

PROMOTING LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN CLUJ COUNTY. THE INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN DESIDERATUM AND REALITY

Lelia PAPP

“Babeş-Bolyai” University Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Geography

Abstract. The experience of the European Union counties has shown that the active involvement of the communities in the management of their own territory represents a more practical alternative to centralization. Although the central government does not disappear entirely, it has the role of supporting the local government to become the main “territorial animator”, involved in capitalizing the potential of its own territory. According to the current legislation, several intercommunity development associations have been already initiated in Cluj County, involving the local authorities from several administrative territorial units. The present paper focuses on several aspects regarding the already functional intercommunity development associations: when, where and how the associations were established, the number and type of involved partners, the aim and the objectives, the powers and resources, the achievements and the problems they face with in their attempt to become operational.

Rezumat. Promovarea dezvoltării locale în județul Cluj. Asociațiile de dezvoltare intercomunitară între deziderat și realitate. Experiența țărilor din Uniunea Europeană a dovedit că implicarea activă a comunităților în gestionarea propriului lor teritoriu reprezintă o alternativă mult mai practică la centralizare. Deși administrația centrală nu dispăre în totalitate, ea are rolul de a susține administrația locală pentru ca aceasta să devină principalul „animator teritorial”, implicat în valorificarea potențialului propriului teritoriu. În conformitate cu legislația actuală, în județul Cluj au fost create deja câteva asociații de dezvoltare intercomunitară, care implică autoritățile locale din câteva unități administrativ-teritoriale. Articolul de față se concentrează asupra câtorva aspecte legate de asociațiile de dezvoltare intercomunitară deja funcționale: când, unde și cum au luat ființă, numărul și tipul partenerilor implicați, scopul și obiectivele, puterile și resursele, realizările și problemele cu care se confruntă în încercarea de a deveni operaționale.

Key words: intercommunity development association, local development, Cluj County.

Cuvinte cheie: *asociație de dezvoltare intercomunitară, dezvoltare locală, județul Cluj.*

1. THE FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORTING THE CREATION OF INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS

1.1. European experience

Practice has shown that the development based only on “top-down” strategies, implying decisions taken by the central government without a preliminary consultation with local communities, have not led to decreased disparities in living standards, on the contrary, as Stohr (1981, pp.39-72) observes, the disparities between social strata, as well as between geographical areas, have generally increased. In the context in which no centralized system

can perceive and answer the great variety of local communities' necessities, and also capitalize appropriately the potentialities of a territory the same way as the communities themselves can, a shift from centralized administration to various forms of decentralization and the encouraging of a "bottom-up" approach are being promoted nowadays by many countries around the world.

Therefore, today, local development policies and local initiatives are stronger and much more integrated into national and European strategies than ever before. We assist at a growing awareness that empowering the local level would not only improve effectiveness of central policies, but also enhance cohesion and assure favorable conditions for each local community to develop itself naturally according to its real needs. In this respect, the Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion entitled "*Growing Regions, Growing Europe*" (2007, p. 148) underlines the fact that "*the division of responsibility can affect the 'quality' of public investment and its contribution to higher productivity and growth in regional economies, insofar as authorities at the regional and local level are likely to have a better understanding of local needs and are perhaps in a better position to tailor investment programmes to meet this*".

But the concept of *local development*, seen as "*a combination of the economic, social, and political factors which allow the capitalization of territorial potentialities on the basis of local resources with a view to its adaptation and development*" (Raysac and Sibille, 1992, cited by Suci, 2000, p.109), also implies *cooperation* and *partnership* between different agents, public or private, as many problems cannot be solved without an integrated approach (*European Spatial Development Perspective*, 1999, pp.16, 25), as well as the elaboration of a common, coherent development strategy.

In this respect, according to the *European Spatial Development Perspective* (1999, p. 25), in order for a cooperation to grow into a long-term successful partnership, several preconditions have to be created: the equality and independence of the partners; voluntary participation in partnership; consideration of different administrative conditions; common responsibility and common benefit.

