

DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

Development strategies in rural Romanian villages were developed mostly due to external factors the local communities, especially for framing a strategy for sustainable development is a criterion for scoring of projects financed post-accession period (criterion - for example - is found in the rating scale for all measures included in the National Rural Development Program - NRDP). Content, scope and methodology of developing such documents varies greatly from one village to another or from a rural area to another. Therefore, no document entitled "Development Strategy" (approved by local councils as such) that are in fact the list of desirable investment objectives or even documents that are produced by a template applied to a number of communities.

Communication presents the author's experience in coordinating a multidisciplinary team which has made development strategies in Brasov county, in rural communities with different characteristics. Presents aspects concerning the organization of the entire process of developing "bottom up" strategic planning document for community development, the main difficulty encountered by team members, including the method used (description mix of methods and techniques used, data processing and presentation, content editing strategies). Ensure rigorous data gathering in the rural community members to clarify their content with them and getting a genuine consensus on content development strategy provide real utility of this document on medium to long term, exceeding the serve immediate interests they rule (use in accessing European funds).

Key words: strategy, sustainable development, community

In recent years, we can observe an almost exponential increase in the number of strategies of sustainable development carried out in rural communities in Romania. Still, this evolution does not come from a change in the way the strategic planning is viewed in the context of sustainable development, but appears to be rather an effect of the mechanism of funds granting. For example, for obtaining European funds for rural development (through the National Rural Development Program - NRDP), points are obtained if the applicant proves the correspondence between the proposed project and the development strategy of the city / rural area. More specifically, under Measure 322 of the NRDP, he can obtain five points if he meets this criterion, a fact which can not be overlooked, given that the projects financed under this component were obtained between 75 and 90 points.

I coordinated the implementation of sustainable development strategies for three municipalities in Brasov county, communities with distinct features: Bran ("the homeland" of rural tourism – a community with important cultural traditions and the place of the most visited monument in Romania, Bran Castle); Prejmer (a community with a long tradition of inter-ethnic coexistence, having a sit on the list of UNESCO

World Heritage (the fortified Church and the fortress), which has determined the largest investment in Brasov county (the Industrial Park - Prejmer) and Vama Buzaului (by the XIXth century, the host of a border crossing point located at the intersection of the roads linking the three Romanian Provinces, one of the most "green" rural areas in Romania, with a quasi-existent pollution and several Natura 2000 sites, located in the Ciucas Mountains).

The attempt to achieve these development strategies has been conceived and developed "bottom up", through the participation of all interested organizations and individuals. It was necessary to use a mix of methods by an interdisciplinary team, resulting thus in documents reflecting both the current situation and the development objectives of the three rural communities.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Development strategies have been developed over a period of seven years; this interval has been chosen to ensure the correspondence with the main European funding programs currently operational. An expert team of five consultants has been involved (one specialist in each of the following fields: social development,

educational sciences and human resources; economic development, environmental protection and civil society / European citizenship), a team which worked closely with a development working group, to which all individuals, institutions or organizations interested in accomplishing the strategy were invited to participate.

In order to achieve the three strategies of the aforementioned communities, the following (joint) set of activities was covered:

1. The constitution of the Development Working Group (DWG), consisting of representatives of the local government, private companies and members of the civil society. Were also invited to join this group: elected and appointed individuals of the local administration, businessmen, business or professional organizations, private entrepreneurs, personalities from various fields, representatives of the church, of NGOs and media representatives. This particular activity has been accomplished through a public meeting for implementing the approach of accomplishing the strategy, where there also have been presented its objectives and benefits and the methodology that was to be used.

2. The analysis of the development context and the drawing up of the community profile, including regional, national and international context analysis (in order to develop an integrated strategy within these development contexts). The SWOT analysis was used as the main tool of analysis and presentation, being completed with cost-benefit analysis and surveys (at least five surveys / community on major issues involved in developing the strategy).

3. The defining of the vision and objectives of the strategy, which was made with the participation of GLD, to obtain a general agreement on some principles, on some economic interests, concerning environmental protection and proper resource management. The defining of the vision and objectives was made starting with the principle that a community with targeted goals and objectives provides greater confidence for its members, increasing citizen participation and the degree of association according to their own interests, which will be clearer after the joint formulation of strategic objectives.

4. The development of the policies and action plans. This activity involved a transposition of development objectives into practical actions included in action plans, developed for each prior area of development. The projects facilitating the achievement of development goals have also been identified, and the action plans required for implementing these projects, as well. These plans include the main tasks to be accomplished, an estimated timetable, responsibilities (of different social actors), funds and the implementation and monitoring mechanism. The priorities set by the GLD were taken into account, and the inclusion of necessary projects was made based on relevance, feasibility and sustainability. In particular, projects

which can be financed by European funds have been considered. For the accomplishment of this activity, focus groups were organized (at least five, for each strategy in part) and workshop-type small meetings (minimum ten).

5. The development of the first draft of the strategy involved both rejoining the elements previously identified within a single material, and the description of the methodology of implementation, monitoring and updating, in order to be presented to GLD. For each community were taken into account: the investment plans / projects already developed / approved, the general town-planning and the development documents prepared on a more general level (the "Centre" Development Region 7, of Brasov county, and the rural development area under the Axis Leader+ program), marketing and business plans in the private sector known to local authorities, available grant programs etc. This first version of the strategy was subject to public debate in a public meeting held in the "open doors" system.

