



# Contribution of EU Supports to Sustainable Rural Development in Three Counties of the Center Region of Romania

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**Abstract.** The main challenge of the rural development in Romania as well as in the whole European Union is to achieve the sustainability from economic, social and environmental point of view. Rural development actions and financial supports must focus on the simultaneous development of these three dimensions, which, however, often generate contradictory objectives. The aim of our study is to analyze whether the EU supports serve sustainable rural development in three counties of the Center region of Romania: Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties, in the programming period of 2007–2013. The first part of the study contains a literature review regarding sustainability and sustainable rural development. In the second part, the results of an analysis regarding the use and territorial distribution – on the level of settlements – of rural development supports in the above-mentioned counties are presented.

**Keywords:** rural development, sustainable development, EU supports, Center Region of Romania

## Introduction

The concept of the sustainable development has become widespread by the report “Our Common Future” of the World Commission on Environment and Development from 1987 (the Brundtland Report). Since then, it entered in the center of attention in several fields, and a lot of studies and publications appeared concerning this topic.

Sustainability has become a central issue also in the rural development policy of the European Union. Adinyira et al. (2007) state: “from its beginnings in

economics and ecological thinking, sustainability has become a planning concept and has been widely applied in rural development.” (Adinyira et al. 2007: 18)

Rural development has a particular importance in Romania because – compared to the EU average – the share of the rural population in the total population is relatively high and a high share of rural areas is undeveloped, characterized by the lack of infrastructure and few employment opportunities. Thus, it is very important to obtain EU rural development supports and to use them as efficiently as possible in order to realize the sustainable development of rural areas.

The aim of this study is to analyze whether the EU supports serve sustainable rural development in the current programming period<sup>1</sup> of 2007–2013. The first part of the study contains a literature review regarding the concept of sustainability and sustainable rural development. The second part presents some analyses concerning the use of rural development supports in three counties of the Center Region of Romania: in Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties. Based on these analyses, in the last part of the study, some conclusions are formulated regarding the contribution of EU supports to the sustainable rural development.

## **The concept of the sustainable rural development**

Sustainable development has many definitions. According to the Brundtland Report, sustainable development means a development which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN 1987: 15).

Sustainability appears as “the main principle” of the Declaration of Rio and Agenda 21 established in 1992 at the United Nations Conference for Environment and Development (UNCED), too. According to the Agenda, sustainability is a multidimensional concept including ecological, social and economic objectives (EC 2001). Between these dimensions appears interdependency (EC 2001) and, many times, due to their often contradictory character, simultaneous realization of these objectives seems to be difficult.

Agenda 21 shows a “comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the United Nations system, governments”, and so on (Euracademy, 2007: 7). It highlights that local communities have a significant role in achieving sustainable development. Hereinafter, we focus on the concept, aspects and components of the sustainable rural development. According to the European Commission - Agriculture Directorate-General’s report, sustainable rural development can be achieved first of all by “strengthening the economic

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1 The idea of this research is based on some earlier researches, where the authors were involved and which were financed by the Transylvanian Museum Society.

viability of rural areas,” which “is the basis for providing the means of preserving their social and environmental functions” (EC 2001: 3). Creation of rural employment opportunities, diversification of economic activities, promotion of local products, services, craft activities and agri-tourism bring closer the achievement of social sustainability (EC 2001). Conservation of natural resources and of the environmental quality is “also a precondition for developing a lasting economic potential in rural areas.” It is essential to “strike the right balance” between the mentioned three elements of sustainability (EC 2001: 3).

In the above-mentioned document, the concept of sustainability is defined as “the maintenance of a certain level of capital stocks (natural, human and man-made capital) as well as achieving efficiency and equity” (EC 2001: 4). Maintenance of the capital stock may be measured in several ways, for example as the maintenance of different environmental or human capital stocks, or even as social cohesion. Efficiency can be expressed by the maintenance and creation of jobs, viability of holdings and so on, while equity by equal opportunities, labor conditions and others (EC 2001).

