A general perspective on the meanings of the socio-demographic indicators in the Danube counties of Oltenia

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Abstract

The transition from a totalitarian and centralized regime to a democratic and liberal one raises a series of challenges for the societies that were part of the communist bloc. Thus, the harmonization of all components in the social environment implies a major effort to adapt to the global evolution of economic and social phenomena.

In the case of Romania it can be noticed that the application of standardized public policies did not generate similar effects in all development regions. Internally, one can easily see that there are significant gaps between development regions, detailing those related to the different capacity to exploit the local potential.

This article is based on a research carried out from European funds aimed at identifying the development potential of the economic development sectors along the Danube. The secondary analysis of the research, focused on three counties in the Oltenia region, which are riparian to the Danube (Dolj, Mehedinți and Olt), this reveals that the local potential assumed by the Danube river is neglected and the dynamics of the social and economic phenomena unfold in imitation of models from the Western countries, which favors undesirable phenomena such as social polarization. The need for competitiveness is characteristic for areas of activity with a high level of technology, evolving through the individual capacity to impose on the specialized markets the economic agents. Internally, there are neglected public policies that identify the existing potential of exploiting the existing resources in the three counties and the consequences are in the social polarization, the marginalization of certain categories of persons and the exposure to the international economic fluctuations.

Keywords: *social development; social environments; well-being: unemployment; social policies.*

1. Theoretical considerations

The formation and development of human communities has been influenced by the ability to identify the best conditions from a natural and economic point of view. Thus, local potential was one of the essential criteria for community formation and development. According to Berger (Berger 1978: pp. 61-62) the development of human communities was achieved after the complexity of the social system, which suggests that natural and technological resources are not enough for the development of a populated area of human communities. The complexity of the social system is understood in the sense of E. Durkheim (2008), specializing in human activities, both in terms of economic and moral interests, by reducing competitiveness. The prosperity

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resulting from economic development has as a consequence the population growth in the respective community and region, by the positive values of the trends followed by the demographic phenomena and by the increase of the immigration due to the increase of attractiveness for persons from other regions.

Historical data reveal that the largest civilizations have emerged and developed along the great rivers, which reveals that the best conditions for development exist near water sources. The perpetuation of these civilizations over time has been influenced by numerous factors, including military confrontations.

Civilizations' moving on certain territories has not eliminated human settlements located on favorable locations. The examination of urban communities has highlighted the existence of common features, regardless of the specificity of the civilization (Giddens 2001: pp. 506-507): existence of defense walls, separation from rural areas, concentric organization of the community, in the center being the public area, religious and political edifices and elite residences. Towards the edges or even outside the outer walls were distributed those in poorer social layers.

Location in favorable geographic areas is just a first step. The capacity to efficiently exploit local potential is the main indicator of the development of a geographic area, in a space favored by natural conditions.

The emergence of urban communities and the concentration in them of the persons that were practicing diversified activities, non-agricultural, has favored the development of technologies for the work organization, water transport and reproduction of animals (Childe 1970: pp. 111-118). The continuity of such activities depended on the development of certain social structures correlated with the objectives of time (Davis 1969: p. 22). The inability to develop new social structures, adapted to the new, led to their decline and collapse.

Cities are important both for their development and the areas under their influence. The main indicator of an evolutionary dynamics of an urban community and hinterland is of a demographic nature. In the development period we witness the growth of the population through the positive trends followed by the main demographic phenomena, especially the validity and the birth rate, followed by the positive values of the immigration and the emigration.

Technological development has positive effects on the cities and the surrounding areas. Thus, the attractiveness of the cities in a region, followed by the attractiveness of the region as a whole, is evidenced, on the one hand, by the tendency of population growth due to natural growth and immigration, and, on the other hand, by the tendency to rejuvenate the population , a degree of demographic dependence understood as a ratio between the working-age population and the dependent population of the inactive population of young people aged 0-14 years and elderly people aged 65 and over.

