EVOLUTION OF URBAN AREAS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: 
The full exploitation of a town’s knowledge potential depends not only on the quality of the education system, but also on the existence of a network and its capacity to transfer discoveries and information between industry, enterprises and academia.

The policy of integrated urban development may contribute to the improvement of these aspects, precisely by encouraging the formation of specific networks and their support, promoting thus the social and intercultural dialogue.

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1. Theoretic considerations about urban expansion

One of the major issues currently challenging the countries of the world is urban expansion. This phenomenon is preponderant in the small towns of developing countries. Thus, more than half of the urban population lives in towns with less than 500,000 inhabitants. In the period 2000-2050, Asia’s urban population is foreseen to reach a figure of 2.64 billion inhabitants, from today’s 1.36 billion; in Africa urban population is expected to grow to 742 million from today’s 294 million inhabitants, whereas in Latin America and in the Caribbean the present number of 394 million inhabitants is expected to increase up to 609 million.

Statistic data prove that also on the Old Continent new lifestyle and consumption were accompanied by the amplification of urbanisation. Thus, in Europe\textsuperscript{1}, 75% of the population live in urban areas, more than a quarter of the European Union territory being at present destined to urban utilisation. According to recent studies\textsuperscript{2}, the expansion of European towns and cities by more than 5% a year for a decade is equivalent to three times the surface of Luxembourg.

Beside the somewhat subjective factors influencing urban expansion, such as aspirations for a more comfortable lifestyle, and access to all the benefits of civilisation (education, health, dwelling, transport infrastructure, fresh water supply and leisure opportunities) a series of objective factors occur to influence the structure of the territory in favour of urban clusters, such as: consistent community financial support allotted to the policy of territory setup, which resulted in the increase of labour force mobility in the context of the improvement of transport infrastructure and hence the gradual change of the aspect of the areas surrounding the big urban agglomerations.

Despite the definite advantages of urbanisation, this phenomenon also triggers a series of aspects with negative impact on the urban population, such as: serious local problems of environment deterioration, amplification of floods as a result of the harmful impact of works for the transport infrastructure on land impermeability, exposure to noise, air pollution, often exceeding by many times the maximum admitted levels prescribed by specialists, difficulties in waste management, insufficient stocks of drinking water, gradual limitation of open spaces following the fragmentation of natural areas.

Although urbanisation was accompanied, as mentioned before, by advantages, the trend of the multiplication of urban agglomerations increases, which has led, in the past 50 years in Europe’s to the doubling of the space used by one person; this led to situation in which the surface of built areas increased by 20%\textsuperscript{3}, much below the population increase, that was of only 6%.

\textsuperscript{1} Urban Expansion in Europe, EEABriefing no. 4/2006, pag. 1
\textsuperscript{2} Corine Database regarding the territory coverage, AEM, 2006, Copenhaga
\textsuperscript{3} Idem
In Romania, urbanisation is extremely reduced compared to most European countries. Thus, in 2007 our country’s urbanisation degree was appreciated at 34.9%, and it is expected to grow to 66.9% in 2025.

Although our country is undergoing a process of modernisation, since 1997 we have witnessed a total different phenomenon, i.e. the migration from town to village, which dominated the internal migration flows. Paradoxically, people no longer follow the natural historical flow of migration from rural to urban, but the reverse one. The year 1997 becomes thus a turning point in Romania’s social history.

This phenomenon took a while, and according to analysts the post-Communist transition in our country seemed to have ended in 2005-2006. The situation returned to a relative normality only in 2006, when the highest number of migrants is represented by people who change towns. The next place is occupied however by the migration from town to village, with a 28% share of all the persons who decide to change residence.

This phenomenon, together with the drop in birth rate and external migration, the urban population decreased from 12.4 million inhabitants in 1995 to 11.8 million inhabitants in 2006. According to official data, only 46% of the total number of towns have more than 50,000 inhabitants. The number of towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants is 25, comprising around 55% of Romania’s urban population; this means that there are about 3 big cities in each region.

The country capital city, Bucharest, concentrates 16.2% of Romania’s urban population. Romania’s network comprises for the rest only small and medium towns (representing in fact 90% of the total number of towns and cities), characterised by a modest urban development. Small towns (under 20,000 inhabitants), although very high in number (209) shelter only 17.1% of the total urban population. Most of these small towns however have entered the urban circuit in an artificial manner (many of them during Communism), and in fact they have to face major development difficulties (also as a result of their decline as mono-industrial centres). Thus, the significant drops in urban population, as well as the deterioration of urban functions as a result of the lack of adequate infrastructure have affected the potential of economic growth of Romania’s urban centres. Thus, towns were no longer capable to behave as growth engines for the adjacent areas. This explains also the tendency of labour force migration toward the most developed urban centres of neighbouring regions or areas.

