

INCREASE THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN FUNDS ON ROMANIAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH VERNACULAR EXPERTISE

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that the projects financed by the European Union generate effects on the entities that implement them, on the interested factors, but also on the regions where they are implemented. These projects aim to develop the regions and achieve the sustainable development. Taking into account a large number of investments initiated through projects at the level of the European Union, it is necessary to evaluate the impact of these projects, respectively, the analysis of the effects created to control whether or not the proposed objectives are achieved. So, in this article, the authors highlighted the main difficulties faced by rural projects, the impact factors in the implementation of projects financed from European funds, and the ways of increasing the impact of European funds from the perspective of rural development. The relevance of the research consists in identifying the impact factors and problems specific to rural areas in Romania and submitting proposals to increase the impact of European funds (based on the Neamt County case study). The research aims to determine the best ways and solutions to increase the impact of European funds from the perspective of rural development. Therefore, the results of the research, especially of the conducted survey, allowed us to conclude that increasing the impact of European funds on rural development can occur through the implementation and use of vernacular expertise, which is also a new element of the study.

Keywords: European funds, rural development, vernacular expertise

Este bine cunoscut faptul, că proiectele finanțate de Uniunea Europeană generează efecte asupra entităților care le implementează, factorilor interesați, dar și asupra regiunilor în care sunt implementate. Prin aceste proiecte se dorește dezvoltarea regiunilor și atingerea obiectivului de dezvoltare durabilă. Reieșind din numărul mare de investiții, inițiate prin proiecte la nivelul Uniunii Europene, este necesară evaluarea impactului acestor proiecte, respectiv analiza efectelor create pentru a controla dacă sunt sau nu atinse obiectivele propuse. Astfel, în prezentul articol autorii au scos în evidență principalele dificultăți cu care se confruntă proiectele rurale, factorii de impact în realizarea proiectelor finanțate din fondurile europene, dar și modalitățile de sporire a impactului fondurilor europene din perspectiva dezvoltării spațiului rural. Relevanța cercetării constă în identificarea factorilor de impact și a problemelor specifice zonelor rurale din România și înaintarea propunerilor de sporire a impactului fondurilor europene (în baza studiului de caz Județul Neamț). Scopul cercetării constă în determinarea modalităților și soluțiilor optime de sporire a impactului fondurilor europene din perspectiva dezvoltării spațiului rural. Prin urmare, rezultatele cercetării, în special a sondajului efectuat, ne-au permis să concluzionăm, că sporirea impactului fondurilor europene asupra dezvoltării rurale poate avea loc prin implementarea și utilizarea expertizei vernaculare, ceea ce constituie și elementul de noutate al studiului.

Cuvinte cheie: fonduri europene, dezvoltare rurală, expertiza vernaculară

Общеизвестно, что проекты, финансируемые Европейским союзом, оказывают влияние на субъекты, которые их реализуют, на заинтересованные факторы, а также на регионы, где они реализуются. Эти проекты нацелены на развитие регионов и достижение, устойчивого развития. В результате большого количества инвестиций, инициированных в рамках проектов на уровне Европейского Союза, необходимо оценить влияние этих проектов, соответственно, анализ созданных эффектов, чтобы контролировать, достигаются ли предложенные цели. Таким образом, в данной статье авторы выделили основные трудности, с которыми сталкиваются сельские проекты, факторы воздействия при реализации проектов, финансируемых из европейских фондов, а также пути повышения воздействия европейских фондов с точки зрения развития сельских районов. Актуальность исследования заключается в выявлении факторов воздействия и проблем, характерных для сельских районов Румынии, и представлении предложений по увеличению воздействия европейских фондов (на основе примера округа Нямц). Цель исследования состоит в том, чтобы определить наилучшие пути и решения для увеличения влияния европейских фондов с точки зрения развития сельских районов. Таким образом, результаты исследования, особенно проведенного опроса, позволили нам сделать вывод о том, что усиление воздействия европейских фондов на развитие сельских районов может происходить за счет внедрения и использования народной экспертизы, что также является новым элементом исследования.

