

DIFFERENCES IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE RURAL SPACE IN THE SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA DEVELOPMENT REGION

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ABSTRACT – The present paper aims to analyze the socio-economic differences from the rural space of the South-West Oltenia Development Region, and, in the same time, to make a correlation between the level of development and the natural background (the relief) where the rural settlements have developed along the history. In the same time, the long-term development potential of the region is analysed, depending on the natural and human resources available and depending on the outputs and inputs that take place between the urban settlements and the rural space from the nearby area. The proximity to the urban influence area can be a major factor with impact on the access of the rural population to certain services, determining a higher level of development. Also, an analysis of the poverty level was made, which characterizes most part of the rural settlements (especially the isolated areas or with aged population), by using statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics and a series of indicators characteristic for the level of development, correlated with the activity profile of the respective settlements. This analysis was performed for a better identification of the problems existent in the rural area of the South-West Oltenia Development Region in order to offer some viable development solutions that are concentrated especially on the natural resources and the local possibilities of the region.

Keywords: rural space, socio-economic differences, development region, restrictive and favourable factors

INTRODUCTION

The five component counties (Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt, and Vâlcea) of the South-West Oltenia Development Region represent 12.25% of the entire surface of Romania and 10.5% of the country population, being the sixth development region considering the population. The demographic dynamics, as compared to 2002, has recorded a decrease by 4.63% of the population at regional level as compared to a decrease of 1.7% recorded at national level. The settlement network has a number of 40 cities, among which 11 are municipalities, and 408 communes with a total number of 2,066 villages (Table 1). The structure of the rural-urban population is 51.98% rural and 48.02% urban. Vâlcea (54.4%), Gorj (52.8%), and Mehedinți (51.2%) are the counties with the highest percent of rural population, except for Dolj County with an urban population of 54.06%.

The South-West Region, due to lithology and the presence of all three major relief forms disposed in amphitheatre from north to south, has a various range of natural resources. The variety of the relief is a source of natural resources, but also a restrictive factor in the development process, blocking the flows and intraregional exchanges and reducing the accessibility to rural settlements, especially in mountain areas. In addition, the high slope terrains, affected by mining and uncontrolled deforestation, are exposed to landslides or flooding. Most of these terrains are located in the rural area of the region, affecting the economic and transport activity. In conclusion, the relief had a major role in outlining the social-economic activities of the rural space within the South-West Oltenia Development Region.

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Table 1. *Main characteristics of the component counties*

County	Surface (km ²)	Population (total)*	Density of population	No. of cities	Number of municipalities	Number of Communes	No. of Villages
Dolj	741,401	712,187	96.1	7	3	104	378
Gorj	560,174	377,718	67.4	9	2	61	411
Mehedinți	493,289	288,775	58.5	5	2	61	344
Olt	549,828	458,380	83.31	8	2	104	377
Vâlcea	576,477	406,555	70.5	11	2	78	560

Source: statistical data provided by the county institutes of statistics (* on the 1st of July 2011)

DATA AND METHODS

The analysis of the social-economic differences which reflect the different levels of development was performed based on the correlations between the natural environment, where rural settlements have developed, the geographical location inside the region, the size of villages, the accessibility or the proximity of urban settlements with a local or regional polarization role, which facilitate the intraregional exchange of flows.

The analysis of the poverty rate, which characterizes the biggest number of rural settlements (especially the isolated ones or those with aged population) was performed using the values of the total poverty rate within the rural area, in all five component counties, but also by analyzing the variation value of the village average development index for counties (in 1992 and 2002). The values of these social indicators were taken from the reports issued in order to drawn up the poverty map of Romania (D. Sandu, 2000) or from the database available online, values that were subsequently processed and analyzed using GIS techniques.

The analysis of the development level of the rural area was performed using statistical data obtained from the reports issued by the National Institute of Statistics and by the County Institutes of Statistics regarding the percent of the economic activities performed. The data were processed using GIS methods in order to identify and locate the problem areas existent in the rural space on the South-West Oltenia Development Region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The differences regarding the social-economic development of the rural space are generated firstly by the geographical location within the region, by the accessibility and the development potential of the settlement depending on the relief. Inside the region, the rural settlements have a higher density in the southern half where the opening of the relief and the transport infrastructure, mainly modernized, offers the population a quick access to social services. There are also areas in difficulty because of the high degree of inaccessibility, such as the Mehedinți Plateau or the mountain areas in the north, where the modern access roads or even the railway are missing (Figure 1).