Such an approach can provide an overview of how a region or community operates, avoiding the risks of misinterpretation of the economic indicators that may have positive values for short periods of time. In a socio-economic analysis, information on life quality and well-being is important. The indicators used for this study have the role of identifying less visible phenomena that sooner or later will influence sustainable development.

This analysis was used in a research funded by European funds to identify regional development opportunities by diversifying the economic activities. The direction of analysis was not limited to estimating possibilities, but it was an effort to know the phenomena whose dynamics can block, divert or pervert the estimated effects

of any action. According to Davis's "barricades theory" (Bădescu 2001: pp. 50-51), social development occurs both when a development agent or a modernizing agent who "invades" the society and the decline of social phenomena that played the role of "barriers ", which is due to the economic functionality, values, political organization, etc. Thus, the dynamics of global phenomena is filtered by the community's local conservation system, as it is organized into functional and efficient structures. Under the external assault of modernization "agents" and internal weakness, we are dealing with a "collapse" of the barricades and the development of an adaptive system based on imitation, without effect on the sustainable development of the community or region.

The three counties that are the subject of this study, Dolj, Mehedinţi and Olt, are part of the southwestern development region IV Oltenia, being located along the Danube. From the point of view of the geographical location, the natural conditions quality and the relief, all the conditions for the sustainable development of the region are met. Historical references have recorded many periods in which the geographical location has played an important role in the development of the region. At present, the economic situation of the three counties signals a shift between economic development policies and geographic location. The economic situation of the three counties is precarious, with many economic and social problems. The dynamics of socio-economic indicators reveal that the natural and the geographical potential are neglected and policy-driven thinking over time has been achieved by imitating principles and ignoring the regional benefits. The effects of the economic crisis are still felt and in the geographical area delimited by the three counties, the social and the economic problems persists pending effective solutions. Dolj is the most developed county of the three, being the only one with a strong university center and a higher level of activities in the tertiary sector.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the main points of regional development and to signal the importance of the Danube River for the economic development of the three counties.

2. Characteristics of socio-demographic and economic indicators in Dolj, Mehedinţi and Olt counties

The demographic analysis allows the estimation of the public investment planning needs such as health and education, consumption of goods and services estimation and demand and supply of labor. The data collected reveals a significant demographic decline, a high degree of rationalization of the three counties and negative values of the natural and migratory balances.

This trend can be explained by a number of factors: the life quality, individual opportunities, emigration opportunities, drop in birth rates, increased mortality, economic difficulties revealed by the high degree of dependence and which are announced to be projected in the future due to a low replacement rate of the population. There are also differences in demographic trends in the two social environments, as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Demographic trends

	Total population 2012-2016	Urban population	Rural population
Romania	-1,67	-2,01	**-1,27**
Dolj	-2,72	-2,92	**-2,49**
Mehedinți	-4,40	-5,60	**-3,35**
Olt	-4,92	-4,89	**-4,93**

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo-Online database 2017. data processing
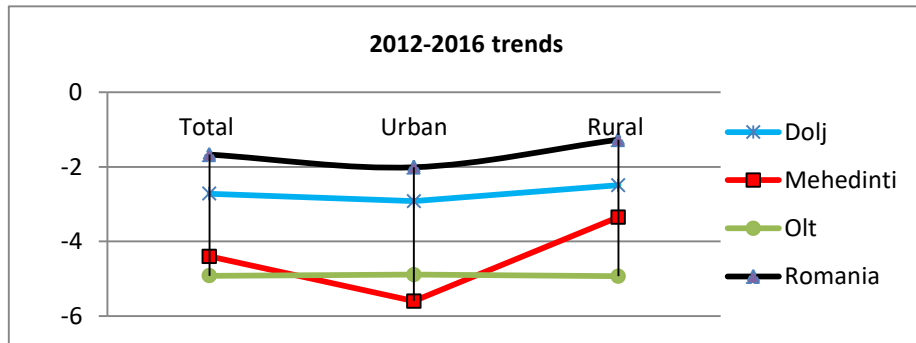

Figure 1. Demographic trends

It is noticed that the population of Dolj County has mediums close to the national ones, with the exception of the rural environment, where the demographic decline is much more pronounced than the national average. In all cases we find that the demographic decline of the three counties is much more pronounced than the one registered at the national level. At both national and local levels, the decline in urban population signals the economic downturn and a low attractiveness of the cities in the region.