Ключевые слова: европейские фонды, развитие сельских районов, местная экспертиза

INTRODUCTION

The current interest in global and regional development is determined by the need to address and resolve some new difficulties within the national economic policies generated in the context of the restructuring and reform processes triggered in the central and eastern regions of the European continent. In 2007, the rural development in Romania was characterised by: few investments in education, technologies, development, research and consultancy; poorly developed economic activities; poorly promoted local agri-food products; unsatisfactory and discouraging results of the activity of small and medium-sized farms; lack of information; low involvement of local and regional public administrations due to unqualified and financially unmotivated staff; climate change affecting agriculture; almost non-existent communication with the outside, which is unfavourable for exports. Romania's rural areas were far behind urban areas in terms of access to infrastructure, services and information, as well as a large number of very poor people. Accession and integration into the European Union were expected and desired by the population of Romania. The desire for development and proximity to developed countries made Romanians look optimistically towards the future. The standard of living was

very low, and the country was looking for solutions. Since 2007, the European Union's common agricultural policies have proposed various programs and projects on all levels, national, regional and local, to improve Romania's economy and living conditions. In this sense, through the given research, we argue that the analysis of the impact of the projects is strictly necessary to verify if they produce the desired effects and if they contribute appropriately to the fulfilment of the objectives of the European programs and policies. The primary objective of this study is to improve the quality of absorption of European funds in rural areas. The object of the research represents rural areas in Romania, with an emphasis on Neamt county as a rural area. The added value of the study lies in the fundamental evaluation of European funds at international and national levels. The applied value consists in applying impact factors and vernacular expertise to increase the impact on the management of the efficiency of European funds related to rural development. The study results are useful to all beneficiaries of European funding, entrepreneurs and natural persons who wish to attract European funds for development, but also to public and private institutions, intermediate bodies and management authorities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical and methodological approaches regarding European funds allocated to rural development have been researched over the years, and as a result, they have been reflected in the works of renowned national and international scholars ([Ciobanu, 2022](#); [Bosworth et al. 2020](#); [Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019](#); [Mieczysław & Zwolińska-Ligaj, 2018](#)). In the view of the authors ([Mitrică et al., 2020](#)), currently, the rural area of Romania is going through a restructuring process (demographic, economic, social), acquiring new dimensions and characteristics. At the same time, Galluzzo ([Galluzzo, 2020](#)) considers that rural development through direct payments and financial subsidies played a significant role in reducing the percentage of emigration from rural areas. We agree with the statements of the respective researchers. Moreover, we believe that the development of rural areas requires a total revival in the context of crises and global changes. That is why, based on the empirical studies of the researchers ([Lowe et al., 2019](#)), we consider it opportune to implement vernacular expertise in order to develop rural areas in Romania.

The analysed literature regarding the European funds on rural development is very complex,

which is the starting point of the respective research. At the same time, the analysed literature allows us to state that currently, the impact of European funds from the perspective of rural development in Romania continues to be uncertain, which allowed us to identify the research area and select Neamt County as a rural area, which absorbs European funds. Thus, the existing problems at the level of absorption of European funds, capacities and the multitude of existing issues in this field motivated us to conduct additional research on identifying ways to increase the impact of European funds on Romanian rural development.

The concept of rural development is based on the concept of sustainable development and has several fundamental features, referring to: (i) *sustainable rural development*, which implies equitable and balanced economic development, with a high level of social cohesion, inclusion and assuming responsibility for the use of natural resources and environmental protection; (ii) *extensive or integrated rural development*, which refers to the development of the rural environment by expanding the means of communication and information, by expanding activities from the rural environment to the

non-agricultural sector and the promotion of extensive agriculture, whose essential coordinate is informational transfer (the concept of extensive agriculture here is different from the traditional one, which is defined as the opposite of intensive agriculture) and (iii)

multisectoral rural development, which refers to the creation of networks and partnerships between international organizations, national agencies or civil society organizations, with a view to a multisectoral approach (Bleahu, 2005).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the assumption that the rural areas of Neamt County in Romania face a series of common challenges with those of rural areas in the European Union, from lower connectivity and lack of services to fewer employment opportunities, and to identify the problems specific to the rural area of Neamt County, in 2021 we carried out a survey according to the methodology used at the national level when

preparing the Eurobarometer report (2021). The survey included six topics, seven questions (Table 1), and 100 respondents from 57 rural localities (villages with commune functions in Neamt County). At the same time, the traditional methods of scientific analysis were applied, such as: analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction.