Based on the population density (Table 1) and the geographical location within the studied area of the fourteen urban settlements, three areas with rural population living in small villages have been identified inside the South-West Oltenia Region, with great distances between them and to a distance of over 25-30 kilometres from the nearest city (Figure 1). Thus, two of these three areas with no urban settlements on a distance greater than 30 kilometers (Craiova – Drobeta Turnu Severin axis and Craiova – Râmnicu Vâlcea axis) are mainly overlapping on the rural areas that have no direct connection to a national road. These areas have a deficit in the transport infrastructure higher than the regional average. The third area has been identified in the southern part of Dolj County and is crossed by the 55A national road in the south, which intersects with E79 in the town of Calafat, connecting the region with Bulgaria over the border bridge. The communes in this area have a good and average access to the transport infrastructure, as they are linked to a national road by lateral connections (Transportation Map available in the Atlas of Romania, 2006).

The economic profile of the rural space in the studied region is mainly agricultural (especially for the communes located in the plain), alternating with industrial activities related to the exploitation

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of natural resources (coal, oil, salt, wood). The economic decline in industry and agriculture beginning with 1992 has affected massively the rural space in Oltenia. Thus, the massive restructuring from the mining industry has not only affected the mono-industrial urban centres, but also the entire rural population from the communes where the degree of dependence on the mining activity was maximum (Figure 1 - Drobeta Turnu Severin – Târgu Jiu area with Motru-Rovinari, Craiova – Caracal – Slatina area).