The experience of the European Union member states offers different examples and lessons of different approaches concerning the creation of partnerships aiming at improving the local community quality of life.

1.2. Romanian legislation

In this context, in the late 1990's, Romania has chosen to encourage the creation of voluntary partnerships between municipalities, or between municipalities and local actors, with the formation of *microregions*, aiming at promoting policies of sustainable development, at ameliorating disparities within the microregion and/or solving local problems. However, according to the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) and to the European settlements issued by EUROSTAT, NUTS level 4, corresponding to the microregions level, is still not organized in Romania. Puiu and Mitran (2008, p. 98) underline the fact that, in contrast with the praxis of development in some European countries, in which microregions are considered fundamental units of territorial development, Romanian microregions are not integrated into the structures of territorial planning, resulting a disaccord among different initiatives that come from the local level and certain determinism when initiatives come from the centre.

Recently, the Romanian authorities have become interested in supporting the association between administrative-territorial units to form *intercommunity development associations* (IDA), this time trying to assure the legal framework to support their formation.

A first step was made with the provisions of Local Public Administration Law No. 215/2001, which authorizes the Local Public Administrations to set up for themselves Contracts of Association based on the provisions of Government Ordinance No. 26/2000 concerning Associations and Foundations. A next step was made in 2006, with the provisions of Law No. 286/2006 (amending and completing Law No. 215/2001), according to which, the intercommunity development associations represent “*cooperation structures with legal private law personality, established, under law, by the administrative-territorial units with a view to carrying out in common some development projects of zonal or regional interest or to providing in common some public services*” (Article 1, Section 2, Paragraph c). The Law also stipulates that “*The intercommunity development associations are financed by contributions from the local budgets of the member administrative-territorial units, as well as from other sources, under law*” (Article 111, Section 1) and that “*The Government gives support to the association of administrative-territorial units through national development programmes. These programmes are financed annually through the state budget and are considered as distinct within the budget of the Ministry of Interior and Administration Reform, under the law regarding local public finances*” (Article 111, Section 2). Therefore, this new type of association brings the capacity to the local councils to meet in the form of a legal entity for purposes to fix, on a territorial regrouping scale, their common objectives and priorities, the governmental support being necessary in this initial phase.

The legislative framework for supporting the creation of intercommunity development associations also includes Frame-Law on Decentralization No. 195/2006, Law on Local Public Finances No. 273/2006, as well as Law No. 188/1999 regarding the Status of Public Servants, amended by Law No. 251/2006.

The attempts of creating the legislative framework, starting with 2006, are meant to legally approve the association of administrative-territorial units and increase their ability to access funds with a view to their integrated development. This measure is seen as essential, in the conditions in which Romania faces a great administrative fragmentation: 319 towns and cities, and 2 851 communes (31 December 2005), situation in which the administrative-territorial units cannot generate significant incomes, cannot initiate and carry out projects properly, and cannot afford sufficient and adequate managerial and technical resources. Moreover, the association forms existent until 2006, were far too diverse, without a unitary, institutionalized and permanent character, many of them even non-functional, as indicated by a study carried out in 2007 by the Ministry of Interior and Administration Reform, with the agency of the Central Unit for Public Administration Reform (CUPAR).

Therefore, in order to support the creation and the development of the intercommunity development associations, with a view to increasing the quality and the efficiency of the common local public services, the Ministry of Interior and Administration Reform, with the agency of the Central Unit for Public Administration Reform, has conceived a national programme, intended to develop between June 2006 and July 2009. The programme is meant to provide the logistic support and to finance projects in order to

assure the logistical, technical, informational, and human resources, necessary for an efficient functionality of the intercommunity development associations.