Table 1:

Thematic areas of the survey for rural regions in Neamt County

Survey topic areas							
Rural settlements (communes) from Neamt County	1. Special attention is given to rural areas in decisions regarding public expenditure		2. What is important for the development of rural areas?	3. Involve-ment in decisions affecting local areas	4. The conse-quences of the pan-demic COVID-19	5. Raising awareness of the risks of climate change in rural areas	6. Raising awareness of EU ac-tions aimed at address-ing envi-ronmental issues
	Q1 When the European Union takes decisions on public spending, the specific needs of rural areas are taken into account. Do you agree or oppose this EU action? (%)	Q2 In your opinion, when the EU invests in rural areas in Romania, who should decide how the investment money is spent? (%)	Q3 What specific needs of rural areas in Romania do you consider to require the most attention? (%)	Q4 To what extent do you agree that you can influence the decisions that affect the rural area of Neamt County? (%)	Q5 After all current COVID-19 restrictions end, how likely are you to deploy? The following activities compared to the period before the pandemic? (%)	Q6 Which of the following, if any, is a problem in your local area/ rural areas of Neamt County? (%)	Q7 Are you aware of EU actions aimed at addressing these environmental issues in your local areas/ rural areas of Neamt County? (%)

Source: developed by the authors based on the Eurobarometer methodology

For the empirical analysis of vernacular expertise, we analysed the sources of knowledge of actors, who use vernacular expertise in their project realisation activity, and professional experts, who develop, test

and disseminate vernacular expertise in the consultation process of project realisation by interviewing 65 people (Table 2) for six days regarding the perception of the expertise of rural practitioners.

Table 2:
Interviews

Areas of expertise	Agriculture	Eco-logical agriculture	Trade in agricultural products	Rural tourism	Agri-tourism	Envi-ron-mental science	Regen-erative energy	Finan-cial man-agement	Rural busi-ness	Logis-tics
Experts	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Bene-ficia-ries of funded projects	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x

Source: data from case study interviews

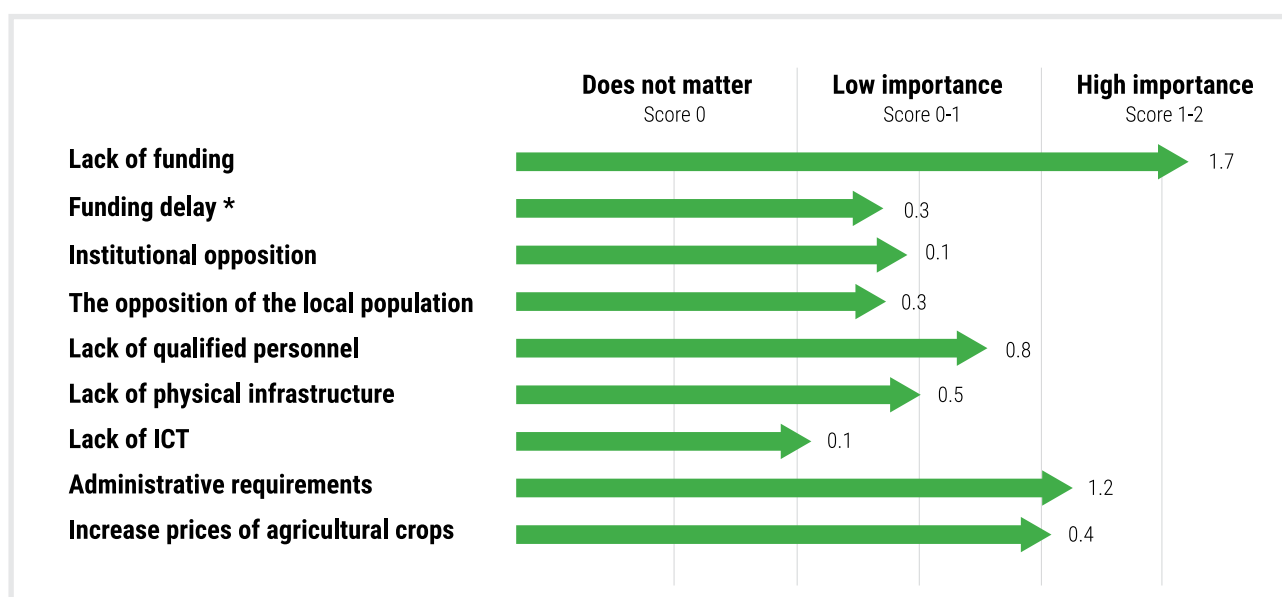
MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of researching the impact of funds on rural development is to identify the key factors that facilitate the success of projects in rural areas at the stage of project development, noting that rural projects face general difficulties, such as, for example, in their initial stages, problems related to bureaucracy, difficulty in finding qualified staff at the levels required for implementation,