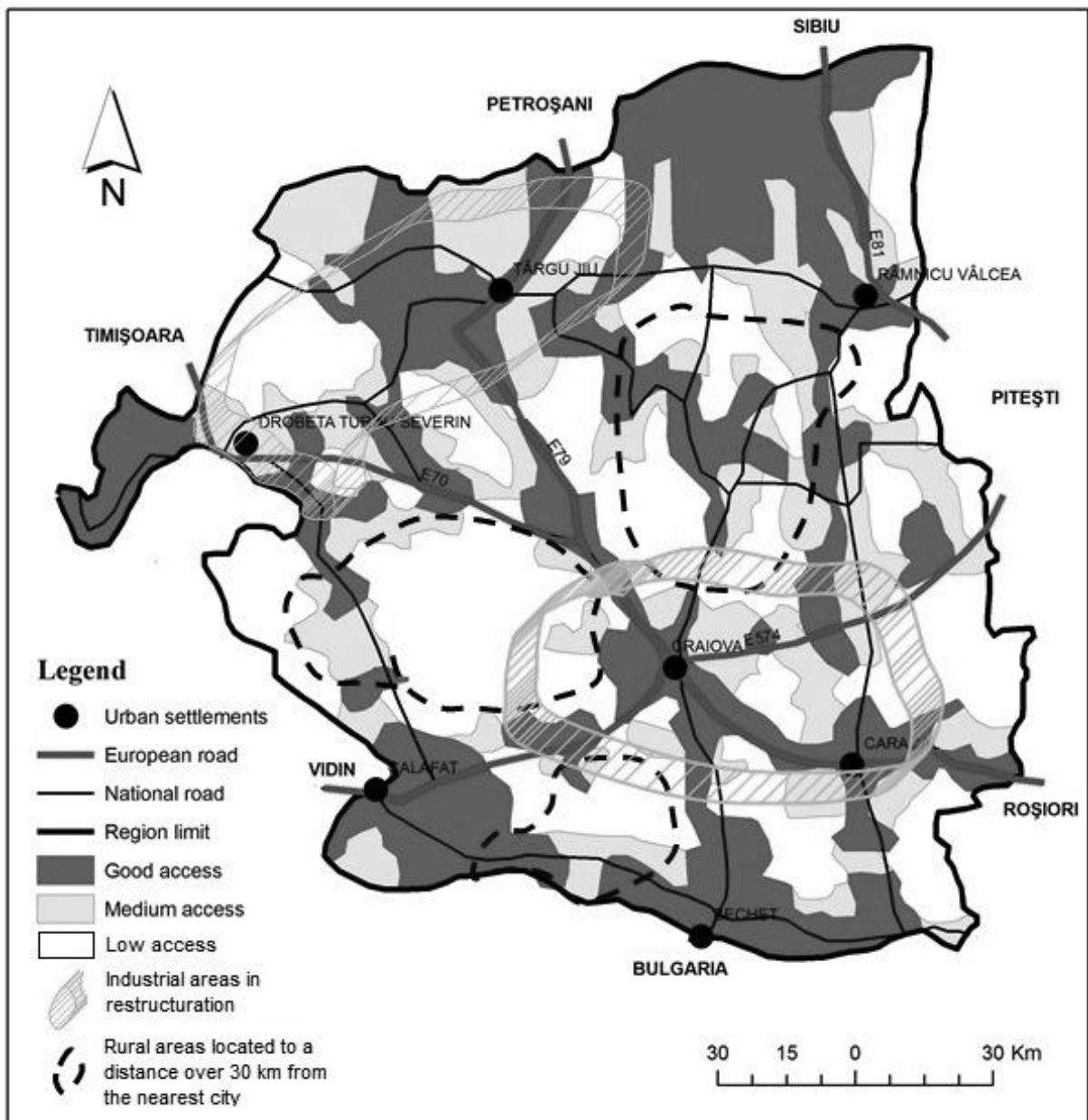


Figure 1. *The accessibility of rural settlements to the road infrastructure and the industrial restructuring areas*

The reform in agriculture initiated after 1989, once the Retrocession Law was issued, did not generate an economic boom for the rural space in the Romanian Plain and in the Danube lowlands. It contributed to the reduction of the agricultural productivity because of the fragmentation of the agricultural lands, generated transformations in the land use, the decrease of profit and the export of

cereals and greengrocery. Following this process, in 1997, when the problem areas where important territorial dysfunctions had been identified were delimited in the Chart of the Regional Development for the first time, the south of Oltenia Region was included in the category of extremely poor areas (most of the rural areas belonging to Mehedinți, Dolj and Olt counties).

