

RESTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE ROMANIAN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

Restraints and Opportunities of the Romanian Rural Areas

Although Romania disposes of an extremely valuable agricultural land, it has proved to be insufficient and irrationally exploited in the last two decades, as a direct consequence of the programme for returning the agricultural areas to the former individual landowners. The lack of technological agricultural means for cultivating the land, its excessive allotment, as well as the rather inappropriate involvement of the political factor in the decision making process and the invasion of imported agricultural products have generated a continuous process of degradation of the rural life as a whole and certain repercussions on the food safety. Currently, more than 50% of the Romanian agricultural area is not being cultivated, while the state imports more than 70% of alimentary products every year.

Key words

urban-rural space, rural state, rural policy infrastructure, agricultural land, Romania

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1. Introduction

Romania has a surface of 238.391 km², out of which, from the administrative point of view, 214.552 km² or almost 90% are represented by rural areas (Romanian Statistical Yearbook 2007).

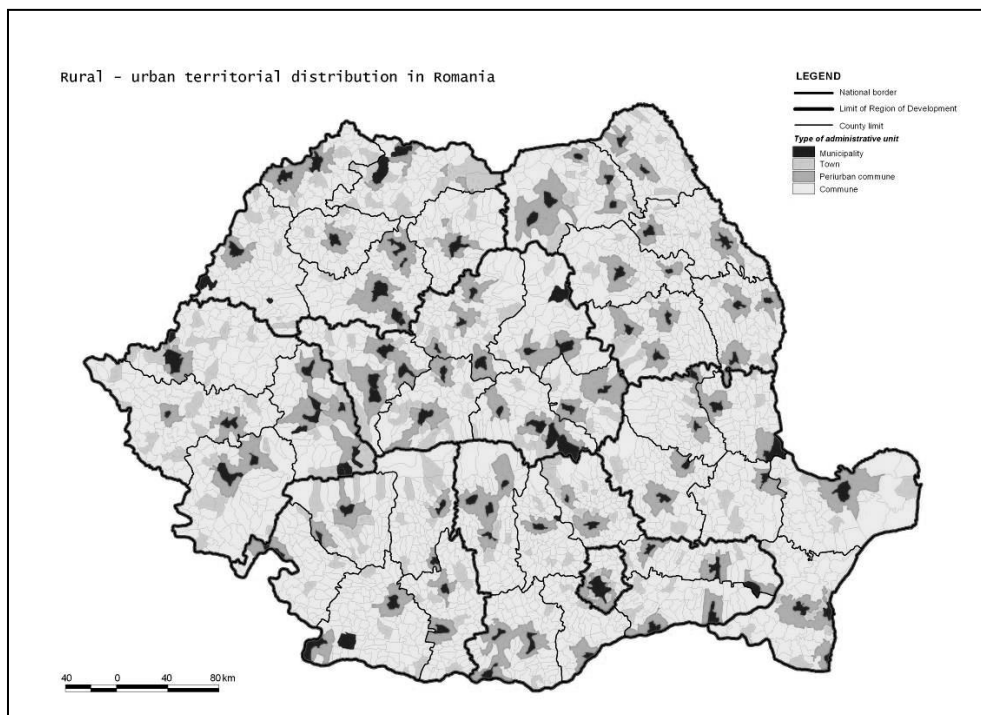


Fig. 1: Rural-urban territorial distribution.
Source: Romanian Statistical Yearbook 2007.

The entire surface, divided by use, consists of three main categories: agricultural land (64%), forestry land (25%) and other categories of land (11%). The agricultural land has a surface of 14.836.585 ha and its structure consists of: arable land 62%, pastures 24%, hayfields 10%, vineyards 2% and orchards 2% (Romanian Statistical Yearbook 2007).

The most extended arable areas are located in the Southern and Western plains of the country, while the highlands are dominated by pastures and natural hayfields. Vineyards and orchards are mostly located in the hilly areas of the Sub-Carpathians and the Transylvania Depression. As regards the climate conditions, the average temperatures are between 8 °C and 11 °C in the hilly and plain areas and the precipitations register values are of 500-600 mm/year.

Both the temperature and the hydrological conditions create an appropriate environment for practicing a diverse agriculture. Only in the Southern and South-Eastern areas of the country the frequent droughts and the quantitatively reduced precipitations impose the intensive use of irrigations, so as to assure stable crops every year.