Although our country has many towns (small and medium), they do not operate in a network, as there are no economic relations among them or between these urban centres and the surrounding areas. The development pattern of these urban centres was designed independently from one another. There is even the danger that mono-industrial towns got detached from the natural economic circuit.

In the future, urban development in our country will continue to be influenced by internal factors (finalisation of transition in Romanian economy, continuation of the decentralisation process encouraged also by the application of the European principles of regional development policy, economic and social constraints, poor cooperation among neighbouring towns and cities, difficulties in the improvement of the environment issues, etc) as well as by external factors (affirmation of the globalisation phenomenon, EU extension, consolidation of research-based economy, innovation, creation of European relations among towns and cities status of international migration, etc).

2. Evolution of urban areas in the European Union and Romania

According to good practices in the Western-European countries, the strategy of implementation, in the urban areas, of a functional mix of dwellings, labour spaces, education, supply and recreational activities has proved to be successful in the long term. The establishment of inter-communal planning organisations, for the coordination of the setup among different towns and cities follows the line of European recommendations in the field of territorial arrangement. The setup measures provided for urban areas are recommended to be applied also in the case of reconversion zones, with the purpose of creating an attractive environment for investors. Thus, the regeneration of industrial regions and towns is indicated to be done by the supply of services, attraction of European areas related to the setup of barren and contaminated industrial areas and the improvement of the urban environment.

Despite the difficulties that may occur in some stages, towns represent centres of knowledge, sources of growth and innovation, creating the premises for social inclusion and economic development. „In the long run, however, towns will no longer be able to fulfill the function of engine of social progress and of economic growth in the sense of the Lisbon Strategy, if the social balance is no longer maintained within towns and among town, preserving the cultural diversity and setting high quality standards in domains such as urban design, architecture and environment”.

The most recent approach of European decision makers in charge with the territory setup refers to the imperative application of an integrated policy of urban development; this means taking into account, in a simultaneous

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4 According to the methodology applied by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, the urban areas refer to towns, and the rural zones refer to communes, in accordance with Law 315/2001, towns and communes are defined as basic territorial administrative structures; they are found in Annexes of Law 2/1968, annexes that are permanently updated.
5 Annual report „Situation of world population " of UNFPA, The UNO fund for the Population, elaborated in 2007 and bears the title „Urbanisation – potential of urban expansion ".
and equitable manner, all aspects related to urban development, as well as interconnections between them and the other sectors and domains logically involved in this process. In other words, the integrated policy of urban development represents a process of coordination of territorial, sector and temporal aspects of the main “key” field determining and influencing the development of urban areas and centres.

In the opinion of European officials in charge with the territory setup, the integrated programmes of urban development should be elaborated for a town seen as a unit, comprising in this respect the following chapters: the description of strengths and weakness of neighbourhood as a result of updated analyses, the shaping of a unitary development vision in accordance with the defined goals, coordination of district plans for a balanced development of the respective urban area, the correct and efficient distribution of funds to the stakeholders in the public and private economic sector, the involvement of all partners that may substantially contribute to the development of life quality of each area. In the same spirit of integrated urban development, it is absolutely necessary to increase the energetic efficiency of buildings, and urban transport must be readapated to the requirements specific to each zone: dwellings, offices, public spaces, taking into account obviously the environment norms. The quality of the environment (as a result of the danger represented by climatic changes) is another condition to fulfill by an integrated urban development. Towns, as centres of „knowledge and innovation, will be able to provide – through measures of prevention, compensation and adaptation the deployment of new industries and companies with a low level of CO2 emissions.

The responsibility of developing a certain area or region is however divided between urban and rural limits. That is why the modern regional perspective is based on an active partnership between towns and the rural area, manifested by cooperation and coordination. Thus, the town within the rural environment also fulfill an important function of impulsioning the development of regional economy. On the regions with low population density, for instance, only the towns and cities can ensure a certain level of infrastructures and services and attract economic activities. In such areas, towns and cities play a special role in the preservation of habitat and cultural landscape.