The economic downturn in the urban environment also suggests a decline in the urban services consumption, such as drinking water, gas, and other goods and services, which highlights the difficulties in shaping the local government budgets. Also, the decline of the urban population at a faster pace than the national average signifies the existence of undesirable socio-economic phenomena that have negative consequences for the population.

Table 2. Degree of urbanization and demographic dependence

	Urbanization degree	**Demographic dependence**			**Dependent population proportion***			
		Total	*Urban*	*Rural*	Urban		Rural	
					0-14 years	*65 years and over*	*0-14 years*	*65 years and over*
Dolj	51,90	49,16	38,96	62,00	19,53	19,42	23,43	38,58
Mehedinți	46,08	50,90	37,90	63,13	19,32	18,58	24,24	38,89
Olt	39,07	51,42	38,95	60,67	20,96	17,99	20,44	40,23

* The dependent population is calculated as the ratio from the total active age population
Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo-Online database 2017. data processing

The urbanization degree of the Dolj County population is 51.90%, while in Mehedinți County it is 46.08% and in Olt County is 39.07%. Demographic trends and current urbanization indicate a process of population concentration in rural areas. This dynamics highlights that the economic opportunities in the three cities are declining and economic diversification does not exist. The rural environment is characterized by the preponderance of employment in agriculture which offers a minimum subsistence conditions for the inhabitants.

The rate of demographic dependence highlights a difficult situation: in the Dolj County only the average is close to 50%, being 49.16% in 2016. The comparison of the two residential districts in Dolj County reveals some major discrepancies: the demographic dependence in the urban area is 38.96%, while in the rural area it is 62.00%. According to the dependent categories, in the urban area, the young population has weights close to the elderly (19.53% compared to 19.42%); while in the rural areas the share of elderly dependent population is significantly higher: 38.58% elderly people to 23.43% young people. This structure suggests that the rural environment is exposed to a significant aging process that involves a number of social problems specific to aging communities. This process can be explained by the possibility of ensuring a minimum subsistence level in rural areas on small land properties.

In Mehedinți County, with an urbanization degree of 46.08%, the rate of demographic dependence is significant, of 50.90%. In the urban area it is lower, cumulating 37.90%, while in rural areas the rate of demographic dependence reaches 61.13%. Depending on the age groups of the dependent population, we find that there are significant discrepancies between urban and rural areas: in urban areas, young people and the elderly have close proportions, with a higher proportion of young people, suggesting the potential for the population replacement over time, while in the rural areas the share of the elderly people is 38.89% compared to 24.24% of young people, suggesting that the aging population is currently under way.

In Olt County, which has an urbanization degree of 39.07%, the demographic dependence degree is 51.42%. In the urban area it is 38.95% and in the rural area it is 60.67%. In the urban area there is a higher rate of dependence of young people,

suggesting the potential for the population replacement, while in the rural areas the dependency ratio of the elderly is 40.23%.

By comparing the collected statistical data, we find that the high demographic dependency ratio is specific to the rural environment, which is more affected by the demographic decline and emigration. Increasing the urbanization degree through the development of urban environment by increasing the attractiveness of the cities is a guarantee of balancing the demographic trends. The analysis of the above data also highlights the trend of the population replacement, which is suggested by the cases where the young population has a higher share than the elderly population. At the present time there is a significant dynamics of the process of ruralizing and aging of the population. Characteristic of the entire Romanian society is the model of administrative multiplication of the number of cities, which makes that between the older towns, with diversified activities and urban development models also to appear younger cities characterized by a high proportion of agricultural activities and a very low level of non-agricultural activities. Thus, urban demographic trends are in many cases influenced by the rural-specific factors such as dependency rates and the aging of the population. Such a situation requires differentiated intervention according to the generating factors.