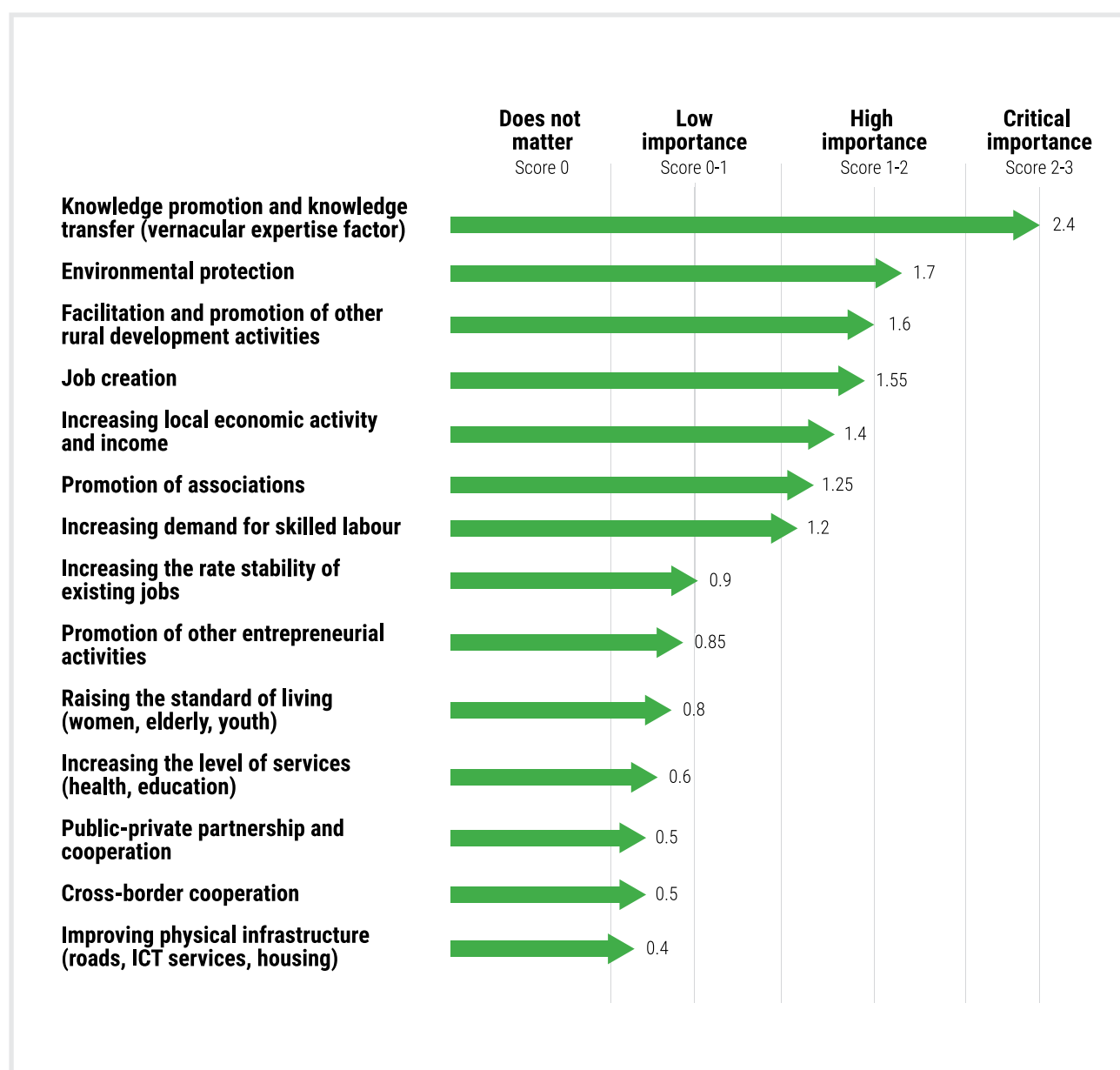
including for specific technical functions, general management and administration tasks, delay in funding, widespread mistrust among local communities, sometimes opposition from certain actors, especially local government, and specific difficulties, related to the site characteristics of the projects in the process of realisation, the solution of which requires specific expertise (Fig.1).