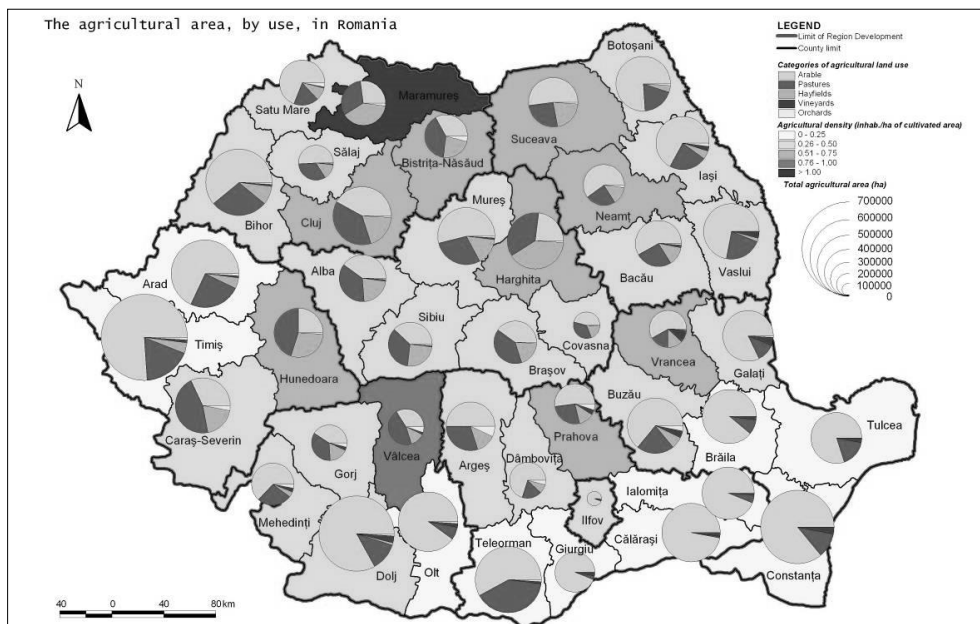


Fig. 2: The agricultural area, by use, in Romania, by counties.

Source: Romanian Statistical Yearbook 2007.

1.1. Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, specific methods were used for study and documentation (such as the cartography method, the statistic method, the questionnaire method and the modelling method). By using the map, I underlined the extension of the rural space at the national level and the structure of the agricultural land, as well as the administrative structure with its main units – the counties (*județe*). I took as an example the climatic map of Romania to attest the diversity of agricultural potential by climatic factors.

In order to demonstrate the changes of the habitat potential in the last 50 years, I chose the Certeze village, located in the Satu Mare County (North-Western part of Romania), where in half a century three generations of houses have been built (the last between 1995 and now). The financial income has represented the main reason, for the majority of the families had been working abroad. The case study about the actual state of the rural households was made in the Micești village, the Tureni commune, the Cluj County (Rural Development in Romania 1998; Wingert 2009).

The rural system of the settlements was highlighted by the building of a diagrammatic model, which shows the state of inter-rural connections by a differentiated distribution of functions and facilities for the public interest (needs), such as schools, shops, town hall, post office, police department, health care centre, etc. It was very useful for me to take into account the study entitled "Rural Development in Romania", 1998, elaborated under the aegis of the European Union and the Romanian Government. I was involved in this study, which analysed the rural space from the Centre and the Western of Romania.

1.2. Terminology

For the rural city hall, I believe it is better to use the word town hall (in Romanian language "*primărie*"), because the majority of the rural communal centres are smaller than the cities. Anyway, the town means a smaller urban settlement category than the city. In Romania all urban settlements are called "*oraşe*". However, in the official documents for bigger urban settlements and for those with complex function we use the term of municipality "*municipiu*".

The main administrative unit in Romania is "*judeţul*" (a county) and for the rural area is "*comună*" (a commune). Each county comprises more than 20 communes and more than 4 towns (cities). I have stated the price in the Romanian currency (Leu), but I have made the necessary adjustments in Euro.

2. Villages and rural population

The rural population of Romania is of 9,670,427 inhabitants (representing 44,8% of the total population). From the administrative point of view, rural areas are divided into 2,854 administrative-territorial units, communes, which comprise 12,951 villages. A commune usually consists of an average of 4 or 5 villages and 3,388 inhabitants. As regards the territory, the surface of a commune is 75,175 km², a village is thus located on an average surface of 16,566 km² and has a population of 746 inhabitants.