The demographic dynamics highlight the negative effects of emigration, which affects the population of the three counties in terms of the total population, the working-age population proportion and the birth rates. To this it is added the economic impact due to the decrease in the number of the goods and services consumers.

The projection of the trends of the demographic phenomena highlights the perpetuation of the current state. In the absence of the integrated policies that can influence the factors behind the current trends, we will witness the accentuation of the negative consequences due to the aging of the population. By analyzing the replacement rates, we can develop possible scenarios:

Table 3. Replacement rate of the elderly population

	Urban	Rural	Total
Dolj	0,11	-15,15	-15,04
Mehedinți	0,74	-14,65	-13,91
Olt	2,97	-19,79	-16,82

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo-Online database 2017. data processing date

From the analysis of the replacement rates of the elderly population, we find that the average for the five-year period, between 2012 and 2016, the replacement rates of the population generally have negative values. In Dolj County, the total replacement rate is negative, of -15.04%. Positive urban values of only 0.11% are insufficient to compensate for the rural demographic decline of -15.15%.

In Mehedinți County, the urban replacement rate has minor positive values (0.74%), while the replacement rate in the rural area is negative, being -14.95%. The resulting average is a county rate of -13.91%.

The positive values of the population replacement rate in the Olt county (2.97%) are canceled by the negative values in rural areas (-19.79%), resulting in a negative average of -16.82%.

It is noted that in all three Danubian counties the demographic decline of the rural environment is much higher than the development potential of the urban environment.

Negative environments indicate the lack of economic opportunities in the area analyzed through this study and the high probability of perpetuating in the future in the absence of public policies that will modify the current structure. The urban environment is not currently an area with significant environmental influences, which indicates that the region currently has no internal resources to induce positive socio-economic trends.

The economic activity is the most important indicator of the existing opportunities. Diversifying the economic activities is the way to multiply the opportunities. Demographic data revealed the existence of undesirable phenomena that are the consequences of an unstable social system, affected by social and economic problems. The identification of functional areas of activity, with a potential for growth both in terms of jobs and the added value, is one of the prime conditions of the current situation.

In the county of Dolj, the main occupation is agriculture, where 35.45% of the total working age population is active, followed by trade, which holds 14.35%, processing industry, where 13.38% of the force labor activates, construction, where 6.43% of the workforce activates and health and social assistance with 5.18% of the total. The trend followed by agriculture is negative, with fewer people working in this area. In contrast, trade, health and social work are on positive lines. The high degree of urbanization of the county influences the growth dynamics of some non-agricultural fields of activity. Agricultural activities generate low income, seasonal and vulnerable jobs without a significant impact on life quality.

Mehedinți County has the highest population degree coverage in agriculture, 39.98%, followed by processing industry (13.49%), trade (11.48%), construction 8.66% and education (4.53%). The difference between agriculture and the next field of activity is high, which highlights the importance of agriculture in employment. In this county there is a very high demand for jobs in relation to the offer, being one of the few counties where the incomes in different areas of actives decreased in the period between 2012 and 2016. As a result of the reduction of the incomes, we are witnessing an increase in the employment rate of the population in certain areas of activity, but lower incomes will ensure a minimum subsistence level and not increase the life quality of the persons concerned.

In Olt County, agriculture is also the main field of activity, accounting for 42.91% of the labor force proportion. The processing industry has 19.08%, trade 9.9%, construction 5.79% and education 4.36%.

3. Working age populations employment issue

Unemployment, dynamics and the relationship with the unoccupied population are another indicator of the functioning of the economic system and the existing social problems. This phenomenon is influenced by labor demand, the decline of some sectors of activity due to low labor productivity, uncompetitive products on the profitable markets, maladministration, the effects of economic crises, etc. Reintegration into the labor market must take place in the shortest possible time to avoid losing working skills and professionalizing those affected.