Figure 1:

The main difficulties faced by rural projects (frequency of cases, %)



Source: Calculated based on the Survey

Figure 2:*Impact factors in the implementation of projects financed from European funds*

Source: Calculated based on the Survey

At the same time, in the implementation report of the Large Infrastructure Operational Program (POIM), there were identified significant problems of a sectoral or horizontal nature encountered in the process of preparing projects on the priority axes related to the environmental,

risk and energy sectors, as well as in the project implementation process (Tab.3). The solution of these problems requires the identification and application of the necessary measures to eliminate or reduce the negative impact and to recover the identified gaps ([Raport, 2020](#)).

Table 3:

Sectoral or horizontal problems encountered in the preparation process, implementation and management of POIM projects

Problems in the project preparation process		Problems in project implementation and management	
Problems	Remedial measures	Problems	Remedial measures
<i>New projects are not yet at the level of maturity required for submission for evaluation</i>	Supplementing the number of experts Optimising the work process with experts	<i>Delays in the execution of works contracts</i>	Regular analysis, together with the beneficiaries, of the activity of entrepreneurs
<i>High investment costs compared to the requirements of economic efficiency</i>	Technical assistance provided for the evaluation of the impact on the objectives Analysing the possibility of resizing very high value investments related to the limited financial and administrative capacity of some beneficiaries	<i>Institutional blockages (delays in obtaining approvals/authorisations, etc.)</i>	Methodological coordination of beneficiaries and entrepreneurs Organisation of mediations between beneficiaries and different authorities involved in the flow of project implementation
<i>Administrative capacity reduced to the level of beneficiaries</i>	Strengthening the institutional capacity of beneficiaries Ensuring the consolidation of the observations of the advising ministries to increase the absorption of European funds	<i>Administrative capacity reduced to the level of beneficiaries</i>	Strengthening the institutional capacity of beneficiaries Ensuring the consolidation of the observations of the advising ministries to increase the absorption of European funds

Source: compiled based on Raport (2020)

In order to better understand the causes of the discrepancies between the concepts of European programs for financing investments in rural areas and the level of their realisation at the local level, especially the low level of capitalisation of funds through local projects, it is important to examine the changing relationship between scientific, professional and non-professional expertise in rural development, covering a wide spectrum of programming processes - planning, implementation mechanisms and models of rural development.

For this, we propose the use of a new concept of *vernacular expertise*, introduced in the scientific circuit by P. Lowe in 2019, but which in Romania has not spread widely in practice, a concept that is the basis of neo-endogenous development models and which addresses the expertise that the people of a particular place have and develop, which must be understood not only as a local experience and knowledge (local knowledge) accumulated about the place, but also essentially fed by sources and external agents, and as a result, which can be better recognised and improved in development

processes and policy agendas (Secco et al., 2016). In particular, the interaction between scientific, professional and non-professional expertise in the field of rural development must be examined, rural development being a case that offers the opportunity to conceptualise expertise due to the variety of well-documented, sometimes experimental management models and knowledge exchange (Gkartzios et al., 2019).

The notion of expertise can be defined as the development and deployment of tacit or codified human knowledge, experience and skills, informal or certified, individualised or collective (Spender, 2005), and of other technical capacities, the concept of expertise recognises that all those interested in a problem and who have relevant expertise should be involved in solving it (Carolan, 2006). According to Collins and Evans typology (Collins & Evans, R. 2002), the following tripartite model of knowledge is distinguished: (i) without expertise; (ii) interactive expertise, when there is sufficient experience to enable interesting interactions between contributing experts from generalisable fields or local/practical knowledge to the extent that all participants leave the

cognitive process changed; (iii) contributory expertise, when there is sufficient expertise to contribute to the knowledge base of the individual or group of individuals.