Adinyira et al. (2007) considers that “beyond the traditional productive function of rural areas, i.e., supplying agricultural, agro-food and forestry goods, goods from extractive industries and craft products, rural areas have become an environment for living and leisure. In this view, sustainable development is paramount to maintaining its function of conserving nature and protecting natural resources” (Adinyira et al. 2007: 19).

According to Csete (2005), the main characteristics of a sustainable settlement are the followings:

- The settlement provides favorable living conditions; people like to live there.
- The settlement is sustainable from financial point of view.
- The situation of the incomes of the population is adequate.
- The agricultural production has a sustainable character.
- The level of knowledge and literacy of the population is adequate.
- The population’s health, training, cultural and information needs can be satisfied.

A research made by the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (NCRCRD 1999) on measuring community success and sustainability shows interesting results. They asked rural communities to identify “the outcomes associated with their community activities that spell «success»”, and the communities named the followings:

- “1. Increased use of the skills, knowledge and ability of local people.
2. Strengthened relationships and communication.
3. Improved community initiative, responsibility and adaptability.
4. Sustainable, healthy ecosystems with multiple community benefits.
5. Appropriately diverse and healthy economies.” (NCRCRD 1999: 1)

In Thematic Guides One and Two of the Euracademy, rural development is defined “as a deliberate process of sustained economic, social, political, cultural and environment change, designed to improve the quality of life of the local population of a rural region” (Euracademy 2007: 7). In this definition, the word “change” suggests that rural development is about “making things better” rather than “protecting the status quo” (Euracademy 2007: 7).

Borec and Turk (2009) state that “rural areas are diverse worldwide but the paradigm of sustainable development and the improving of rural development has become an issue that occupies most of the world’s governments. The global goal is the same everywhere: to improve the well-being of rural people in the broadest possible sense, but the strategies are various and depend on many different factors and sectors.” (Borec – Turk 2009: 37) This point of view emphasizes the importance of creating adequate, suitable rural development strategies, which focus on the special needs of a given community. Actually, this idea represents a starting point for analyzing the distribution and use of rural development supports.

Another important issue is that it is not enough to find out the way how development can be sustainable: “However, simply being sustainable does not make a development path desirable. It also matters whether it is the sort of development path society wants to follow and this depends on what determines well-being for its members” (UNECE/OECD/Eurostat 2008: 20). This affirmation also emphasizes the fact that in order for the rural development strategies to bring sustainable development, they should be acceptable and even realizable in the communities they support.

## **Territorial distribution and use of EU rural development supports in three counties of the Center Region**

In the second part of the study, the use of EU rural development supports is analyzed on the level of the settlements in three counties of the Center Region of Romania in the period between 2007 and 2011. Data were collected from selection reports of the applications for the EU supports provided under the National Rural Development Programme 2007–2013 (NRDP) measures. These reports are published on the website of the Payment Agency for Rural Development and Fishing (PARDF), functioning in the frame of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Romania.

Analyses refer to measures of the NRDP 2007–2013, which are presented in Table 1. It has to be mentioned that the implementation of these measures began only in year 2008 or later. Final selection reports concerning some of

these measures from year 2011 (or, in some cases, even from previous years) and selection reports of other measures (for example, measure 122 - Improving the economic value of forests), which appeared later, as well as data regarding LEADER axis, were not yet available.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it must be taken into consideration that the analyses carried out in this study only refer to the current situation of the distribution and use of the EU rural development supports.

Out of these, there exist some measures, such as the 211 - *Support for mountain areas*, the 212 - *Support for less favored areas-other than mountain areas* or the 214 - *Agro-environment payments* measures, in case of which payments are effectuated in the frame of the Paying and Intervention Agency for Agriculture, so selection reports for these measures were also not available.