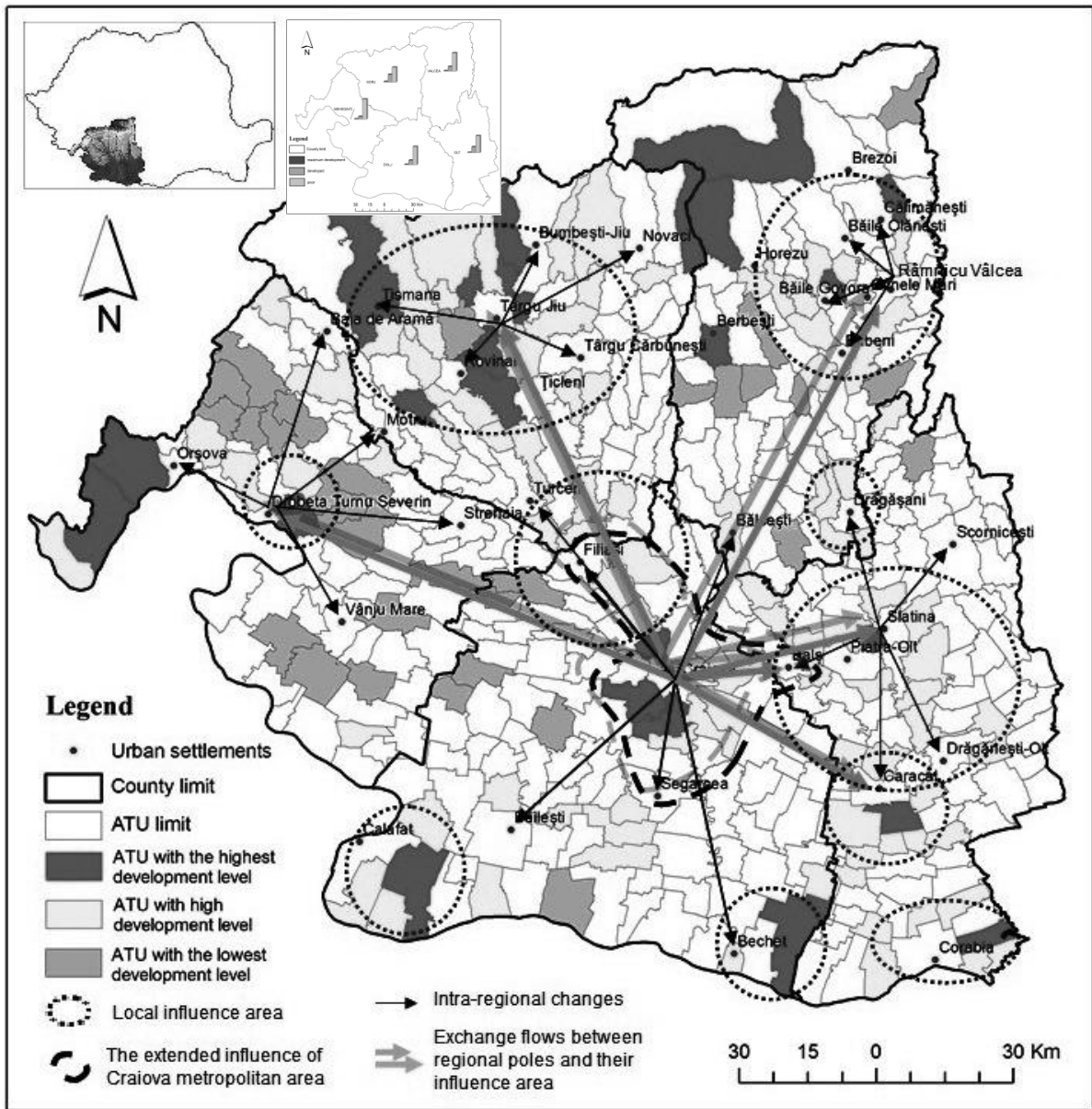


Figure 2. *The development level of the administrative-territorial units (ATU) and the urban areas of influence on the nearby rural space*

In the process of economic reconversion or the turn to an agriculture practiced with rudimentary means in highly instable climatic conditions (lack of or degraded irrigation systems in periods of prolonged drought) only marked the beginning of a degradation process of life conditions due to the loss of a stable source of income. The increase of the unemployment rate and the lack of clear action directions for the economic revitalization led the rural space towards the economic recession. This fact has intensified the migration process of the qualified labour force and youths, deepening the social-economic differences between the developed villages and the small rural

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settlements and a subsistence agriculture, characterized by an aging process caused by a low birth rate and a high emigration rate. In the South-West Oltenia Development Region, eleven communes registered, during 1966-1998, a decrease in the population number higher than 50%, while half of the communes in Mehedinți and Dolj counties registered a decrease in population between 30-50%. The category of communes registering a high population loss also includes those that, according to statistics, have the lowest development level (D. Sandu, 2000) (Figure 2).

Thus, the different social-economic conditions correlated with a low accessibility of the rural settlements located in the northern part of the region, overlapping the southern part of the Southern Carpathians, or those located in the calcareous area of the Mehedinți Plateau, contributed to the delimitation of disadvantaged rural areas. These areas, together with the declining mono-industrial urban spaces, generate a slow development process for the entire region of Oltenia.

These differences contribute to the individualization of three sub-regions as regards the social-economic development of the rural space: rural settlements with the highest level of development, developed and developing rural settlements, and poor and extremely poor rural settlements (Figure 2). The rural settlements with the highest level of development and the developed ones generally have over 1,500 inhabitants and are, in most of the cases, commune centres. In addition, the greatest number of communes having a high development level is grouped around the cities with a local or regional polarization role (Figure 2). The proximity of the communes especially to the county seat cities facilitated the exchanges between the two spaces regarding the request of labour force, but also for agricultural products on the internal urban market place. The closeness of the rural settlements to the upper rank cities (first and second rank) favoured the access of the rural population to upper medical and educational services. The presence of a national or European road contributed to the reduction of the time and cost of travel for the population in order to benefit by these social services, determining a higher level of development.

Performing an analysis at the level of each component county, we notice that only Gorj County has 2% of rural settlements with a maximum degree of development. The counties with the poorest rural settlements are Mehedinți (87%), Vâlcea (80%), and Dolj (79%). Nevertheless, this fact is not entirely relevant because each county has a variable number of villages. At the regional level, the development level of the rural space shows the same dramatic situation where 77% of the villages over 20 inhabitants are included in the category of poor and very poor settlements (Figure 3).