6. The completion of SDS, the preparation of adoption by the City Council and the final report of the consultancy team. After receiving comments from members of the GLD, from other experts in development and participants in the public debate, the final form of the sustainable development strategy has been developed, which was subject to public debate (according to the laws in force). The suggestions, recommendations and amendments made were the basis of the final text, which was adopted by a City Council decision.

Regarding the report of the expert team, it included as a separate section, the monitoring measures of strategy implementation to be undertaken by local authorities. The report also included a list of possible sources of funding the prior areas of development (from EU funds or other sources).

The responsibility of strategy implementation was assumed by the local authorities through a local council decision. An initiative group was organized for each domain associated with sustainable development (open to all organizations / persons concerned) aiming to accomplish the action plans and the necessary corrections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After carrying out the activities described above, three strategies corresponding with the development priorities of each community have resulted (Bran, Prejmer, Vama Buzaului), but their nucleus consisted in two elements:

- a. Analysis - diagnosis of the current situation presented as a SWOT analysis – its content was completed by applying a series of investigative tools (structured interviews, surveys, cost-benefit analysis etc.). Within the content of each development strategies SWOT analysis have

been developed for each of the areas currently associated with the concept of sustainable development:

I. Economic growth, with an emphasis on improving the business environment and opportunities for services development, industry, agriculture, trade.

II. Providing local public services, with an emphasis on the administration's ability to finance and to provide public service packages in the following areas: public utilities, education, health, social services.

III. Development of the civil society, with emphasis on increasing the degree of involvement and participation of citizens in decision making.

IV. Training and re-training of labor force, in order to meet the new requirements of the European, national and local labor market;

V. Sustainable tourism development, with the protection of natural, cultural and historical resources of the community.

VI. Urban development, with emphasis on promoting town-planning policies and infrastructure established locally, in ensuring environmental protection.

b. Organizing the development vision, objectives, policies and action plans. The development vision expresses for each community an ideal target, jointly shared, which fits the needs and expectations of citizens. After accomplishing the development vision, the strategy objectives have been defined, which were then identified according to the results of consultations within GLD. The objectives were ranked and delimited according to the estimated schedule (on short, medium and long term). Depending on the objectives, the prior areas of development have been identified (where, a special attention was given to fields whose development is mainly dependent on local resources).

In formulating the objectives and prior areas was taken into account the full complexity of local factors that may influence sustainable development (such as: business situation, local economic context related to the national one; employment situation; efficiency and equity of public services provided by local authorities; availability of actors to assume roles and responsibilities, expectations and priorities of community members).

Also, in defining the objectives and areas of development were considered the current approaches currently associated to sustainable development: environmental protection, proper use and resource management, sustainable economic development, the need to develop local partnerships etc.

To translate into practice the vision and objectives set by the GLD, appropriate policies and action plans used in the implementation of the strategy have been formulated:

- policies are designed to institutionalize procedures and practices throughout the community that will lead to the implementation of the strategy objectives. Thus, the effects of these actions, the decisions and the behaviors inconsistent with consensual objectives will be limited. By their very clear structure, policies will help in preserving the strategic vision and to achieve development objectives;

- the action plans represent implementations of policies in each area of development, being defined in terms of concrete actions directly measurable. These plans are work instruments of the persons / organizations involved in implementing of the strategy, actual "roadmaps" drawn up for each domain / sub-domain of sustainable development.

CONCLUSIONS

The value of implementing a sustainable development strategy in rural areas lies in the institutionalization of the strategic plan. It is essential to create an organizational and financial base to support this plan. Strong links with organizations and programs that the strategy might be harmonized with must be created. Techniques for financial planning and project management are required, without which no strategic development plan could be materialized.

The existence of action plans developed in each area has proven to be an useful option in the methodological approach for monitoring the implementation strategy. Each action plan is being observed by a group of local experts, aiming: the accomplishment of the responsibilities assumed by the local actors of development; the development of funding documentation of established projects; adequacy of budgetary planning. These action plans are regularly reviewed in terms of ranking the operational objectives, the first operation required to update the strategies adopted.

The unitary applying of action plans will ensure the success of integrated planning of community development. Integrated planning is a modern solution for the development of institutional, administrative and socio-economic initiatives and actions, which optimizes the use of resources and maximizes the positive impact of change, according to the established strategy. Integrated planning will help local authorities to undertake projects that have multiple impact, intersectorial consistency and are entitled for

funding and support from county funds, European or governmental funds.

Monitoring the process of strategy development is an essential action which helps to determine the needs of its adjustment or of the development of the implementation process. The monitoring process uses a range of indicators nowadays (e.g. the number of critical problems solved; the number of implemented actions; any other indicator specified in the action plans as a quantification of the objectives). For a successful implementation of the strategy, all stakeholders in the community must be involved (depending on their field of competence / expertise) in conceiving the assessment process and establishing the indicators for achieving the strategy, according to the socio-economic developments at the local, county, regional or national level.

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