We have to mention that the size of the Romanian villages, in terms of rural population, ranges from 1 or 2 inhabitants per village to 10,000 inhabitants per village. The lowest values may be explained by the fact that some rural settlements have lost their demographical potential due to massive emigration, mainly abroad, high mortality or natural calamities. Administratively, there are communes which are either formed by only one village or by over 20-30 villages. For example, the commune with the maximum number of villages is the Cornereva commune, in the Caraş-Serverin County, which consists of 41 villages.

Over 50% of the Romanian villages are small-sized, with a population of no more than 250 people. The category of the population aged 60 years and more represents 22.8% of the total rural population. The feminine population represents 51.2% of the total population. As a matter of fact the training level is not represented in the rural areas, due to the fact that stable intellectual models are completely inexistent in most of the villages, the only intellectuals working here are included in the category of commuters.

The majority of the actual rural 60 year old population has a double socio-professional status, that of workers (employees) - peasants and that of peasants - workers (employees), as a result of the fact that before 1989, they used to work as commuter employees in the urban industry, and today they benefit from the state retirement funds, more consistent than the financial retributions received by people who worked in agriculture only (in the former Agricultural Cooperatives of Production- CAP).

3. The agricultural land

The Act no. 18/1991 and its subsequent modifications stipulate the restitution of the

old land proprieties, registered before the agriculture collectivization (1962), to the former land owners or their successors and the dissipation of the estates agricultural structures. This process has led to the establishment of 8,254,294 new individual agricultural exploitations, formed of over 60 million plots. Each private agricultural exploitation has the average size of about 2 hectares, divided into about 8 plots. The average size of a parcel is 0.25 ha. Yet, there are cases when a land propriety disposes of 15-20 plots, all scattered on the entire territory of the village.

The Act No. 18/1991 stipulates the restitution of the agricultural land to the former owners or their descendants, according to exactly the same land organization, registered before the time of collectivisation. Still, it was decided that the maximum size of agricultural land per owner that can be reattributed is 10 hectares (Act 18/1991), even though some of the former landowners previously registered larger surfaces in their propriety.

This fact may be justified by the fact that in numerous cases the land registered in the official inventories did not correspond with the real situation previously established in terms of size, therefore the landowners declared more reduced size land surfaces in order to pay smaller estate duties, especially during the period between 1945-1958, when Romania had to pay major war financial claims to the former USSR. Hence, in several villages it was registered as a "surplus of agricultural land" which currently has been the object of land speculation between the representatives of the local commissions for land restitution, such as mayors, politicians and other people representing the local administration. Thus, we can explain the "passion" for handling public functions in Romania, which often go along with major corruption phenomena.

The Act No. 18/1991 and its way of being applied (see above), e.g. allowing the local administrations to measure the land by their own empirical means, has led to the separation of agriculture from its natural and economic perspectives and aims, and has eventually transformed Romania in a country that massively imports agricultural products.

The main impediment against modernization and efficiency of agriculture in Romania has proved to be the excessive allotment of the agricultural land for exploitation and the lack of an efficient, safe and stable association system in the process of land exploitation as a means of production.

The number of persons/rural household is 1.8, the fact that indicates a poor level of active labour force in agriculture. The surveys applied in several pilot communes regarding rural development in 1997 reveal that in over 50% of the cases the householder is represented by women, usually above the age of 60. In many cases, the propriety titles, emitted by administrations on a legal base, are full of uncertainties, a fact that systematically drags the rural people in legal trials for regaining their land proprieties. In more than 25% of the cases, the new landowners live in the city; therefore they abandon or rent their agricultural land. The land trade in general and especially the trade with agricultural land in rural areas represent a current practice that has generated the class of newly enriched people in Romania. The poor technological means of practicing agriculture stand for another issue that proves to be very difficult to solve by the "new land owners".

The agro-technique and infrastructure of the former State Agricultural Enterprises

(IAS) and Agricultural Cooperatives of Production (CAP), mostly outdated and physically overused has been sold at small prices in the years subsequent to the fall of the communist system. The barns, the stock buildings for agricultural products, the farms used for breeding, the irrigation installations, the forage barns, as well as the animal shelters have been, in most of the cases, destroyed or stolen, due to the weakness of the state authority and the very active "revolutionary enthusiasm". Therefore, many rural inhabitants returned to physical work, as regards land cultivation, they starting to use animal traction again. Hence, in only a few of the smallest rented agricultural exploitations we can notice agricultural practices comparable to the modern ones. As we have mentioned before, more than 50% of the national agricultural land is left unused, the rest of it being mostly cultivated by rudimentary technological means, specific to the interwar period. This, under the circumstances in which currently Romania can provide agricultural products for a population of 85-90 million inhabitants, if it stabilizes itself at an average level of productivity, in case of an integrated exploitation of the agricultural land.

