

**THE RESTRUCTURING OF RURAL AREAS IN BULGARIA: NEEDS MUST
POLICY OR POLICY BASED ON THE NEEDS OF RURAL PEOPLE?**

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Abstract

In the beginning of the 90s the political, economic and social transformations have led to profound changes in Bulgaria's rural regions. After about ten years of rambling agricultural policy and lack of rural policy of the state, the EU integrated rural development approach has been adopted in 2000-2006 National Agriculture and Rural Development Plan (NARDP). The Plan totally reversed the vision of rurality and perceived sustainable development of rural areas as a main priority of the rural policy. It aimed at overcoming the existent development disparities observed not only between rural and urban regions but also within rural areas through improvement of the quality of life of rural people and living conditions in rural communities.

The paper focuses on the impact of the 'changing rurality' to the rural development policy of the restructuring of rural areas in Bulgaria. It gives some examples of the on-going restructuring of small and peripheral rural communities in terms of identifying their current needs and priorities expressed by the various representatives of local actors. The paper presents some findings of the in-depth study carried out in two Bulgarian rural regions – a study, complementary to the World Bank quantitative countrywide survey.

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Introduction

Bulgaria's rural areas experience serious difficulties in the restructuring process due to their overall inherited backwardness: low productive and low labour efficient non market (socialist type) oriented agriculture, manufacture economy, poor infrastructure.

In the course of the transition the break up of the collective farms, the decline in agricultural production and the collapse of rural economy led to leaping unemployment, increasing migration and deteriorated demographic trends.

As in many other CEECs, in Bulgaria the agricultural restructuring has relegated rural social reconstruction to a secondary place in the list of priorities. The breakdown of sociality and the shrinking of collective identity (closely linked to the co-operative farms) and solidarity down to individual and family identity, and/or to informal networks, reinforced disintegration processes and individualistic coping strategies. Respectively, the everyday life of rural people and their living standard were influenced and limited by these facts and constraints. Hence, the present picture of the needs, priorities and expectations of the diverse socio-economic groups of the rural population reflects the long and contradictory political and economic transition of the country.

All this deepened the negative trends in rural communities, retarded their development and puts rural areas in an unequal position in the pre-accession period.

The changing rurality in Bulgaria

In EU member-states the term rurality covers broader, modern and postmodern views on the contemporary rural world, views that are continuously being rethought and redefined. Thus the definitions range from those that perceive the countryside as a place of consumption, situated beyond a place of production (Marsden *at al* 1993); "a landscape for recreation, a place to look at and to move freely in" (Oksa and Rannikko 1996); 'specific society or form of life', which also "has to do with the use and exploitation of 'natural' resources" (Tovey 1998), to certain vanguard postmodern concepts. The latter no longer see rurality as "an opposition between regions and spatially defined groups" but view it as a "social identity", "a principle of

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organization and a system of values” for nature conservation and resource management (Mormont 1987); as “rural space /which/ is becoming a terrain on which different social groups... can display and realize different identities and social projects“ (Mormont, cited by Tovey 1998: 30); or as a “pure space and no longer a specific mentality” (Therborn 1997: 25).

In Bulgaria the understanding of rurality during the socialist period was rather neglected or simplified, being reduced mainly to its productive (agricultural and small industry) function. In the transition, rural areas have been profoundly and unfavourably affected by the fundamental economic and social transformation taking place in the country. After about ten years of a rambling, "piecemeal policy" in the agrarian sector the state “re-discovered” its rural policy as a part of Bulgaria’s pre-accession strategy. The EU integrated rural development approach has been adopted in the 2000-2006 National Agriculture and Rural Development Plan (NARDP). The Plan aimed at protecting and strengthening rural economies and communities, implementing common economic, infrastructural, environmental and cultural policies in all rural areas; improving rural living and working conditions, the quality of life in rural areas, protecting the rural heritage etc. (NARDP, 2000). Hence the definition of ‘rural’ and ‘rurality’, its scope and features, have been changed totally. The representation of rurality have continuously been redefined, reconfirmed and negotiated with the changing realities.

Whereas prior to the political changes in Bulgaria the term rurality was used mainly to refer to everything which is not urban, in the NARDP a broader definition of ‘rural’ has been adopted (respectively, rural areas and rural population) following the complex criteria of the OECD and EU¹.