The Report Regarding the Activities Developed by the Central Unit for Public Administration Reform in 2007 indicates that 2007 represented a period dedicated to the analysis of the existent situation, to establishing the objectives meant to support the intercommunity development associations, and to creating the necessary instruments to attain these objectives. The analysis revealed that the existent intercommunity development associations face a series of difficulties raised by the unclear provisions as regards their setting up, functioning, and administration. Therefore, 2008 is intended to be dedicated to assuring the legal and support framework, by issuing the draft normative act which regulates the National Programme for Supporting the Intercommunity Development Associations, as well as to elaborating the Handbook of Intercommunity Development Associations and to offering a permanent support for all the interested actors.

2. THE INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS FROM CLUJ COUNTY

The new framework offered by the Local Public Administration Law, as well as by the possibility of developing and implementing projects financed through EU programmes, has encouraged most of the administrative-territorial units from Cluj County to form associations.

In the context in which there are numerous and diverse forms of associations at the level of Cluj County, the Government's representative at the county level, namely Cluj County Prefecture, supported by Cluj County Council, has initiated, starting with 2006, two pilot projects. In this respect, Objective 4 of the pilot project regarding decentralization at the level of Cluj County aims at making efficient the local administrative system by supporting the intercommunity association, while the pilot project regarding the association of public authorities has in view to enhance the abilities of the local public administration authorities to set up intercommunity development associations with a view to increase the quality and efficiency of the common local public services.

At the moment (June 2008), eight intercommunity development associations have been already set up in Cluj County (Figure 1.) on the basis of Local Public Administration Law No. 215/2001, amended by Law No. 286/2006.

The most complex form of voluntary association between administrative-territorial units in Cluj County, namely *Cluj-Napoca Metropolitan Area*, is still in project phase, although the intention to create it dates back from 2004. The development strategy, elaborated in 2006 by Quantum Leap S.A. for the benefit of Cluj County Council, is still submitted to objections coming both from architects and local authorities of the communes involved in the project, who are still afraid of not losing their decisional and financial independence. Cluj-Napoca Metropolitan Area (Figure 1.) is planned to include one city (Cluj-Napoca) and 19 surrounding communes (Aiton, Apahida, Baci, Bonțida, Borșa, Căianu, Chinteni, Ciurila, Cojocna, Feleacu, Florești, Gârbău, Gilău, Jucu, Petreștii de Jos, Sânpaul, Săvădisla, Tureni, Vultureni), aiming at an integrated development of the area, which implies collaboration in solving some problems related to urban and rural economic development, protection of environment, development of infrastructures, improvement of services delivered to the citizens, etc.