4. The rural infrastructure

The Romanian villages, as well as the entire country are tributary to a very poor transport infrastructure. Of the 63,670 km of county and communal roads, only 7.7% are modernized. This is why even the villages located in the proximity of the main cities have a difficult access to the urban services due to the poor state of the roads. The situation becomes even more severe in case of rain or in the winter, when many of the rural settlements remain isolated. At the level of each commune, about 10-15 km of roads needs to be modernized or rehabilitated.

There are numerous situations in which stone and gravel quarries are located nearby, but there is a complete lack of interest from the local administration representatives who are more preoccupied to maintain their job in administration than to manifest more interest regarding the local community. Of 12,951 villages, only 1,682 (13%) are connected to the centralized distribution networks of drinking water (Romanian Statistical Yearbook 2007). In the mountainous and hilly areas, in the Western part of Romania, almost every household has either its own source of drinking water (well), or they use the drinking water provided by the local springs. Despite this „natural gift” only 10-15% of the rural households are equipped with bathrooms and indoor drinking water delivery systems.

The main part of the buildings in rural areas are in good state. Over 90% of the rural houses have been built in the last 50 years by the peasants who used to combine the work in the urban industry with the work in agriculture. The building materials were cheap. We have to mention the fact that most of the villages are electrified, and only 346 small villages located in the mountainous area have no electricity yet. In many cases we find "deserted houses" (without inhabitants). On the other hand, in many villages where the population has left abroad for work, manifested and generalized second and third generation of houses have appeared in the last 50 years, having the most exigent aesthetics and comfort. These villages are empty most of the year. Their inhabitants have left for work, and twice a year they come back, usually for Easter and Christmas celebrations. During the rest of the year their houses are locked and secured by local guards or by other relatives remained in the house. In some of the cases, the invasion of new houses has cancelled the touristic potential of some rural settlements, for example Certeze, Satu Mare County.

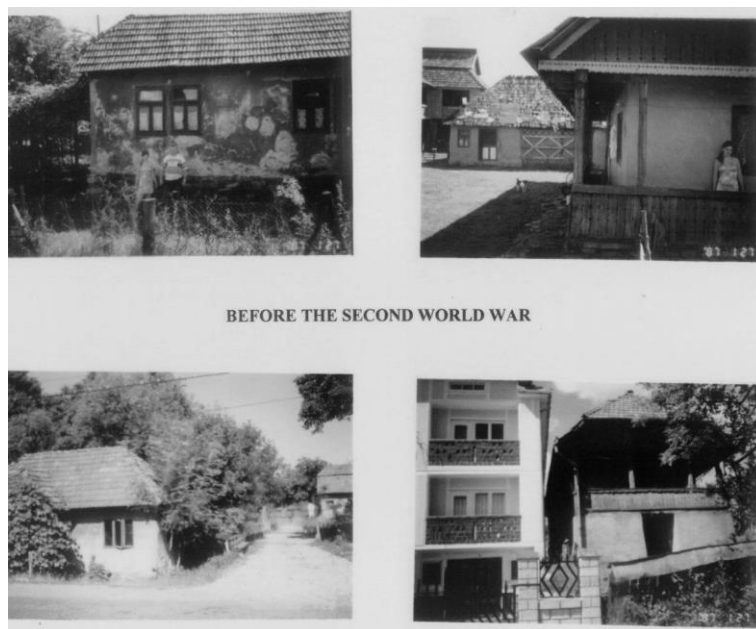


Fig. 3: Certeze Village: old houses.
Source: Author.



Fig. 4: Certeze Village: the 2nd generation of houses.
Source: Author.

As a result of the low price of the land, the unaltered natural support and several conjunctures, many urban inhabitants and foreign citizens have built houses in the Romanian villages. Despite the urbanity, the villages in Romania dispose of a significant potential for inhabitancy and exceptional ecological conditions for living (clean air, individual water sources, individual gardens and good protection).