¹ According to OECD indicators, rural areas are defined as regions in which the biggest town (municipality center) has a population of less than 30,000 inhabitants and the population density is less than 150 persons per square kilometer (OECD 1994). Following OECD criteria EU developed a large set of socio-economic and environmental factors to encompass the diversity of rural areas, but it was and still is impossible to build a common and unequivocal definition of rurality (Van Depoele 2001). In Bulgaria the population density in rural areas is 40 persons per sq. km, which is well below the country’s average (76.4 persons per sq. km). According to this, over 84 percent of the territory covers rural regions with a population accounting for 43.6 percent of the country’s total population.

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The present state of rural areas in Bulgaria are too far from the postmodern vision of rurality and they still possess characteristics of the “belated modernity” of the Bulgarian village (Kozhucharova, Rangelova 2001), which is based on agriculture and is socially organized in small communities coherent with the rural culture and traditions. Rurality has been perceived and promoted through reinforcement of rural community identity and by using the potentials of rural areas to develop the viable farm and off-farm activities, raise the living standard of rural people and protect the rural habitat.

The changing rurality in the country could be explained by the changing identity of rural people both in respect of the locality, (the milieu), and with regard to their needs and priorities. The complexity of the explanation comes from the broken ties between the local, regional and national levels and inside the locality, due to the increasing social disintegration and insecurity.

Rural regions

The harmonization of the legislation with regard to the restructuring and development of rural regions in Bulgaria involves the elaboration of two basic acts: The 1999 Regional Development Act (RDA) and the 2000-2006 National Agriculture and Rural Development Plan (NARDP 2000). Adopted in these documents are the EU concepts and criteria for territorial and regional development. At first, the new regional development strategy has laid the EU Nomenclature of Territorial Units (NUTS). Bulgaria has been divided into six planning regions, which are classified as NUTS II regions. 28 administrative districts correspond to the EU classification NUTS III level. The country is further divided into 263 administrative centers called municipalities, which correspond to EU NUTS IV level (RDA 1999). According to this NUTS classification Bulgaria does not differ significantly from the new EU member states in which large parts of the territory are predominantly rural areas (Zichy 2001).

Bulgaria’s rural regions have been defined as municipalities in which the largest towns have a population of less than 30,000 inhabitants, and whose population density is less than 150 people per sq. km (RDA 1999). According to this criterion, 81.4 percent of the country’s territory comprises rural regions, and the population

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there amounts to 43.6 percent of the country's total population. The population density in rural areas is 40 persons per sq. km, which is well below the country's average (74.6 persons per sq. km)² (Table 1). The average density of rural settlements in Bulgaria is 3.75 villages per 100 sq km. According to this definition rural areas cover all municipalities in Bulgaria with the exception of the 28 regional centers and the five municipalities³. In other words, out of a total of 263 municipalities, 229 are in rural areas. There are 5 307 rural type settlements versus 33 urban type settlements.

Table 1: Types of Settlements in Bulgaria

Type of settlement	Municipalities	Settlements	Area		Population density
	Number	Number	km ²	%	Persons /km ²
Less than 30 000 Inhabitants	229	5 307	90 371	81.4	40
More than 30 000 Inhabitants	34	33	20 622	18.6	226.5

Source: NARDP, 2000. The data are prepared on the base of the NSI data and the data from the National Centre for Territorial Development and Housing Policy.

Rural areas are classified according to their geographic location as mountainous, plain, and peripheral small towns and villages. **Mountainous areas**⁴ represent a substantial part of the rural settlements structure - 2172 settlements in 138 municipalities are situated in mountainous areas and cover a territory of 22.85 percent of the total agricultural land in Bulgaria (Sustainable Rural Development... 2004).

Villages are the most common settlements around a rural municipality whose centre may be a large village or a small town. They correspond to EU NUTS V level. The most widespread type of rural municipality consists of a small town with 10 to 20

² The average density of rural settlements in Bulgaria is 3.75 villages per 100 sq km.

³ Municipalities of Dimitrovgrad, Dupnitsa, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Kazanlak and Svishtov (Rural Regions 2004).

⁴ Mountainous areas are defined as areas "with altitude above 600 m, or under 600 m, but with depth of relief segmentation above 200 m... with density of relief segmentation above 2 km² and the area slopes are above 12° steep" (Ordinance ... State Gazette No 35/2003 in accordance with Article 18 of the EC Regulation 1257/1999).

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associated villages. Villages in Bulgaria are classified as small, medium, large, and very large. The most numerous type are the small villages (Table 2). Rural economy still depends on agriculture - farming is still a primary economic activity in the villages. The other activities are in the field of forestry, processing industry, crafts and rural tourism in the last years.