**Table 1.** Priority axes and measures of the NRDP the financial allocations were provided through

|                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Priority Axis 1: Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors</i>                              |
| Measure 112 – Setting up of young farmers                                                                                   |
| Measure 121 – Modernization of agricultural holdings                                                                        |
| Measure 123 – Increasing the added value of agricultural and forestry products                                              |
| 123. A – State aid scheme – Agricultural sector                                                                             |
| 123. F – State aid scheme – Forestry sector                                                                                 |
| Measure 125 – Improving and developing infrastructure related to the development and adaptation of agriculture and forestry |
| Measure 141 – Supporting semi-subsistence agricultural holdings                                                             |
| Measure 142 – Setting up of producer groups                                                                                 |
| <i>Priority Axis 2: Improving the environment and the countryside</i>                                                       |
| Measure 221 – First afforestation of agricultural land                                                                      |
| <i>Priority Axis 3: The quality of life in rural areas and rural economy diversification</i>                                |
| Measure 312 – Support for the creation and development of micro-enterprises                                                 |
| Measure 313 – Encouragement of tourism activities                                                                           |
| Measure 322 – Village renewal and development                                                                               |

It has to be mentioned at the very beginning that economic and financial crisis have had significant negative effects in Romania in the past period, and it “reduced the capacity of co-financing European programs from national public and private sources” (Dachin-Ailenei 2010: 47).

Looking at the number of applications which were selected for financing, major differences can be observed between the selected three counties. In the analyzed period, in Covasna County more than 400 applications, in Harghita County more

<sup>2</sup> Last selection reports downloaded by the authors are from October of 2012.

than 1600 applications, while in Mureş County more than 600 applications were selected for financing.

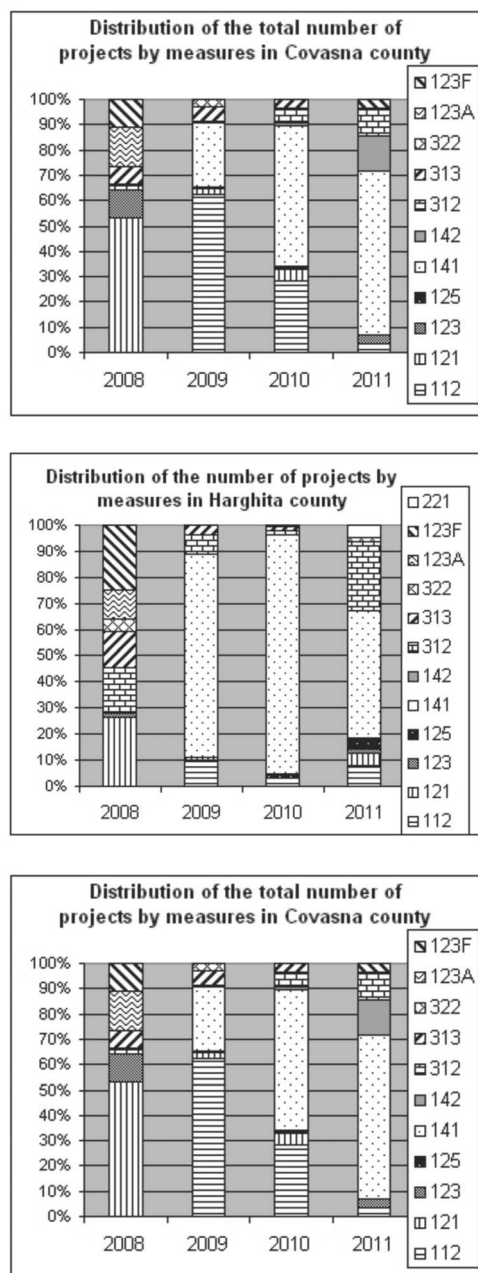
Regarding the distribution of the numbers of these applications by measures, significant differences can be observed between the analyzed counties and between the years. In 2008, the number of projects which obtained financing under Measure 121 was the highest in all three counties, but while in Covasna county this share was more than 50%, in the other two counties it was about 30%. A relatively high share of the projects selected for financing under Measure 123A has to be mentioned in Covasna County, and that of the 123F projects in the other two counties. In 2009 – since when measures 112 and 141 have been implemented –, the share of Measure 112 was the highest in Covasna and Mureş counties, while in Harghita County the number of applications obtaining support under Measure 141 was in the first place. In 2010, the share of Measure 141 was the highest in all three counties due to the fact that applications financed under Measure 141 had a relatively low unique value: 7,500 euro. The situation was the same in 2011 (except for Mureş County).