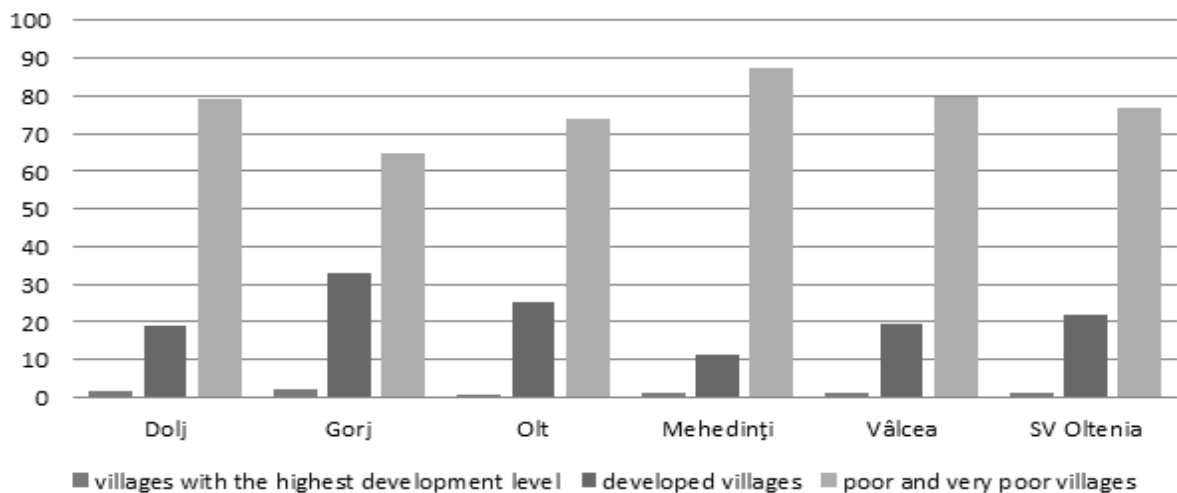


Figure 3. The village development index for the component counties (%)

Source: data taken from the database available online (D. Sandu, 2000) and processed by author

The average village development index, at the county level, indicates an increase in 2002 compared to the values in 1992 for the entire rural space, being more evident in Mehedinți and Dolj

counties (Figure 4). In the same time, the values of the total poverty rates for the rural space indicate that the poorest rural area is located in Mehedinți and Vâlcea counties (Figure 5).

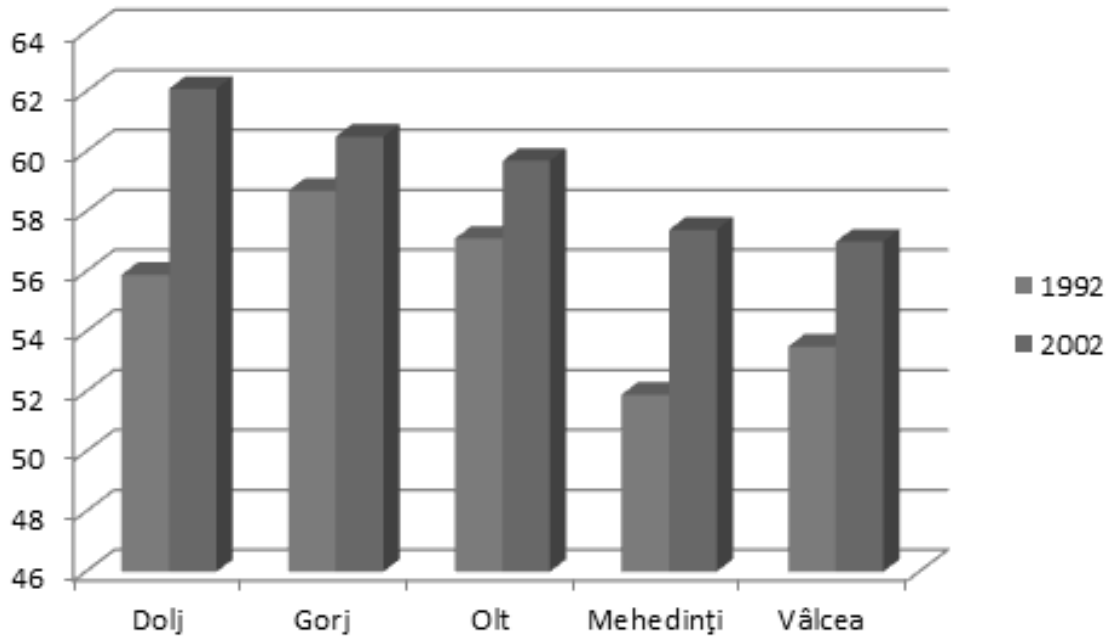


Figure 4. *The average village development index at the county level (1992, 2002)*
 Source: data taken from the database available online (D. Sandu, 2000) and processed by author