Examining ways in which interactive expertise could be cultivated to facilitate knowledge exchange between local contributing and certified experts should, we believe, lead to a better understanding of how knowledge is communicated to certified contributing experts, and, in this sense, to contribute to the better use of local expertise (Wynne, 1989). Examining the evolution of rural development and knowledge generation models in recent decades has shown that the results of science have been disseminated to farmers by extension agencies in the form of technical recommendations, materials and equipment, with farmers being classified as “progressive” or “traditionalist”, the main forces of progress within the exogenous rural development model being conceived outside rural areas. According to this model, rural areas do not have their own dynamism, and modernisation results from external planning, rationalisation of localities, infrastructural connections and the transfer of socio-technical innovations from dynamic urban areas, industrialisation and technological innovation as solutions generated from research and not as solutions developed in or for concrete localities, the role of rural development is to pave the way and stimulate the adoption of new scientifically driven technologies.

The bottom-up model, characteristic for the endogenous development concept based on the evolution of the local social and ecological system, was passed when the idea of state orientation towards welfare was refused in favour of competition (OECD, 2016), when the emphasis of rural development was placed on the exploitation of local potential depending on local knowledge and resources. The new model, the network or neo-endogenous development model, assumes that rural areas are shaped by internal and external forces, promoting local and extra-local connections, facilitated by state institutions (Bosworth et al., 2020) to strengthen the conditions of local confrontation (local enterprises, households, community groups and voluntary organisations) with the outside

(capital circuits, powers and expertise, rural professionals, regional agents, NGOs, companies, universities and research institutes) (OECD, 2018). The Drumurile Bistriței Association could present a new model of relations, made up of 15 localities from Neamt (Alexandru cel Bun, Piatra Soimului, Savinesti, Roznov, Dochia, Margineni, Zanesti, Borlesti, Tazlau, Rediu, Podoleni, Romani, Moldoveni, Bahna, Costisa and Candesti) and Filipești de Bacău. Many investments in the territory of these localities owe their existence to the LAG (Local Action Group) projects and the European money attracted, whether it is about the improvement of the infrastructure, the purchase of equipment needed by the town hall or the small farmers or the various local producers, who have seen in the European programs the saving solution for their businesses. During the funding period 2007-2014, the Drumurile Bistriței Association attracted 2.8 million euros for the implementation of the projects proposed by its partners. In 2015, after establishing the local development strategy, Drumurile Bistriței concluded a project financing contract of about 2.6 million euros.

The model of relations between actors necessary for starting, implementing and developing development projects in rural areas, the type of support they provide and their contributions, includes the categories: (1) scientific and technical support provided by research centers, technical staff from government offices, certification agencies, etc.; (2) knowledge and information on specific and technical issues, provided by a wide variety of public bodies; (3) the physical infrastructure necessary for the operation of the project provided by public bodies, especially local ones, and national governments; (4) organizing and marketing provided by a variety of actors, including public bodies, mainly local governments, private organizations and NGOs; (5) implementing regulatory standards provided primarily by local and regional governments; (6) participation of other types of actors, for example, business advice provided by external consultants or companies or organizations similar to the one leading the project.

Esparcia's model reflects the importance of actor networks in relation to different stages of projects (Esparcia, 2014):

- **at the initial stages of idea generation**, two types of projects are found: (a) projects where the networks of actors are relatively weak, poorly developed or almost non-existent, when the adoption of the role of the network of individuals, one of whom takes the role of manager, becomes a key factor, and (b) projects where the generation of the basic idea is the result of the cooperation and interaction of several actors within a more developed network;
- **at the implementation stage**, there are projects in which the network of actors involved grows significantly when the commitment of all those actors is required;
- **at the development stage**, there are projects in which new actors have a significant contribution which, however, leads not so much to growth as to consolidation to ensure the network's sustainability.

Based on the fact that the implementation of projects requires a relatively large relational network, we further analysed the influence that different actors had on the design and implementation of projects within the networks with the participation of actors who have an active role in the managerial structure of the projects.