Table 2: Distribution of Villages by Number of Inhabitants

Village type	Inhabitants	Total number of villages
Small ¹	Up to 500	1 285
Medium	501-1000	619
Large	1001 – 5000	215
Very large	Above 5000	7

¹ (1/4 of total villages are with population below 150).

Source: *Rural Area Studies*. National Centre for Territorial Development and Housing Policy; NARDP 2000.

Following a set of criteria, the 1999 Regional Development Act, identifies four types of areas in Bulgaria: Areas for Growth; Areas for Development; Areas for Trans-border Cooperation and Development, and Areas with Specific Problems⁵. **‘Less developed rural areas’** refers to the fourth type and covers “municipalities or groups of municipalities with a predominant rural way of life, specialised in farming and forestry, characterised by a low level of economic development, technical infrastructure and workforce qualification, suffering acute social consequences such as rampant unemployment, low income and depopulation” (NARDP 2000: 19). Being areas with specific problems, less developed rural areas are the target of a special support policy and of measures for integrated development grounded in the 2000-2006 National Agriculture and Rural Development Plan (NARDP) of Bulgaria, prepared under the EU Special Accession Program for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD). The social objectives of the Plan are to overcome the existing regional socio-economic disparities, and to promote a revival in these areas.

⁵ Source: NARDP, 2000 - Ordinance for Identification of Areas for Specific Impact and Their Boundaries (No. 105/2.06.1999) of the Ministry for Regional Development and Public Works.

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In preparing of the Plan, 34 rural areas were identified as less developed rural regions representing 77 municipalities with a population of one million people in all (12 percent of the total Bulgarian population). These areas cover 24.3 percent of the total territory; they have significant farm and forest resources (Table 3). Farming and /or wood processing and timber industry are prevalent economic activities.

Table 3: Characteristics of the Less Developed Rural Areas

Total number of less developed rural areas		34
Total number of municipalities included in less developed rural area boundaries		77
Total area (sq. km; % of the country's total area)	16 088 7	24.3
Total population (number; % of the country's population)	1 008 931	12.2
Farm land (% of country's total farm land)		25.4
Forest land (% of the country's total forest land)		23.8

The demographic and social characteristics of less developed rural regions are less favourable than those of other rural areas: continuous negative natural growth rate, high death rate, a very aged population, a share of educated people well below the average for the country. The unemployment rate is much higher than the country's average. Most of the mountainous rural communities belong to this type of rural areas.

Rural Development Policies

In the context of the development concept, rural development policies are oriented to overcome the development disparities and to raise living standard and living conditions in rural areas at an individual, local and regional level.

Economic and social restructuring of rural regions are the core of rural development policies; they require complete rationalization of all sectors of rural life.

Economic restructuring of rural areas lays emphasis on:

- restructuring of agriculture on a market basis; creation of a new market environment and increasing the competitiveness of the sector;
- revitalizing strategically important sub-sectors such as vine growing, greenhouse vegetables, perennials (orchards), growing of roses and berries, natural honey, cultivated herbs, silkworm breeding, etc.;
- innovation and technology improvement in all sub-sectors of agriculture and in processing industries;
- renovation of equipment, facilities and innovation of production technologies complying with EU requirements;

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- improvement of hygiene requirements and standards and strict control over the agricultural products;
- effective land use;
- diversification of rural economy – new business development; promotion of alternative economic activity like light industry (especially the food-processing industry), services and rural tourism

The main guidelines in social restructuring of rural regions are oriented to:

- creation of jobs through alternative activities and generating sources of income;
- improvement of the social services in the villages and facilitation of rural people's access to them;
- improvement of the infrastructure and building the IC sector;
- building democratic institutions in rural areas (civil organizations such as NGOs, professional associations, market organizations, networks, LLGs, groups of interests etc.);
- new educational and training patterns – new skills and knowledge-based qualification are needed. There is a growing need for training in management and marketing of small-and medium-sized farms.

A substantial part of sustainable rural development policy is the implementation of practices for environmental and heritage protection. The protection and conservation of the natural environment has been assigned to the institutions responsible for protecting the country's biological and landscape diversity - wildlife species and protected areas; however such activities are also the objective of regional and local NGOs. The goal of preserving the cultural and historical heritage has defined rural regions as priority areas because of the advantages they offer for alternative tourism and recreation.

In my view, the economic and social restructuring in rural areas should take place simultaneously in order for rural areas to be modernized and to meet the needs and priorities of different groups of rural population, to improve their the quality of life.

