and

children for various reasons increases. Therefore the creation of social services is necessary. More efforts should be made to aligning those needs with the funding available from the EU Operational Programs. Equally, it should be promoted a more active involvement of local residents and organisations in the implementation of these social services. These initiatives will lead to better social services and to expanded economic opportunities for local economic entities.

3. Development of infrastructure for better access to education and administrative services

Educational infrastructure is regarded as being part of the wider social infrastructure, especially in primary and secondary levels. One of the most serious disadvantages in rural areas is that the quality of education and the availability of different schools providing access to meet the diverse interests of students and capabilities is limited. This is one of the more often quoted reasons behind the propensity of young families and people to leave rural areas, as they seek to provide better schools options for their children. Without addressing this issue, which is seen as an key element of social infrastructure, will be difficult to address the demographic realities and deteriorated viability of rural areas.

The stakeholders underline the need to use digital technologies in creating new forms of education by which students are associated to the educational programmes of those schools which have better resources and capabilities to teach in certain field. The setup of remote programs and other forms of educational assistance that are made available to school students is very important to give wider opportunities of the children in rural areas in terms of knowledge and training. It is recommended that such initiatives be supported by public interventions because in Bulgaria education is an almost exclusively public activity. Large-scale policies cannot exist without such public support.

Developing and improve digital administrative services to rural areas is also a priority. Rural areas and especially those that are quite remote from the municipality's headquarters oblige local residents to travel to those to deal with administrative matters. This remoteness also limits their right to duly receive administrative information. Digitalisation of administrative public services and expansion of the access to public information available in rural areas will not only enhance the local residents' quality of life. It will also save costs for the rural households and prevent them missing opportunities and advantages that they can potentially benefit.

4.3.2. Recommendations for future research agendas

Rural areas continue, despite the efforts that have been made, to lag behind in their economic development. They continue to lose and deteriorate their human and social capital. Their territorial importance continues to retreat. The reasons for this are complex and multifaceted, but the main one is that rural areas have many weaknesses and disadvantages in economic and social terms in comparison with the highly populated urban areas. In order to trigger and strengthening the measures and actions to permanently change this trend, there is need and room for deepening existing research on this topic. The main directions and topics for research work to be supported with public funding are:

1. Research on gaps and causal factors between different types of rural areas and urban areas

There is a growing need that researches in this field to investigate and analyse in more detail the socio-economic development of different types of rural and urban areas. There is a scope to carry out more studies that dig deeper into factors underlying and generating these differences in terms of level of backwardness different types of areas. Research about rural areas are to a great extent usually related to issues of agriculture, employment, diversification or income. Less attention is paid to social infrastructure, which is an important element of human wellbeing. It would be good to investigate more extensively the backdrop of rural areas in comparison with urban ones in terms of social infrastructure. This will help to identify the

differences in terms of the actual opportunities of communities in different types of areas have in relation to health, social care, education, social contacts and links etc.

2. Research on characteristics and socio-economic performance of different types of rural areas across the EU

Having in mind all the research done and most analysis are carried out on the socio-economic status of rural areas individual in European countries, it is clear that there is considerable differentiation and divergence. Undoubtedly, the problems and challenges are very common, they have been observed everywhere, but it is of great importance to also look at the relative extent and intensity of these problems across the various EU member countries. Once it is done, the whole picture can be revealed and a better understanding of the state of rural areas across the EU can be found. It would be very useful to carry out mapping and classification of rural areas on the basis of such an in-depth analysis. The purpose of such exercise would be not just to classify and rank rural areas in terms of in terms of population density and remoteness, but also on the basis of their socio-economic status. A better knowledge of the situation of the different types of rural areas, by means of a pan-European common research methodology, would not only improve our research findings to a significant extent, but also to improve and better target the support and intervention policy.

3. Impact assessment on the interventions implemented by all EU Operational Programmes in rural areas

All EU member states, carry out various types of evaluations of the implementation of their respective Rural Development Programs (RDP). This concerns their purpose, size, timescale but also an evaluation of their effects and the impact of the public investment. Such impact assessments are also made for the other Operational Programs financed by other public funds. However, by contrast to the RDP analysis and assessments, other Operational Programs make little emphasis on the territorial and regional effects and results that have been achieved. Thus, there is a growing need for specific, comprehensive studies and evaluations of the overall impact of all public funds on rural areas. In order to achieve significant progress in improving the socio-economic situation of rural areas, it is essential to have a complex and much more targeted support policy. The introduction of research objectives to measure the impact of Operational Programmes on rural areas will make it possible to acquire a comprehensive overview of the impact of public funds in rural areas. This will in return facilitate decision-making.

Conclusions

Social infrastructure is crucial for the development of rural areas and should be seen as a pivotal factor to achieve viable and sustainable changes in the socio-economic situation of these areas. It is noted that with the exception of the Rural Development Program, in other Operational Programs of EU, there is no special priority for rural areas. In those programmes, the effects on the rural areas are not reported and monitored. Still, implementing a great number of the key components of social infrastructure (health care, education, social care, etc.) is within the scope of the implementation of those programmes. While other (Bulgarian) Operational Programmes do not have a territorial prioritisation, this is very often the result of the demarcation between them that has been made. As a result, rural areas are excluded from some interventions. At the same time, the funds for social inclusion and social infrastructure that are available within the Bulgarian Rural Development Program are neither sufficient to meet the enormous needs that exist, as nor to boost up a gradual convergence between rural and non-rural areas in terms of social infrastructure.

