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Subsistence / Semi-subsistence Agricultural Exploitations: Their Roles and Dynamics within Rural Economy / Rural Sustainable Development in Romania

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Abstract

Within the Romanian agriculture subsistence / semi-subsistence agricultural exploitations continue to occupy an important part, the characteristics of their organization and functioning imparting a particular kind of dynamics. The study here aims at highlighting the perspectives on the evolution of subsistence / semi-subsistence agriculture in relation to rural economy and the sustainable rural development. Our main purpose is to bring into analysis the core issues which the Romanian small farms have to face and, at the same time, identify / propose solutions which would contribute to the economic recovery of the agricultural exploitations in question.

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1. Introduction

The rapid increase of the global population is exerting an increasing pressure on resources, the existing food crisis triggering the rethinking of the importance of agriculture and the rural space. The issue of subsistence / semi-subsistence farms is a topical one, the latest waves of European integration leading to a considerable number of agricultural exploitations of this kind, from the former communist states. Subjected to demographic, commercial and

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technological transformations, subsistence / semi-subsistence farms are confronted with problems related to poor economic competitiveness, low productivity, poverty, as well as rural depopulation.

Though possessing a significant agricultural potential (the agricultural surface occupies 61% of the total land fund, and the rural population represents 45% of the total population, The Statistical Yearbook of Romania 2012), Romania continues to lack in what regards the efficient exploitation of its potential. One of the causes of the poor competitiveness of the indigenous agricultural sector is represented by the perpetuation of the considerable share of subsistence / semi-subsistence agriculture, the small agricultural organizations being defined by small productivity, an inefficient use of production means, the vulnerability of the producers, the limited access to financial resources.

The dire situation of the subsistence / semi-subsistence farms in Romania comes in the context in which the European Union credits these farms with a special status within the economy and the sustainable rural development. Thus, the small agricultural exploitations are attributed a series of auxiliary functions pertaining to the delivery of public goods in addition to the productive function.

Thus, we highlight the social function of these farms which bring an important contribution to the farmers' increase of income, providing protection against poverty. Moreover, they ensure a diversification of the activity, the multi-functionality being, in its turn, a source of growth. Another important function of the small agricultural exploitations is to help preserve the particular characteristics of the rural European space and of the bio-diversity of rural areas. Last but not the least, we must refer to the cultural function, the subsistence / semi-subsistence farms conserving elements of the immaterial patrimony and promoting traditions (Avenir des petites exploitations agricoles: The European Parliament Resolution concerning the future of small agricultural exploitations, 2013/2096 INI). At the same time, the small agricultural exploitations foster ecological agriculture, their traits also conferring higher flexibility and adaptability to economic crises.

2. Subsistence / Semi-subsistence Agricultural Exploitations. Trends in EU-27 and Romania

The latest period has coincided with an increase, at the level of the European Union, in the interest towards the evolution of small agricultural exploitations, their future being even more important since small exploitations represent the predominant agricultural model in the EU. The significant differences that exist between the member states raise numerous problems, even the initiative to adopt a universal definition for these exploitations proving to be a failure. Thus, the small agricultural exploitation / the exploitation of subsistence / the exploitation of semi-subsistence are defined through the analogy to such criteria as: surface (small agricultural exploitations: ≤ 5 ha UAA), economic dimension (subsistence exploitations: < 1 ESU; semi / subsistence exploitations: 1-8 ESU; small exploitations: ≤ 8 ESU), standard production (very small exploitations: less than 8 000 EUR; small exploitations: 8 000-25 000 EUR), percentage of production intended for the market (subsistence exploitations: self-consumption; semi / subsistence exploitations: self-consumption and market EC no. 1698/2005).

Focusing on Romania's case, a first observation to be made is that our country holds the largest number of agricultural exploitations within the EU-27: 3859 thousands exploitations from a total of 12.015 thousands, representing more than 32%. The runner-up, with a smaller percentage, is Italy with 1,621 exploitations (13.5%), but also Poland with 1,507 exploitations (12.54%), and Spain with 990 thousand exploitations (8.23%). The smallest number of agricultural farms is recorded in Luxembourg (2 thousand exploitations: 0.01%), Malta (13 thousand exploitations: 0.10%), as well as Estonia (20 thousand: 1.16%), the Czech Republic (23 thousand: 0.19%) and Slovakia (24 thousand: 0.20%).

Considering the physical farm size criterion, small agricultural exploitations (below 2 ha utilized agricultural area - UAA) represent around 50% of the total of the EU-27 agricultural exploitations (46.91%); by extending these to 5 ha UAA, around 2/3 from the total number of the European exploitations (67.04%) fall into the category of small exploitations. Our country would thus hold a share of 49% of the European total of the exploitations below 2 ha, respectively 43% of the number of the agricultural exploitations below 5 ha. The statistics attest the overwhelming proportion of small homesteads with less than 5 ha in Romania; those 3459 thousand exploitations of this type representing 90% (89.6 %) of the total number of indigenous homesteads.

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