Concurrently with the implementation of the NARDP under the SAPARD programme, other EU instruments and projects, UNDP, World Bank and other international projects directly address various topics of rural development. In the last few years there has been a more intense adopting of the European experience in the participatory approach by local government management bases. All activities and

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practical measures undertaken in the implementation of projects are oriented to improve local self-governance and to increase the civic participation of rural people. In themselves these projects can be defined as innovations, for they aim to ‘awaken’, mobilize and involve the rural people in local (individual and common) actions to help them raise the quality of life and to overcome the lagging of rural areas. This is the main development challenge.

JOBS projects⁶ with the support of UNDP have been launched in some rural municipalities with the aim of creating new business opportunities.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) coordinates the Bulgarian participation in the Network PREPARE⁷ which purposed to strengthen civil society and promote multi-national exchange of experience in rural development, focusing on the 10 candidate countries from CEE.

Referring to this, I would argue that all passed studies have shown that small and peripheral rural communities have less access to and meet difficulties in implementation of rural sustainable development programs due to the structural, technical, territorial, financial, and other constraints.

In the preparing of the National Strategy Rural Development Plan (2007-2013)⁸ the main objectives referring to sustainable rural development lays on the priority of “**improving the quality of life and jobs opportunities in rural areas**”. The partnership is the main principle implemented in the National Strategy Plan.

Data and Method

The paper is based mainly on the in-depth study carried out in two Bulgarian regions – a study complementary to the World Bank survey “**Bulgaria: Survey on Rural Development Needs**”⁹. My field work covered a qualitative survey in two

⁶ The Job Opportunities through Business Support project has been carried out by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy under the government programme “Bulgaria 2001”. The JOBS Project aims to foster a sustainable environment for job creation by supporting micro and small businesses and agricultural producers in regions of Bulgaria confronting high unemployment levels.

⁷ Pre-accession Partnership for Rural Regions in Europe. Source:
<http://www.mzgar.government.bg/SR/Prepare/Prepare.htm>

⁸ http://www.mzgar.government.bg/MZ_eng/OfficialDocuments/Programs/NSRDP_draft.pdf

⁹ The World Bank (WB) survey with the partnership of the FAO, the WB Office in Bulgaria with the support of Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), conducted November 2003-April 2004, was a

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rural mountain areas: the municipality of Troyan (Balkan Mountains) and the municipality of Devin (The Rhodope Mountains), which could be referred to 'less developed rural areas'¹⁰. The case studies could serve as examples of how to understand the rural periphery¹¹.

The **objective** of the WB survey was "to show the human, social and economic dimension of life in rural areas and to determine what rural inhabitants and stakeholders consider as the main constraints to development, what are their most important priorities and needs" (Bulgaria: Survey on... 2004). In the survey, rural population was defined the one living in municipalities which population in headquarters is **less than 30,000 inhabitants**.

General background

The two regions are rich in biodiversity, landscape, protected national landmarks. The meadows, grasslands and pastures cover more than two third of the of the villages' total area, while the agricultural land represents lesser share. Forests are the greatest treasure for the Rhodope villages and of high importance for the Troyan region. The lowest category of the land, the steep and hard accessed terrain in the Rhodope villages is not favourable for farming while there are good conditions for perennial crops in Troyan villages. Common for

country-wide non-representative survey based on interviews of a target sample of respondents in 14 rural municipalities (plains, valleys and mountains) and 56 villages. Reflecting the diversity of the socio-economic and geographical conditions in rural areas in Bulgaria, it aimed to investigate the current situation in rural areas in Bulgaria with a special focus on rural infrastructure; to determine the problems, needs, priorities and expectations, as perceived by different groups of rural population, in order to elaborate a rural development strategy (Survey design 2003).

The **quantitative survey**, carried out by Vitosha Research Agency, included individual interviews with a total of about 490 households, 71 entrepreneurs (including farmers, traders, agricultural products traders and processors, and co-operative managers), Mayors, members of the municipality staff and/or of the Municipality Council, as well as 70 group interviews.

Researchers carried out the **qualitative complementary survey** in 9 case studies in villages and their municipal centers, conducting in-depth individual interviews and target focus groups.

¹⁰ In each area two villages were studied: the village of Dobrodan (hereafter signified as D) and the village of Golyama Jelyazna (GJ) in the Troyan Municipality; and the village of Trigrad (T) and the village of Osikovo (O) in Devin Municipality. More than 150 in-depth individual interviews with different types of households, entrepreneurs, mayors and other representatives of local actors were conducted, as well as target focus groups with employed, unemployed and young people.