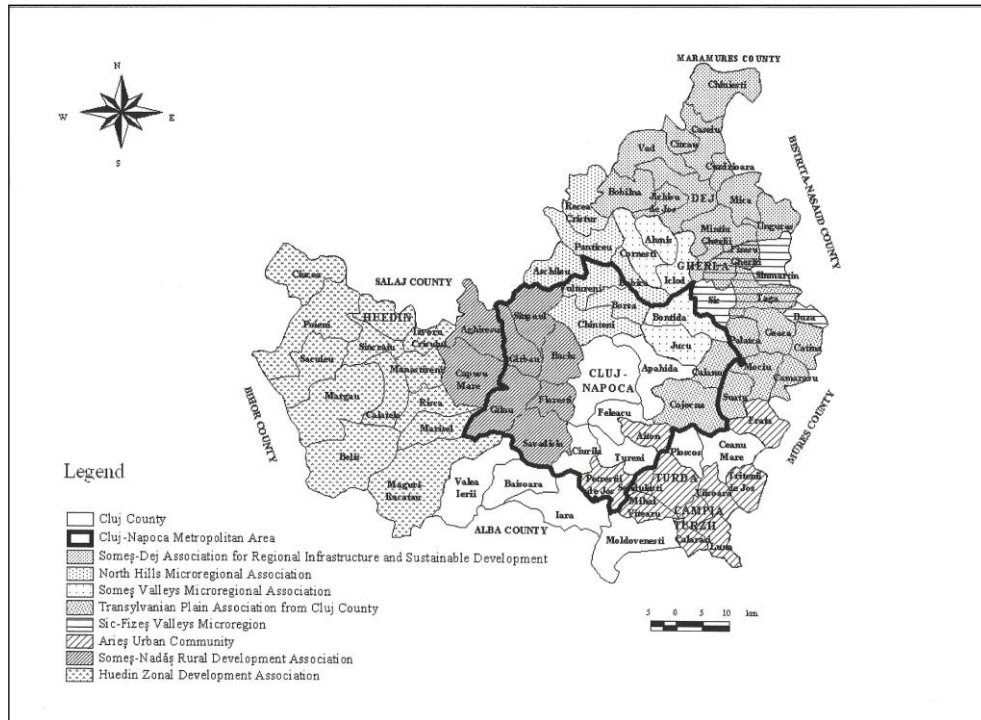


Figure 1. Intercommunity Development Associations in Cluj County, June 2008.
 Asociațiile de dezvoltare intercomunitară din județul Cluj, iunie 2008

The present paper focuses on several aspects regarding the already functional intercommunity development associations: when, where and how the associations were established, the number and type of partners, the aim and the objectives, the powers and resources, the achievements and the problems they face with in their attempt to become operational. The analysis of the present stage of this associative form required the accession of the available web sites created in order to promote the activity of these intercommunity development associations, as well as the application of a semi-structured interview with the representatives of seven intercommunity development associations. It must be mentioned the fact that only four intercommunity development associations have already personal web sites, out of which, only some are “ready” to present concrete and updated information about the association itself.

The analysis points out the fact that half of them were initiated starting with 2006, the others, initiated earlier, have undergone different adjustments in order to become eligible for accessing different structural funds for the period 2007-2013. Moreover, the name of most of these associations still bears the influence of the *microregion* concept, a modification of the status being also required in order to become intercommunity development associations legally. For example, the members of the *Association of the Transylvanian Plain from Cluj County* (set up in 2007), have formed in 2008 *the Intercommunity Development Association of the Transylvanian Plain from Cluj County*.

Table 1. Intercommunity Development Associations from Cluj County, June 2008.
Asociațiile de dezvoltare intercomunitară din județul Cluj, iunie 2008

No.	Name of the intercommunity development association	No. of administrative-territorial units included	Year of legal registration	Place of registration
1.	Huedin Zonal Development Association	13	2001	Huedin
2.	Someș-Dej Association for Infrastructure and Sustainable Development	13	2003	Dej
3.	Arieș Urban Community	11	2005	Turda
4.	Association of the Transylvanian Plain from Cluj County	9	2007	Cojocna
5.	Someș-Nadăș Rural Development Association	8	2006	Săvădisla
6.	North Hills Microregional Association	7	2007	Chinteni
7.	Sic-Fizeș Valleys Microregion	5	2003	Sic
8.	Someș Valleys Microregional Association	5	2006	Iclod

The size differs from one association to another, but generally, the greatest number of associated administrative-territorial units is gathered around the main towns of the Cluj County: Turda-Câmpia Turzii, Dej-Gherla (although Gherla has been less active in the association lately), and Huedin (Table 1.). This urban-rural partnership has the advantage of promoting an integrated development through joint projects and mutual exchange of experience, the towns functioning as engines of growth for the surrounding countryside.

The administrative-territorial units are given the possibility to adhere to more than one association. This is the case of Fizeșu Gherlii commune, included both in *Sic-Fizeș Valleys Microregion* and in *Someș-Dej Association for Infrastructure and Sustainable Development*, or the case of Țaga commune, included both in *Sic-Fizeș Valleys Microregion* and in *the Association of the Transylvanian Plain from Cluj County*. But these two cases are more a consequence of the fact that *Sic-Fizeș Valleys Microregion* is less active for the time being. Another case will be represented by the communes surrounding Cluj-Napoca, which, besides being members of the already initiated associations, they will be also members of the *Cluj-Napoca Metropolitan Area*.