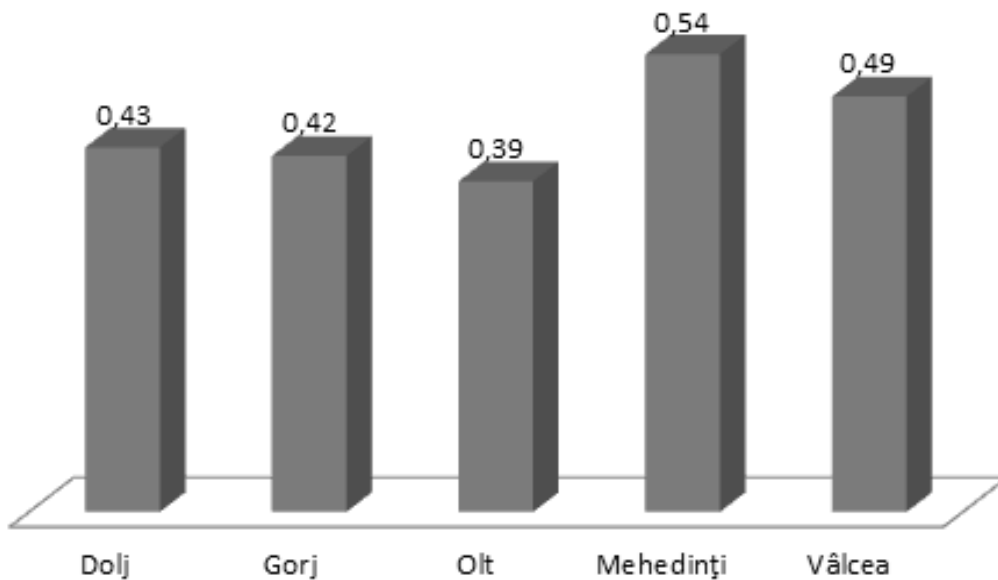


Figure 5. *The total poverty rates at the county level for the rural area*
 Source: data taken from the database available online (D. Sandu, 2000) and processed by author

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CONCLUSIONS

Knowing the underdeveloped rural areas in a process of demographic degradation, both qualitatively and quantitatively, helps the directly implicated local actors identify the social and economic problems and find viable regeneration solutions. The development direction for the rural space in Oltenia must aim firstly at the exploitation of natural resources, others than the underground ones, with an industry in crisis nowadays. A first viable direction to reduce the social-economic disparities within the rural area might be the valorisation of the high tourism potential of the region (especially in the northern part - Tismana, Novaci, Polovragi, Horezu, and the western part - Mehedinți County). The presence of protected areas ("Iron Gates" Natural Park, Mehedinți Plateau Geopark) and the ethnographic areas already known to tourists (Polovragi, Horezu) may turn the rural space under study into a tourist area of national and even European importance. The tourist activities may reduce the emigration phenomenon and may raise the development level by increasing the incomes of the rural area. But there are problems concerning the viability of this direction because of the acute lack of a specific tourist infrastructure and modern roads. As already mentioned, a great part of Mehedinți County faces accessibility-related difficulties. In the same respect, another problem may be raised by the high level of population aging and the lack of qualified personnel to offer quality tourist services. A solution to this may be the reconversion of the unemployed personnel coming from the mining industry.

Even if nowadays the industrial spaces in crisis do not seem to represent a viable solution for economic regeneration, without major investments for the modernization and efficiency of the extraction process, they must not be neglected regarding the environmental protection and the ecological reconstruction. The presence of pollution sources represents repulsive factors for possible investments in tourism or services.

Except for the city of Craiova, the other urban poles of regional importance have a certain peripheral position within the region. Therefore, the largest part of the internal area is rural, being polarized only by few small towns, of local importance, with no high possibility of polarization (Figure 2). Except the communes in the Carpathian and Sub-Carpathian area, where the main economic activity is husbandry, the rural settlements located in the south may concentrate on the exploitation of the agricultural products. In this respect, there are two directions: the exploitation of fresh greengrocery on the urban markets, but using a centralized collecting system avoiding en-detail sale and cut the losses caused by multiple offers. The second direction aims at the cultivation of cereals on wide surfaces by creating associations of landowners. This action may represent a first stage in the modernization process of agriculture and the possibility to obtain a higher production and profit. At the beginning, the profit may be partially redirected to support the process of recovering the irrigation systems in the Danube floodplain and in the Romanian Plain, to purchase adequate machinery to mechanize the agricultural activity, as well as to use selected seeds and natural or organic fertilizers that increase productivity.

By analyzing the results of the development directions aiming to improve the social-economic conditions within the rural space, we notice that, despite the general high potential, there are too many restrictive factors intervening and generating the need of additional investments and costs. Therefore, the exploitation of ecotourist potential is not an immediate solution (especially for the settlements in Mehedinți County, except for Eșelnița, Dubova, and Șvinița communes), but a long-term direction. However, the modernization of agriculture and the association of landowners can be a viable solution for the development of the rural space in the plain area.

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