¹¹ I support the notion that rural periphery can be defined not only in the geographic terms but also from the viewpoint of the development concept, i.e. as a periphery of development. Thus, in the central part of the country, rural settlements can be identified as peripheral when their remoteness from the administrative center causes development constraints. On this basis we can compare the peripheral (border) village of Trigrad (Devin Municipality) with the village of Golyama Jelyazna, in the periphery of the Troyan Municipality, within the Central Balkans Municipality of Troyan.

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the two regions are farmers' problems: finding markets, low sales prices of milk, meat, livestock, and other specific local agricultural products.

Specific natural conditions in both areas predetermine the main economic activities: timber industry, wood processing, stock-breeding and tourism (Table 4).

Table 4: Characteristics of the villages

	Dobrodan	G. Jelyazna	Trigrad	Osikovo
Topography				
Situation	Balkan mountains	Balkan mountains	Rhodope mountains	Rhodope mountains
Locality (municipality)	Troyan	Troyan	Devin	Devin
Population density (municipality)	26 persons/sq. km		42 persons/sq. km	
Accessibility (distance to nearest town)	12 km(close)	30 km (remote)	27 km (remote)	40 km (remote)
Accessibility (distance to nearest town)	12 km(close)	30 km (remote)	27 km (remote)	40 km (remote)
Natural conditions				
Agricultural land	500 ha	120 ha	300 ha	55 ha
Non cultivated land		100 ha	20 ha	-
Pastures	1450 ha	280 ha	200 ha	60 ha
Forests	200 ha	1100 ha	700 ha	20 ha
Landmarks			Devil's Throat Cave; Trigrad Gorge; the Haramiiska Cave	Virgin nature, sites of ancient Thracian settlements
Protected areas	Central Balkan National Park		Shabanitza (300 years old spruce and beech forest); Chairite (fore lakes)	-
Main activities	Wood processing, Furniture	Timber industry, Forestry,	Timber industry Wood processing,	Forestry, Farming Stock-

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	production, Timber industry, Farming, Stock- breeding	Farming Stock- breeding	Forestry, Commerce and services, Farming, Stock- breeding, Tourism	breeding
Farm structure: Subsistence farms Commercial farmers (number)	Small-sized Large 5	Small-size Large 1	Small-size Middle-size 2	Small-size Middle- size 4

The development trends in the surveyed rural communities are not so bleak. Devin Municipality refers to 'less developed rural areas'. Troyan Municipality is better developed in terms of its inherited industrial profile. The 1992-2001 population dynamics slightly tends to negative. The population density in the two municipalities is lower than the average for the country but in Troyan region it is 1.6 times higher than that in the Devin region. Natural population growth is negative but lower than the country average (Table 5). The closure of enterprises and the dismantling of the cooperatives caused an extremely high and long-term (official and unofficial) unemployment among both women and men in Devin Municipality – from 50 percent to 80 percent of the working-age population. The unemployment rate highly varies: between the villages in Troyan Municipality (from 7 percent on the average in the town of Troyan, 13 percent in the village of D., and up to 80 percent in the village of GJ.

Subsistence farming has the greatest share and importance in rural economy. The share of the households, whose main livelihood and source of income is agriculture, is over 80 percent. The vast majority of them are small-sized units. **Commercial farmers** are very few in the surveyed areas.

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Table 5: Characteristics of the population

	Troyan municipality		Devin municipality	
Population density (municipality)	26 persons/ sq. km		42 persons/ sq. km	
Natural population growth (municipality)	-9.5%		-9.4%	
Life expectancy (municipality)	71.7 years		72 years	
	Dobrodan	G. Jelyazna	Trigrad	Osikovo
Size of population	402	810	960	389
Share of people in working age	45.0	19.3	45.0	55.3
Share of retired	45.0	69.1	37.0	27.2
Share of registered unemployed*	11.1	50.0	30.0	8.0
Share of not registered unemployed*	3.3	10.0	**	88.8
Share of households, whose main occupation is agriculture	80.0	96.0	85.0	99.0

* Percentage of the people in working age

** Missing data

During the last five years in both municipalities a decline is observed in formal state sectors in construction, industry, transport and communication, health system and some other services, at the expense of the expanding of the private sector in processing and light industry, forestry, agriculture, rural and spa-tourism, crafts, catering and other services.

Mountain rural areas do not offer conditions for a great variety of **off-farm entrepreneurship**. The main sectors are wood processing industry and related services, furniture production, forestry, trade and services, particularly in tourism.