As far as the type of partners is concerned, all these associations are formed through the voluntary association of the administrative-territorial units, represented, according to law, by the executive authorities (mayors and vice mayors). They form the administrative board of directors, but the agreement of the deliberative authorities (local councils) is also required, a situation perceived as ambiguous by the representatives of the intercommunity

development associations. While the members of some associations have regular meetings (once a month or even once a week), with impact on the dynamics of the respective associations, others find it difficult to meet and work together, common interest falling on the second place. Moreover, the local elections that took place in June 2008 slowed down the activity of the associations, the results of the elections being waited in order to continue their activity, as well as to modify their status.

However, this type of public partnership may represent a first step in the formation of the so-called Local Action Groups (LAG), a public-private partnership, which has the responsibility to detect the necessities of the local communities, to establish priorities by elaborating development strategies, elaborate projects, find financing sources and implement the projects according to the existent development strategy. The complexity of the LAG makes it the only beneficiary of the LEADER programme, created for stimulating and promoting rural development within local rural communities, the main objective being the functionality of the territory. For the time being, at the level of Cluj County, although in formation (for example the case of *Someş-Nadăş Rural Development Association*, which works in collaboration with Civitas Foundation- a Romanian NGO, a Hungarian foundation - Szülőföld Alap Iroda and local private partners), there is no LAG with legal personality.

As mentioned before, the main objective of this type of association is to elaborate reliable projects, with a view to improving the citizens' life. The projects can be financially supported by accessing the structural funds for the period 2007-2013 in the following fields: local and zonal transport infrastructure, health and social assistance, education and training, regional and local business environment, tourism, ecologisation of the connected public utilities and public services, modernization of connected public utilities, waste management. However, some of these associations have in view not only the elaboration and implementation of some projects, according to a sustainable development strategy, but also an effective involvement in community's life, by trying to represent the common interests in rapport with other institutions, attract private and civil partners, facilitate the access of population to information and financing sources, offer support for local innovative initiatives, facilitate regional, inter-regional or trans-border cooperation, protect and capitalize the local natural and cultural patrimony in the interest of local communities, etc. Therefore, the association is seen as a long-term partnership that works in the benefit of the entire community.

According to Frame-Law on Decentralization No. 195/2006, the IDAs are given the power, yet limited, to act, to get involved in an active manner in developing themselves by mobilizing the available resources (financial or human). Besides the financial resources coming from the local budgets of the member administrative-territorial units, the IDAs are given the possibility to finance themselves from other sources, under law. The human resource is also a very important key-element in the functioning of the IDA. Professionals, who know how to elaborate projects or development strategies, who are acquainted with the problems of the community, who can offer assistance and facilitate the communication between the local public authorities, NGOs and enterprises, are highly required. Therefore, at least one local development agent (LDA) is necessary for each IDA, if not in each town hall. In reality, out of the total number of intercommunity development associations, only 3 of them have local development agents, the lack of specialized personnel being one of the main problems the intercommunity development associations confront with.

But the functionality of this type of association comes out when taking into consideration its achievements. The elaboration of a sustainable development strategy facilitates a better understanding of the territorial potential and of the specific local needs and offers the suitable guideline for elaborating and implementing different projects. However, the elaboration of a sustainable development strategy at the level of each IDA from Cluj County is found in different phases, but none of them is completely finalized. The tendency is to elaborate first the development strategy for each administrative-territorial unit which forms the association, the synthesis being represented by a development strategy elaborated at the level of the entire association.