Public support is indispensable to provide develop social infrastructure. Efforts should be made to develop not only physical infrastructure but to address the direct needs of individuals and communities. The priority for the development of rural areas should be expanded with support not only to regions but also to communities themselves. Currently, the main part of the available public support is devoted to physical infrastructure, which alone it cannot solve the existential problems in rural areas. Public support must

consider the actual needs of local people and communities in rural areas. Thus it should be oriented towards creating social infrastructure, which provides conditions for attracting young people to stay and settle in rural areas. Measures for setting up of electronic services in public administration can also be strengthened for rural areas, particularly those that are further away from municipal administrative centres and thus have limited access to social services, public information and opportunities. The expanded support for better access to health care in villages, education, transport and social care should be addressed by way of public funding.

The health system and access to education are prime needs to improve the social welfare in rural areas. Access to good qualitative education to enable people to pursue their personal interests and motivations is very important. Therefore, a more flexible and open educational system must be set up. The goals of public programs and funds should be directed not only towards the creation of physical and other assets but also towards the promotion of social capital. This allows local people to fulfil their aspirations, a key factor to have vibrant and sustainable rural areas. This will, in our view, lead to greater synergy and increase the achievement of policy outcomes and the effectiveness of public funding.

It is necessary to devote particular research towards identifying the deeper and underlying factors that make rural areas lag behind other non-rural and urban regions. It is equally very valuable to make a comprehensive impact assessment of the effects and contributions of all Operational Programmes that support the rural development. The improvement of health and social services, that of the educational system, better access for learning and training services, as well as easier and broader access to information and administrative services in rural areas, the creation of better conditions for entertainment and social interaction in those areas is necessary. This is challenging in terms of financial provision. Economic modelling shows that all this will require significant resources. Therefore, a gradual and consistent approach should be followed with more public support provided and more coordination ensured between Operational Programmes.

It also important to consider the elaboration of common definitions, classification and mapping of rural areas across the EU. This will allow better targeting of the support and better understanding of their socio-economic situation. The villages and small towns should become the real beneficiaries of public support. We understand and consider that this position is a starting point, one that it can be further developed and upgraded, which is a matter of constructive dialogue and joint efforts with all stakeholders and partners.

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Annex 1 Methodology used by the MAP

Responsibility: Facilitator and Monitor

- Which kind of stakeholders/how many participants/groups/facilitators? – The stakeholders that were chosen are people that have a direct relationship with the issue under consideration and can give the most accurate and informative assessment of the social infrastructure in Bulgaria. The NGOs and groups are currently working with the population and helping to solve some of problems created in rural areas. For this MAP there are two facilitators that have previous studies on trends in rural areas.
- Was there any anticipation in preparation for the MAP meetings (e.g. questionnaires, documents shared)? Before the meetings with for this MAP, we have decided to outline relevant questions to the social infrastructure and ask them our stakeholders as well as assemble notes and documentation based on the MAP discussion. There was not official questionnaire the form that we used was based on the six thinking hats approach and the discussion we had.
- Which changes did you implement to the process? The IAE team realised that it would be fine to involve reviewers of the analysis done by IAE researchers before showing to the MAP members. The approach was to widen the discussion – the social infrastructure in Bulgaria from different standpoints, that give us the benefit to get more detailed information. We are aware that widening the review of the paper is a way of investigating an issue from more perspectives and combining views and reflections that may help the MAP work. It can be used by individuals or groups to move outside habitual ways of thinking, try out different approaches, and then think constructively about how to move forward.
- What was difficult for facilitators/criticised by members? The most difficult thing is making the discussion productive and helping all of the participants that have saw the problem from various perspectives understand the perspective and the problem the others are heaving and negate any conflict in the MAP group.
- What was particularly useful/appreciated? The different viewpoints in the group helped us as facilitators see the big picture and add processes that were hidden.
- What kind of reflections were facilitated (or not) by the methods used? Did the MAP address any controversial issues in the exercise? Yes, some controversial issues were discussed and some solutions to different problems were proposed.
- Ownership of results: is there any take-up of results by MAP members? Were there any follow-ups to the meetings? If yes, by what members (policy, research, CS) and what kind of follow up (media, publications, debate started at the gov level/fed into an existing debate, etc). Some of the researchers wanted to collaborate on papers and more detailed research on the topic. We are hoping to have more meetings with policy makers to discuss topics of better monitoring since Bulgarian rural areas would benefit for more data and understanding the problem better.
- Key learning re. the methodology, if any? "Six Thinking Hats" is a way of investigating an issue from a variety of perspectives, but in a clear, conflict-free way. It can be used by individuals or groups to move outside habitual ways of thinking, try out different approaches, and then think constructively about how to move forward.



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