Statistical data shows that the three counties have different unemployment trends compared to the national average.

Table 4. Unemployment

County	Unemployment rate	2012-2016 trend
Romania	4,8	-11,11
Dolj	9,4	0,00
Mehedinți	9,0	-5,26
Olt	8,9	15,58

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo-Online database 2017. data processing date

At national level, unemployment is on a downward trend of 11.11%. In the case of Dolj County, unemployment was constant, with annual fluctuations being minor and not showing the growth of the economy.

In Mehedinți County, unemployment fell by 5.26%, being about half of the national average. This county may be a special case due to the fact that the decrease of unemployment has occurred amid the reduction of income in several fields of activity. In this case it can be appreciated that the reduction of unemployment was achieved by multiplying the vulnerable jobs, which do not significantly contribute to the increase of the life quality.

The economy of Olt County is still in recession, as indicated by the rising unemployment trend, which reached 15.58%.

Unemployment fluctuations can also be found in the expenses borne by the state budget. The ideal case is to reduce the amounts spent to support these categories of people. However, statistical data show that the decrease in the amounts spent with the unemployed is not due to the inclusion of the unemployed on the labor market. The decrease in unemployment expenditures was offset by the increase in expenditures with the guaranteed minimum income. This expenditure pattern suggests that a large proportion of the unemployed pass into a new category of beneficiaries of government support at the end of the unemployment period.

Table 5. Expenditure on the unemployed people and minimum guaranteed income

County	Expenditure on the unemployed		Minimum guaranteed income	
	RON	*Trend*	*RON*	*Trend*
Romania	1 008 049 126	-73,63	673 411 053	73,99
Dolj	34 227 356	-72,72	43 592 910	64,75
Mehedinți	60 452 276	-9,59	19 537 135	78,41
Olt	19 954 933	-72,54	22 294 115	120,53

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo-Online database 2017. data processing date

At the national level it is noted that the decrease of unemployment by 11.11% meant a decrease of 73.63% of the unemployment expenditures and an increase of 73.99% of the amounts for the guaranteed minimum income.

In Dolj County, during the period 2012-2016, unemployment remained constant, unemployment expenditures decreased by 72.72%, while the amounts for minimum guaranteed income increased by 64.75%.

In Mehedinți County, the drop in unemployment by 5.26% resulted in a 9.59% decrease in unemployment expenditures amid a 78.41% increase in the amounts for the guaranteed minimum income.

In Olt County, the unemployment rate decreased by 75.54%, as the guaranteed minimum income increased by 120.53%. These values highlight that many of the unemployed are not integrated into the labor market, becoming beneficiaries of the following form of support. Thus, the unemployment period expires by modifying unemployment statistics and the amounts allocated to the unemployed, but the increase in the guaranteed minimum income amounts to the magnitude of the phenomenon of vacancy. Unemployment fluctuations and legislative changes may generate a situation where unemployment is followed by a fall in unemployment expenditures, but the magnitude of the phenomenon is reflected by the fluctuations in guaranteed minimum income.

At national level, it is found that, in general, the amounts for unemployment are higher than those for the guaranteed minimum income. But in the counties of Dolj and Olt we find that the amounts for the expenses with the unemployed are lower than those for the guaranteed minimum income. But in the counties of Dolj and Olt we find that the amounts destined for the expenditures with the unemployed are lower than those for the guaranteed minimum income, which denotes the existence of socially difficult categories exposed to social marginalization.

The number of persons benefiting from the minimum guaranteed aid increased both at national level and in counties Dolj, Mehedinți and Olt.

Analyzing the unemployment trends, we find that general trends are different depending on the level of education of the unemployed. The most frequent rises in unemployment are found in people with low levels of education (primary, gymnasium and professional).