It has to be mentioned that very few applications under Measure 221 (which is connected to the environmental sustainability) were selected for financing in the analyzed period: only 3 projects obtained funding (in 2011, in Harghita County).

The share of measures significantly differs also in the case when the distribution of the total value of the applications selected for financing is analyzed. Absorption capacity of the counties significantly differs. While in Covasna County, the total value of financial supports was almost 48 million euro, in Harghita County it was more than 85 million euro and in Mureş County it was more than 76 million euro.

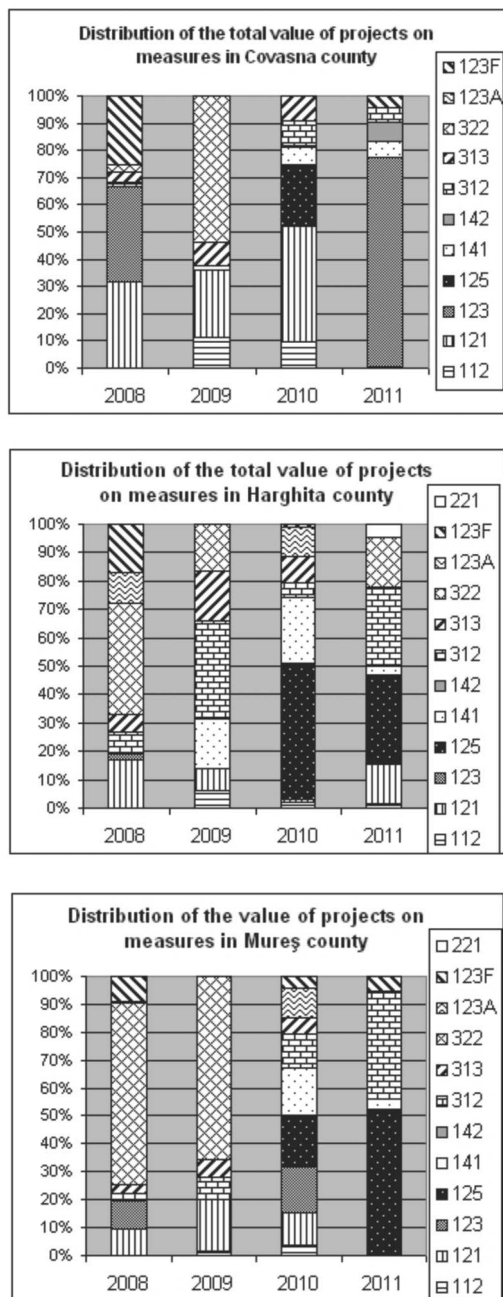
In year 2008, the highest financial supports were obtained under Measure 123 in Covasna County and under Measure 322 in Harghita and Mureş counties. The share of measures 121 and 123F was also considerable in all three counties. In 2009, the share of Measure 322, which is dedicated for village renewal and development, was the highest in Covasna and Mureş counties, while in Harghita County micro-enterprises obtained the highest financial support through Measure 312. In 2010, the share of Measure 121 was the highest in Covasna County, Measure 125's share – which is dedicated for infrastructural investments providing the development and adaptation of agriculture and forestry – was the highest in Harghita County, while in Mureş County the shares of measures 141, 125 and 123 were considerable, having an almost similar share. In 2011, projects belonging to Measure 123 in Covasna County and to measures 125 and 312 in the other two counties gained the most considerable financial supports in 2011.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of the total number of projects by measures in Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties



Source: own calculations based on PARDF data

**Figure 2.** Distribution of the total value of projects on measures in Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties