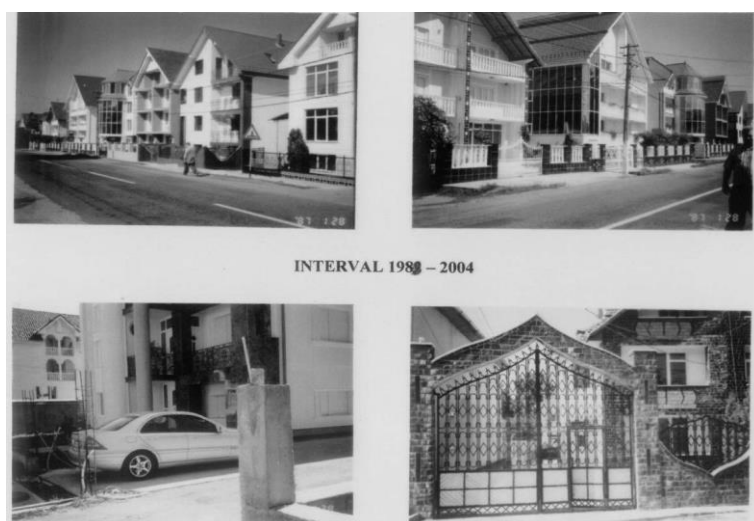


Fig. 5: Certeze Village: the 3rd generation of houses.

Source: Author.

5. Public interest equipment

Every communal centre disposes of a set of mandatory public endowments, such as local administration hall (town hall), post office, police department, nursery school (school garden), secondary school (1-8 grades), general store, medical centre, community home. In some of the communal centres we can also find restaurants, hotels, drugstores, vocational schools and dentist's consulting room. Other villages of a commune dispose of only a primary school, a general store and a church. Some villages that until 1968 functioned as communal centres and are inhabited by a larger number of people, among them a large number of pre-school children, can dispose of a secondary school, while most of the small villages do not have any significant public facilities, except for a church and possibly some pubs.

Based on the quantitatively and qualitatively, differentiated distribution of the public endowments (facilities) with a central role in the territory (polarizing potential), we can reflect the connections established between the settlements, which represent the basis on which the systems of rural settlements are formed. Thus, in Romania, we can distinguish three categories of systems of rural settlements, such as:

- Rural systems with supracommunal polarizing centres
- Rural systems with communal polarizing centres
- Rural systems with subcommunal polarizing centres.

The rural systems with supracommunal polarizing centres are extended on the territory of two or three communes, rarely more, disposing of technical equipment superior to that of the commune. These usually have high schools, drugstores, hospital and hotels. Gradually, these centres become towns. Through the services they provide, they attract population of two or more communes. The rural communal systems are formed by the villages of the same commune, which are oriented towards the communal centre due to the obligatory basic services it provides (school, administration, police, post, healthcare). Lately, the transportation of school children by bus towards the schools located in the communal centre has

become regularity. The subcommunal systems have not more than one or two public facilities, thus they have a more reduced spatial cohesion.

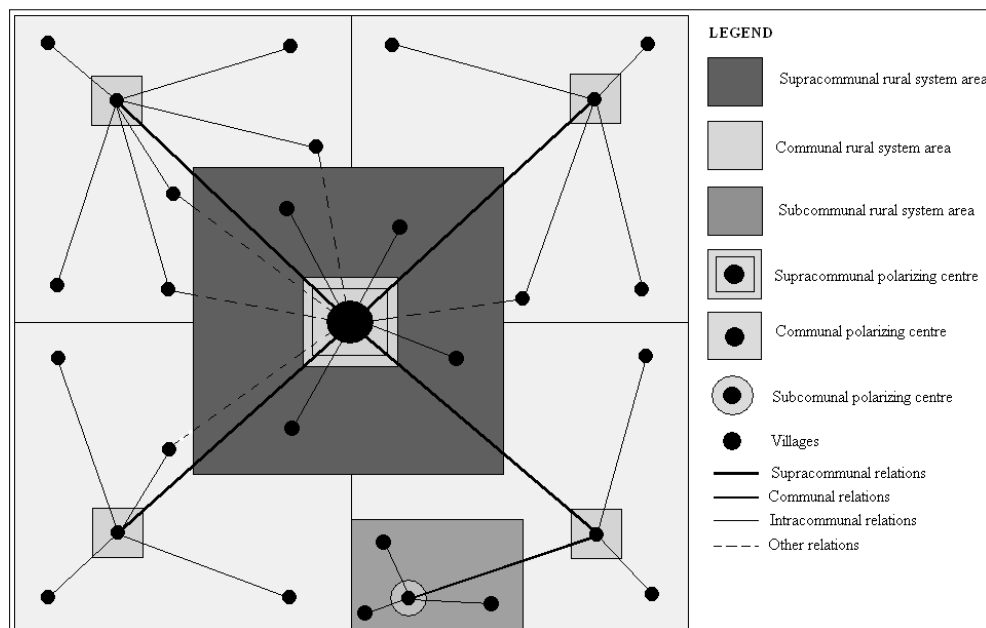


Fig. 6: The rural system of settlements in Romania.