The activity consists especially in elaborating and implementing development projects. In this respect, all the analyzed intercommunity development associations have already initiated projects, found in different stages of elaboration and implementation. One of the most dynamic associations, namely *Association of the Transylvanian Plain from Cluj County* (Asociația Câmpia Transilvaniei din județul Cluj), has already initiated and proposed for financing, since its formation in 2007, a number of 5 projects, some in partnership with foundations (Agape Foundation) or other public institutions (Cluj County Council, Cluj County Office for Persons Records), in fields such as social assistance (family counseling, legality of personal documents, no matter of ethnicity), training (forming professionals in administration) and infrastructure (introduction of water supply in centralized system and construction of the sewerage network in several localities from Geaca and Țaga communes, the value of the project reaching 6 million euros). The project "Professionals in administration, strategies for modernization" (119,375 euros) was initiated in July 2007 by the Cluj County Council and was meant to be implemented in partnership with *Someș-Nadăș Rural Development Association*, *Association of the Transylvanian Plain from Cluj County* and *Someș Valleys Microregional Association*, aiming at training the public servants working for the involved partners, in project management, financial management, regional development and public acquisitions.

Someș-Dej Association for Infrastructure and Sustainable Development (Asociația pentru infrastructura regională și dezvoltare durabilă Someș-Dej) is involved in 4 projects in fields such as: social assistance (labour market integration of disabled persons by creating a small digital printing office), education and training (promotion of lifelong education, professional training, rebirth of traditional handicraft).

The first project accessed by *Arieș Urban Community* (Comunitatea Urbană Arieș) is an ISPA project, with an initial value of 30 million euros, supplemented afterwards to 90 million euros, dedicated to rehabilitation and extension of the water supply and sewerage networks. The associated administrative-territorial units also agreed to work together for a common waste management, for the creation of European Information Centres, etc.

Someș-Nadăș Rural Development Association (Asociația de Dezvoltare Rurală Someș-Nadăș) has already implemented a series of projects for developing the territorial infrastructure in some localities of the member communes of the association: introduction of water supply in centralized system, creation of the telecommunication network, of the sewerage network, introduction of the natural gas network, assurance of the sanitation service, asphaltting a series of streets, etc.

Huedin Zonal Development Association (Asociația de Dezvoltare Zonală Huedin) has its beginnings in 1999, when, at the initiative of "Transilvania" Ecologic Club from Cluj-Napoca, Huedin Microregion was created. Until its legal registration in 2001, and even

afterwards, the association has succeeded in registering some progress in raising the public awareness on the need of environmental protection and preservation. The association joined a very important project developed between 2006 and 2007, the local authorities, together with local communities, carrying out the responsibilities assumed by signing the GMO (Genetically Modified Organisms) Free Zone Declarations.

The other three intercommunity development associations have also in view the development of territorial infrastructure: the introduction of water supply in centralized system in the case of *Sic-Fizeș Valleys Microregion* (Microregiunea Văilor Sic-Fizeș) and *Someș Valleys Microregional Association* (Asociația Microregională Văile Someșului) or the improvement of the road network in the case of *North Hills Microregional Association* (Asociația Microregională Dealurile Nordului).

A problem the associations have encountered as far as the project financing and implementation is concerned is that they cannot access funds for implementing more projects having the same object of activity. In order to do that, they have to create another intercommunity development association. This is the situation of "*Arieș Valley Water*" *Intercommunity Development Association*, initiated in 2007, but still in process of organization, set up by the members of the *Arieș Urban Community* in order to manage *Compania de Apă Arieș* (Arieș Water Company), through a contract of management assignment, with a view to carrying out in common development projects related to water supply, sewage and sewage-treatment plants.

CONCLUSIONS

The intercommunity development associations represent a good means to promote local development, encourage collaboration between different administrative-territorial units and support an integrated development by taking into consideration local needs and potentials. Although relatively new, the eight analyzed intercommunity development associations from Cluj County, have in mind, or have already initiated a series of projects, especially in the field of developing the territorial infrastructure or training the human resource.

Nevertheless, more governmental and legal support, as well as a clear guideline for their setting up, functioning and administration is required. In addition, the analysis pointed out a need of impulse through examples and good practice, an imperious need for experienced professionals (local development agents), but also a need to improve communication both in vertical and horizontal cooperation level, the weak communication within some of the analyzed intercommunity development associations and the existence of other interests than the common one having a negative impact upon their achievements.

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