Source: own calculations based on PARDF data



Evaluating the analyzed measures from a sustainability point of view, it can be observed that the measures of the Priority Axis 1 seek to increase mainly the economic sustainability. However, measures 112 - *Setting up of young farmers* and 141 - *Supporting semi-subsistence agricultural holdings* are dedicated not only to the economic growth, but they may also refer to social justice and equity, providing social sustainability, too. Measure 221 - *First afforestation of agricultural land* belonging to Priority Axis 2 is connected to the environmental sustainability, while measures of the Priority Axis 3 – and especially Measure 322 - *Village renewal and development* – stimulate an attractive environment to live and work in by seeking mainly economic and social sustainability (Szócs et al., 2012).

Thus, in the following part, we investigate the types of investments and projects financed under the measures of the third axis. Measure 313 encourages touristic activities, so, we will not enter into details regarding this measure. In turn, it is interesting to analyze projects selected for financing under Measure 312, which provide the diversification of rural economy and promote entrepreneurship by developing different services that are important in increasing the quality of life in rural areas. Measure 322 is interesting again because it is dedicated to make rural areas more “liveable” and more attractive.

#### *Measure 312*

In the analyzed period, 16 enterprises obtained EU financing under Measure 312 in Covasna County in the following fields: auto service or showroom: 4 projects, veterinary centers: 4 projects; dental centers: 3 projects; wood processing: 2 projects; cutting, shaping and finishing of stone, producing flexographic printing forms, and construction: 1 project for each.

In Harghita County, 80 microenterprises were supported under Measure 312, out of which more than 20 work in construction or land preparation field. Other enterprises are auto services, TIR wash, or have as main activity wood processing, electrical installation or infrastructural works. Other enterprises work in manufacturing such as boiler manufacturing, manufacturing of elements for vehicle decontamination, manufacturing of paper towels, refractory mortars production, organ preparation, plastic waste processing, cutting, shaping and finishing of stone, and so on. Some of the enterprises run service activities, which also have an important role in the diversification of rural economy: as joinery and carpentry, textile works, laundry, tinker works, data processing and web page management, dental surgeries, medical center, veterinary center, restaurant, sanitation services, special events organization, and so on.

In Mureș County, 51 microenterprises obtained EU financing under Measure 312. Several of them are auto services, laundries, effectuate tinker works or activate in constructions and land preparation works. Other enterprises are dental centers, medical centers or active in manufacturing such as: manufacture of metal

structures, wood processing, producing of biofuels and so on, or in the services such as hairdresser, restaurant, computer services, agricultural services and so on.

#### *Measure 322*

In the period between 2007 and 2011, four communes obtained supports under Measure 322 in Covasna County. These are integrated projects having the following objectives: 1. Rehabilitation of roads, construction of a building for after-school activities, purchasing traditional costumes for the folklore group; 2. Construction of drinking water or wastewater network, rehabilitation of roads, modernization of cultural centers, construction of a building for after-school activities; 3. Rehabilitation of roads, construction of wastewater network, equipment for the folklore centre, modernization of the library building; 4. Rehabilitation of roads, realization of the services for the rehabilitation and maintenance of the roads, rehabilitation of the cultural center, realization of a social centre for persons with handicap.

In Harghita County, 5 projects were selected for financing under the mentioned measure. All of them have as main objective the construction, rehabilitation and modernization of the communal infrastructure regarding roads, drinking water or wastewater networks. Some of the projects also focus on the development or construction of some cultural, social or educational centers such as: information and promotion center of cultural and natural heritage, day nursery for children, social care center, cultural center, community care service.

In Mureş County, 14 communes were selected for financing under Measure 322. Similarly to the other two counties, the main objective of the projects was modernization or even creation of the basic infrastructure: roads, drinking water or wastewater networks. Besides infrastructural development, some of the projects intended to realize day nursery for children or develop and modernize cultural centers.