6. The economic state of a rural household. Case study.

Here we mention the situation of a typical rural household, which is located 25 km from the big city (Micești, Cluj County). The agricultural land of the family is 2.75 ha. Now the family comprise of two persons only (3 children live in the city and are married), both over 70 years old.

Out of the 2.75 ha, 0.70 ha are cultivated with wheat, 0.5 ha with corn, 0.5 ha with potatoes and 0.50 ha is used as hayfield. About 0.5 ha is not cultivated and is left for the recovery of fertility by applying the biannual rotation system wheat-corn. The 2.75 ha of land are split into 11 plots. Other agricultural activities include animal breeding with the following characteristic: 1-2 cows, of which 1 is for milk and one baby beef; a horse used for animal traction and agricultural practices, 1-2 pigs, of which one is for personal needs and one for sale; 20-30 chickens for eggs and meat and 10 sheep for cheese (wool is not currently processed and economically valorised due to the rarity of cloth factories in the country).

The agricultural technique comprises a plough with a horse, a car for transportation and other tools for agricultural exploitation, to which other specific tools are added. The fertilizer manure is used instead of fertilizers. Land cultivation is made by plough and manually; the same manner can be found for practicing all agricultural activities. For harvesting, the beating machine is used which is driven by specialized persons. By the house there is a garden where vegetables and some fruit trees are cultivated. Speculative plants such as medicinal or technical plants are not

cultivated. The owners receive monthly retirement retribution of about 600 Lei, which is 150 Euros (out of which 50 Euros from the former agricultural work practiced by the wife, and 100 Euros from the work of the city industry as commuter – husband). They usually spend the money to buy some products such as sugar, oil and other, and for paying the utilities, especially electricity. Annually, they make alcohol from plums and apples (about 50 l) in their particular way of processing. Other supplementary income is provided by wood and fodder transportation for other inhabitants of the village.

The household consists of a house built in 1968, a stable, a pork coop, a chicken coop and a stall for sheep. The house has two rooms and a kitchen. From May to October, cattle and sheep are pastured on the public territory of the village, for which they pay a fee at the administration hall and to the shepherds. They do not read anything and go to church only formally, twice or three times a year. They usually watch political or folk shows on TV. Daily, the local milk collection centre receives about 3-5 litres of milk from every household at the price of 1 Leu (about 0.20 Eurocents). Selling the milk in the city is not an option, because the expenses for transportation to the city and back do not cover the price of the milk.

By revealing this model of a common household we try to highlight the autarchic character of the rural households in Romania. And yet, over 70% of the food needs of the country are solved by imports. The attempts for voluntary association of the farmers are weak and prove their distrust in a new manner of collectivization. Much more, the projects for rural development, with all their apparently philanthropic character, hardly succeed and finalize due to the bureaucracy and lack of interest of the public administrative representatives, able to support the applicants of these projects. This is how we can explain the low Romanian rate of absorption of the European non-refundable financial aid, of about 18% of the 6 billion Euros, invested in projects for rural development, in the last 6 years (Alexandru 2008).

7. Instead of conclusions

For most of the Romanian rural inhabitants the agricultural land represents a means of protection against extreme poverty and not a valuable means of production that could provide income. The modernization of rural areas cannot be efficiently and rapidly accomplished without a strong intermediation of the state by a legislative system that would enforce the managerial and professional abilities of the agricultural engineers excluded after 1989 of the rural economic life and by a reunification in optimum size plots of the current agricultural land, mostly left unused, yet maintaining the private propriety of the land.

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Summary

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For most of the Romanian rural inhabitants the agricultural land represents a means of protection against extreme poverty and not a valuable means of production that could provide income. The modernization of rural areas cannot be efficiently and rapidly accomplished without a strong intermediation of the state by a legislative system that would enforce the managerial and professional abilities of the agricultural engineers excluded after 1989 of the rural economic life and by a reunification in optimum size plots of the current agricultural land, mostly left unused, yet maintaining the private propriety of the land.