Beside the partnership between territorial-administrative communities, the promotion of a professional network resulted from the association of urban and rural small and medium enterprises plays a decisive part in regional economy. This process facilitates the exploitation of the local potential and the dissemination of knowledge and information to the companies in the respective region. In our country, like in the other member states, one aims at achieving a coherence of national policy with the community and urban development policy. Thus, within the Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013, the first priority axis of the programme called „Town sustainable development – potential growth poles” stipulated the funding of integrated projects of urban development, the programme being in full accord with the provisions of the „Community Strategic Orientations”.

3. Factors of local economic development

Edward J. Blakely, in his book, defined local economic development as “a process in which the local government and / or community groups manage their existing resources in a partnership arrangement with the private sector or with other structures, for creating new jobs and developing economic activities in a well-defined economic space”8. In this concept, especially for the countries with transition economies, local governments have a special role to play for the following reasons:

- As a result of delimiting property and forming municipal property, local authorities have become owners and managers of businesses, with substantial presence on the market;
- Local authorities dispose of diverse financial instruments and capital means in order to grant direct assistance to new and existing companies;
- Local authorities have access to information and networks of agencies that may be used in the assistance of companies and attraction of investments.

Local economic development is also a continual process of planning and implementing strategic programmes and sustainable development policies for the measurable improvement of life quality for the entire local community, by the creative use of local resources.

The basic goal of local economic development is the removal of obstacles hindering economic development and improvement of mechanisms of market efficient operation. Other goals refer to the orientation of efforts towards offering assistance to the existing business sector, encouragement to open new business by the identification of people’s needs, attraction of local investments and enhancement of infrastructure development level. For the reaching of these objectives and of the final goal we need to operate strictly in the directions of economic development of the respective town, with the prospect of economic growth and improvement of life quality for the inhabitants of the given territory. The most important element in the economic development of the locality is the correct setting of „accents” by identifying modern tendencies that are always changing. This is very important in a town, if it intends to be a

7 The Leipzig Chart for sustainable European towns “, 24-25 May 2007
participant with full rights on the market. The competition plays a very important part and thus those localities will be successful that will take into consideration the current conditions on the market.

The development and dynamism of micro and small enterprises have represented means of adaptation of local economies to the new economic circumstances occurred in the transition period. They encourage many social groups to organise an independent source of revenue by opening a business, contributing thus to the job creation and unemployment reduction. These processes prove that the main challenge for a town is to be able to mobilise the existing potential, to coordinate diverse local factors exploiting their potential and placing them in the service of economic activity.

The economic activity of towns generates between 50% and 90% of the Gross Domestic Product in most countries. Economic prosperity of many peoples is often related to economic prosperity of their towns and cities. Moreover, a town may be more successful if the businesses conducted there are successful. However, business success depends on the capacity to secure an advantage on regional, national or even foreign markets. In this respect, many towns and cities attempt to strengthen their comparative advantages in a way that directly supports the competitive advantages of businesses or productive sectors on their territory.

Local economic development may be also interpreted as a phenomenon that is not only quantitative (economic) but also qualitative (Social-human). Thus economic growth will be associated with development only in the case of involving a structural change into the social-economic system, in other words if it improves the quality of life and environment, preserves the cultural patrimony, involves the community in solving common issues and common exploitation of benefits. These changes will mark a transition from an old to a new economic structure.

The implementation of local development policies depends on a series of factors in the sphere of influence of local authority. Which, correctly exploited, may lead to the reaching of the development objectives, and they are:

- Infrastructure (roads, public utilities, air or water transport, telecommunications, touristic infrastructure etc);
- available buildings and lands (barren lands for locating economic activities, available building, programmes of the existing valid fund refurbishment, business centres);
- human resources (specialised labour force, recycling programmes adapted to the market, lifelong learning);
- financial support (from the local, regional, national or European level);
- managerial support and know-how dissemination (consulting services, of information dissemination, etc);
- life environment (quality of dwellings, services, natural environment, crime level)
- Organisational capacity (organisational structures, economic cooperation, involvement of the private sector).

4. Conclusions

The general valid opinion is that in the present context of changes, economic, social and administrative restructuring, local development triggers a process depending on innovation and entrepreneurship, of internal growth and structural changes aiming at the enhancement of local community living standard, based on the improvement of the capacity of transformation and adaptation, as well as of innovation stimulation.

Local development is the expression of local solidarity, generating new social relations that reflect the will of the inhabitants of a region to put local resources to good use. It is situated at the crossroads of different domains of public intervention: urban policies, industrial policies, territory setup policies, decentralisation, social policies.

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