## **Distribution of the EU rural development supports by settlements**

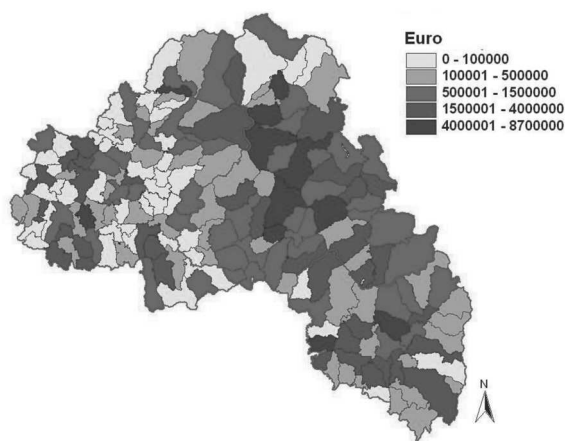
As analyses from the previous part have shown, EU rural development supports contribute to the sustainable development of the rural areas of the analyzed counties because all of them focus on relevant problems of the rural communities and provide economic and social development of the communes making them more liveable and attractive (Szócs et al. 2012).

The following part of the study contains a commune-level analysis in order to see how rural development supports are distributed among the communes of the analyzed counties. The aim of the analyses is to correlate the value of the

EU rural development supports to some socio-demographic and developmental characteristics of the communes.

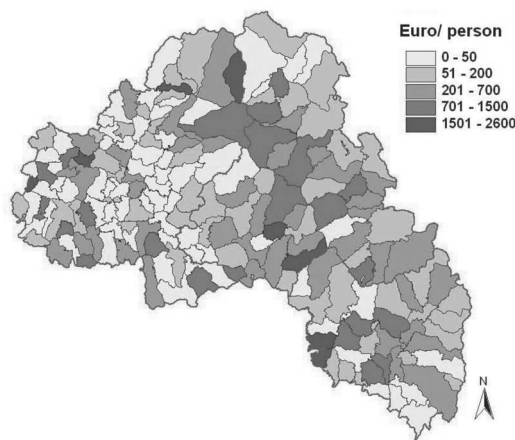
Figure 3 shows the value of the rural development supports by settlements in Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties in the period of 2007–2011. It can be observed that, generally, the communes of Harghita County obtained more support.

**Figure 3. Value of the rural development supports on the level of settlements in Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties in the period of 2007–2011**



Source: own edition based on PARDF data

**Figure 4. Value of the rural development supports per inhabitant on the level of settlements in Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties in the period of 2007–2011**



Source: own edition based on PARDF data

Figure 4 presents the value of supports per inhabitant on the level of the settlements of the analyzed counties. The highest values appear in the following communes: Tăureni (Mureș County), Brădești (Harghita County), Stânceni (Mureș County), Belin (Covasna County) and Rușii-Munții (Mureș County).<sup>3</sup>

Table 2 contains the results of some statistical analyses: correlations between the value of supports and some socio-demographic and developmental indicators on the level of the communes of Covasna, Harghita and Mureș counties were calculated.

Indicators chosen for describing the socio-demographic and developmental situation of the communes were the followings (based on Szőcs et al., 2012):

– *Population* – average of the period between 2008 and 2011 (number of inhabitants) and *total surface*.<sup>4</sup> We chose these indicators because we propose that a more populous, larger commune is more capable to obtain supports.

– *Population change index (2005/2011)*<sup>5</sup> (%), which shows the liveability of the communes. In other words, those communes where population change is positive are theoretically more capable of providing good life conditions for their inhabitants, while communes with a decreasing population may be the most dependent on supports.

– *Development indices of Dumitru Sandu*<sup>6</sup> (2007–2008), which – based on some complex socio-economic indicator system – state a score for the communes according to their development level (IDC) or classify communes in five (IDC5) categories (poor communes – developed communes).

– *Social development indicators of Dumitru Sandu*<sup>7</sup> (2010), which also give a score or classify communes based on some social and economic criteria (IDSL, IDSL6).