The results of the analysis show that: 1) for many interviewees, the major actors are those who participate in one or more of the stages of the project (internal actors); 2) the significance of the role of internal actors (project partners) is assessed as high and very high; 3) the intervention of public actors is particularly significant, especially in relation to promotion and financing policies, regional governments are perceived as the most influential external actors, and the role of other external

actors, for example, collective associations, private companies, is much less significant for the realization of projects; 4) the role of regional governments (as external actors) is generally average; 5) in some cases the relationship with the project managers is valued as very important; 6) the influence of local authorities varies considerably, depending on the case, but for most of the interviewees it is valued from moderate to very significant; 7) for most projects, the national government has little influence; 8) non-public actors do not have significant influences on projects, thus, projects depend primarily on the network of internal actors, including partners on which project operations are based, external dependencies being mainly directed to public actors due to administrative links, public financing and other public policies to support the projects (Table 4).

Table 4:

Perception of actors' influence on projects

	Average influence	Frequency by the level of influence, %				
		No influence -0	Low influence -1	Medium influence-2	High influence-3	Very high influence-4
Project (internal)	3.3	0	13	0	38	50
Regional administration	2.4	0	22	44	0	33
Local administration	1.8	22	33	11	11	22
National administration	1.1	67	0	0	22	11
Other projects	0.8	44	33	22	0	0
Other Companies	1.1	22	56	11	11	0
Associations, NGOs	1.4	11	56	22	0	11

Source: Calculated based on the Survey

For projects at the local or regional level, the solid effort to ensure self-sustainability is specific, along with the need for external support, predominantly public. The analysis of the role of the actors in the promotion and implementation of the initiatives shows that their presence varies according to the project development stage, noting that once the projects are developed and consolidated, they tend to offer external services that contribute to their sustainability, especially for enterprises with private sector-oriented services, for example, trade in agricultural products, and enterprises operating based on public-private partnerships, for example, energy management advisory services. Because the relationships between actors and projects also have the opposite direction, we analysed the impact of projects on actors and stakeholders, assuming that the achievement of the project's objectives has a positive impact

on directly involved actors and strong multiplier effects on other "external" actors.

The results of the analysis show that: (1) the most significant impact is on the local and internal actors directly involved in the project; (2) there is an initial network of actors through which relationships of mutual influence are very strong; (3) the impact-benefit perception for external actors is as high as for public actors in the network of secondary actors (regional and local governments); (4) some projects have an "output", understood as a high, including political, profit for public actors and other actors involved; (5) there is a third group of external actors with less intense connections and less influence, which refers to collective associations and NGOs, other projects with which intense relations are maintained or private companies with which commercial transactions are negotiated (Table 5).

Table 5:
Perception of the influence of projects on actors

	Average influence	Frequency by the level of influence, %				
		No influence -0	Low Influence -1	Medium influence-2	High influence-3	Very high influence-4
Project (internal)	3.3	0	0	0	13	88
Regional administration	2.4	0	1	56	11	22
Local administration	12.4	11	22	11	22	33
National administration	1,2	56	11	0	22	11
Other projects	1.0	44	22	22	11	0
Other Companies	1,2	22	56	0	22	0
Associations, NGOs	1,3	11	56	22	11	0

Source: Calculated based on the Survey

We mention that the impact or benefits of the projects on the actors are appreciated and perceived above the reverse - the impact of the actors on the projects (Table 6).

Table 6:
Average influence of project-actor relationship

	Actors' average influence on projects	Average influence of projects on actors
Project (internal)	3.3	3.9
Regional administration	2.4	2.4
Local administration	1.8	12.4
National administration	1.1	1,2
Other projects	0.8	1.0
Other Companies	1.1	1,2
Associations, NGOs	1.4	1.3

Source: Calculated based on the Survey

CONCLUSIONS

The survey study confirmed that the rural areas of Neamt County in Romania face a series of common challenges with those of rural areas in the EU, from lower connectivity and lack of services to fewer employment opportunities, however, demonstrating some particularities.

Therefore, the interview data show that vernacular expertise has a hybrid essence, it is a combination of knowledge generated by the concrete field of the project carried out, local and extra-local experiences, skills and knowledge, adapted to the specific context and objectives of the project, and strengthening the expertise of local actors is more effective in their perception

by co-producing knowledge, creating networks for sharing expertise and equipping local actors with methods and tools to use to develop and apply their own expertise, and at the same time, to manage the specialist-non-specialist/expert-non-expert communication skill as a two-way, trust-based exchange process within the project.

In the context of the obtained results, the authors recommend the implementation and use of vernacular expertise in identifying the specific problems of each area of the rural space both nationally and internationally, which will allow the improvement of all rural development processes.

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