Table 6. Unemployment by educational level

County	Primary, gymnasium, professional		High school and post-secondary		Higher education	
	Total 2016	*Trend 2012-2016*	*Total 2016*	*Trend 2012-2016*	*Total 2016*	*Trend 2012-2016*
Romania	333069	-3,86	67884	-38,37	17284	-53,53
Dolj	23021	5,87	2250	-47,28	598	-65,55
Mehedinți	7948	-4,96	1790	-28,57	296	-48,61
Olt	12111	26,82	2387	-35,95	399	-43,16

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo-Online database 2017. data processing date

At national level, there is a 3.86% decrease in unemployment among these categories of people. In the counties of Dolj and Olt the trends are positive, the

unemployment increasing by 5.87%, respectively 26.82%. In Mehedinţi County, unemployment among these people fell by 4.96%. It is found that among those with a low level of education are the most unemployed. Unemployment outcomes are minor, and in Olt County the increase in unemployment among these people is significant.

In the case of graduates of secondary education, unemployment has decreased both at national level and in the three counties. The same trend is observed among the higher education graduates whose number in absolute figures is low.

The analysis of unemployment trends reveals that the greatest difficulties are encountered in integrating people with a low level of education into the labor market. These differences in the dynamics of unemployment reveal the reconfiguration of the economic framework and the evolution of the labor market at national and county level. Economic development implies the recruitment of employees with a higher level of education, suggesting that investments in modern technology and management become preponderant.

This dynamics predicts the worsening of social problems for vulnerable people, such as those with low education or over 45 years of age, which signals the emergence and perpetuation of social polarization risks. Thus, the rural environment is increasingly becoming a social area of subsistence for those lacking in occupational opportunities, adapting and developing survival strategies. In fact, survival means preserving in a state of poverty and social marginalization.

3. Conclusions

This article reveals that demographic decline affects the population of Romania. Urbanization is a phenomenon that can bring more than mere modernization, but can contribute to the implementation of sustainable development principles by diversifying urban functions and the influence of cities on hinterland. The statistical data show that the increase in population urbanization decreases the dependency of the population and the replacement rate tends to be balanced. The general activity rate increased in the counties analyzed, with effects on unemployment and unemployed expenditures, but predominantly for graduates of secondary and higher education.

Returning to the theory of barricades (Bădescu 2001: pp. 111-118) we find that the statistical data used reveal that in the three counties there is a social context characterized by the "collapse" of the three protection barriers, a slow, fragmented and chaotic social and economic development. Modernizing agents have not become factors for boosting sustainable development, becoming mere landmarks of a disorderly imitation of western economic and social structures.

The result of these processes is the discrepancy between the opportunities that different categories of people have. The solution for most of them is emigration, as individual wishes and goals are taken over by imitation, without the need to take formal steps to fulfill them.

The economic environment tends to be formed by small companies and the turnover is lower than the national average, suggesting that entrepreneurship is less well represented in the future plans of the population. Labor in agriculture is losing attractiveness due to the decrease in the value of agricultural production, which signals a decrease in the living standard of those working in this field.

Starting from agriculture, as a main field of activity and comparing the socio-economic indicators of the three counties with the national averages, we find that all the dimensions of the society have individual trends, with regular fluctuations due to the

lack of coherent integrated policies meant to harmonize the dynamics of socio-economic phenomena in order to generate a positive sense of development. The heterogeneous characters of the socio-economic processes and phenomena have as a consequence the social polarization and the regional gaps.

The Danube River has a remarkable economic potential, well-exploited in upstream but neglected riverside counties. The potential for transport, tourism or fisheries is an objective in sterile strategies, lacking a vision of overall needs at the expense of inconclusive details.

Under the conditions of globalization, which instills values, attitudes, cultural models in all societies (Niță and Goga 2017), it contributes to influencing regional competitiveness. Internal causes that have led to the weakening of traditional "barricades" of protection against loans of any kind have not been identified, and the development of a system of adaptation to new socio-economic conditions through social, cultural and economic harmonization can be a solution to generating an ascending economic trend and sustainable in the three counties analyzed in this study.

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