It can be observed that significant correlations appear in four cases in Harghita County and in one case in Mureș County. According to these results, if a commune in Harghita County is more populous or more developed, it is probably more

3 Hun. Mezőthát, Fenyéd, Gödemesterháza, Bölön, Marosoroszfalu.

4 Source of data: National Institute of Statistics – Tempo Online Time Series (<https://statistici.insse.ro/shop/index.jsp?page=tempo2&lang=ro&context=10>, respectively <https://statistici.insse.ro/shop/index.jsp?page=tempo3&lang=ro&ind=AGR101B> at 17.07.2012.)

5 In Covasna County, index is calculated for years 2006 and 2010 because one of the communes has existed since 2006.

6 IDC, IDC5 indicators are based on the values of the following indicators: habitable dwelling surface (m<sup>2</sup>), gas consumption per inhabitant (m<sup>3</sup>), water consumption per inhabitant (m<sup>3</sup>), income from own sources per capita, capital costs per inhabitant, number of cars per 1,000 inhabitants, life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate etc. Source of data: the website of Dumitru Sandu - <http://sites.google.com/site/dumitrusandu/bazedate>

7 IDSL and IDSL6 are based on the following indicators: education level of population, mean age of population over 14 years, life expectancy at birth (2006–2008), number of cars per 1,000 inhabitants, average size of dwellings, gas consumption per inhabitant, size of settlements by categories (this indicator is not used in the case of IDSL6). Source of data: the website of Dumitru Sandu - <http://sites.google.com/site/dumitrusandu/bazedate>

capable of obtaining EU rural development supports. In the case of Mureş County, only the population number correlates with the value of obtained supports. In turn, in the case of Covasna County, no significant correlations can be observed.

**Table 2.** Correlation between value of supports and some socio-demographic and developmental indicators on the level of communes of Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties

| County   | Statistical values    | Population | Population change | Surface | IDSL     | IDSL6    | IDC     | IDC5  |
|----------|-----------------------|------------|-------------------|---------|----------|----------|---------|-------|
| Covasna  | Pearson – correlation | .289       | .235              | .147    | -.056    | -.201    | -.218   | -.258 |
|          | Sig.                  | .071       | .144              | .366    | .733     | .213     | .177    | .108  |
| Harghita | Pearson – correlation | .388(**)   | .115              | .149    | .444(**) | .360(**) | .280(*) | .175  |
|          | Sig.                  | .003       | .390              | .265    | .000     | .006     | .033    | .189  |
| Mureş    | Pearson – correlation | .212(*)    | .037              | .158    | .182     | .141     | .124    | .163  |
|          | Sig.                  | .044       | .728              | .134    | .085     | .182     | .242    | .123  |

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: own calculations

Based on these results, we suppose that the absorbing capacity of a commune is often influenced mainly by factors like abilities, knowledge, relationship, mentality and access to information of the mayor's offices' staff and the way they provide information on supports for the population (which generally happens through the local governments). But these factors are not related to the real needs for supports of the communes (Szőcs et al., 2012).

Thus, from this point of view, the allocation system of the financial supports is not equitable enough since not necessarily those communes receive the most supports, which are the least developed or the most dependent on these supports (Szőcs et al., 2012). On the other hand, in the case of Covasna and Mureş counties, not even those communes obtained the most financial support which, being relatively developed, theoretically, should have the highest absorption capacity.

## Conclusions

Literature review on sustainable rural development provided a short presentation on the characteristics of a sustainable rural settlement. Based on these findings, we tried to find out whether the EU supports in the current programming period serve sustainable rural development. Analyses carried out in three counties of

the Center Region of Romania demonstrated that supported rural development projects contribute to sustainable development focusing mainly on its economic dimension (Szócs et al., 2012).

In the same time, the allocation system of the financing does not seem to be sustainable, as often the size of the communes or their need for the supports does not correlate with the value of supports. Rather the abilities, relationship and access to information of the local governments' staff are the key of success. In other words, EU supports serve sustainable development but not in the most sustainable way. Thus, in order to achieve sustainable rural development – among others –, a more efficient allocation system of the EU supports for rural development would be required (Szócs et al., 2012).

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