At present in the surveyed villages there are generally fewer opportunities for **job creation** due to economic, social, demographic reasons and infrastructure difficulties. In the Devin region basic obstacles to investment and creation of jobs are the remoteness of the villages, transport costs, and the bad quality of roads. In the Troyan village of GJ there are the additional factors of an aging population and the

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lack of young people. The share of **employed** is less than 50 percent of the population in working age in the villages of T, GJ and O. Worst is the situation in O where there is hardly any employment to speak of. The village of D is an exception – most of the people are occupied. Employed who work on the basis of official contracts is mostly the people in the local administration, the state and municipal institutions (the school, the kindergarten, the state forestry, etc.). Self-employed are mostly people in small family business: commerce, services, small processing workshops, and family hotels. Most of the young employed people who have a secondary special or higher education do not work in the field of their specialty and are not satisfied with their work, but are forced to continue on the job in order to support themselves. They are potential migrants.

The unemployment rate highly varies between the villages in Troyan Municipality (from 7 percent on the average in the town of Troyan, 13 percent in the village of D., and up to 80 percent in the village of GJ). The extremely high and long-term (official and unofficial) unemployment has been observed among both women and men in Devin Municipality – from 50 percent to 80 percent of the working-age population.

Coping strategies

Survival strategies seem to predominate, in the majority of the rural households, over the strategies of development. Subsistence farming is the main coping strategy for most rural households. Other coping strategies include seasonal employment, employment within the special state programme¹², the financial support obtained from the state, mostly within social programs for the unemployed, barter and exchange of services and goods between households and individuals, and migration (inner and outward, mostly among young people). The strong family ties allow substantial transfers in kind and cash between members of the wider family¹³.

For the time being there is no possibility for longer term employment in the two mountain regions. Hence long-term planning of the lives of many households is also impossible. People live from day to day, as the respondents

¹² The programme "From Social Relief to Employment" conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. In 2002-2003 it provided employment for people specially recruited among the socially disadvantaged and long-term unemployed persons.

¹³ BULGARIA: Survey on Rural Development Needs. 2004

often remarked¹⁴. Only commercial farmers plan to expand their farms. Generally, rural people are hard pressed by daily financial and practical problems, which create feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and lack of perspective.

Needs, priorities and expectations of rural people

The basic problems and difficulties of rural people in the mountain regions stem from the less developed local economy, poor infrastructure, the higher unemployment rate, and also from the lack of new skills and knowledge. The analysis reveals that rural people in both regions have quite similar needs and priorities.

The main priority of rural people, both at the individual and household level, is to have permanent jobs and regular income for themselves and their children.

“We say it’s a privilege to live in the city, because all kinds of work can be found there. Here in the village people have nowhere to go – when you’re in the village you have no choice – something must be done for a person living in a village, some kind of work must be provided for him”. (woman, 36, T);

“We must have work in order to live... but well paid work at that, you can’t support a family on 110 leva”. (woman, T);

“We must have work in order to survive”. (women, temporary employment, group interview, T)

In all villages, the main priority of the households without a regular income is also to find a job.

The needs of different groups of rural population come down to providing the daily necessities, earning “a bit of money”. Surprisingly, there is not a great need/demand for land that would be used for making a living. The only exception is the situation in O. Here even young people show a need and willingness to have land,

¹⁴ Vitosha Research Survey data also proves that 46 percent of all respondents have no particular plans for the future or could not think of any wishes for their household's future. This share is even larger for non-farming households (50 percent) and subsistence farming households (56 percent). More than half of the commercial farming households plan to expand their farms and increase productivity (BULGARIA: Survey on Rural Development Needs 2004).

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the only source of livelihood and the only factor that prevents the people from leaving the village.

Subsistence farmers from O and T emphasize as one of their specific main priorities the improvement of agricultural roads/paths surface, which would increase the access to their remote farmland.

A specific need of agricultural producers from the mountain villages is for taxes and duties to be reduced, or for some preferences to be granted for their vehicles and technology. If this were to happen, “villages will start progressing”, a farmer from the remote village of Osikovo believes:

“I have a freight car, without it we would be doomed. Our cars don’t bring us any income – we use them to transport the manure, the seeds to the field, to bring firewood and hay for the animals. I could pay you 150 leva of taxes a year for this car, and more taxes for the roads, over 100 leva for obligatory insurance – why I’m forced to get rid of this car and carry things on my back – how can I develop this way?” (farmer, 34, O)

The main constraints and priorities that all local commercial farmers have undergone are related mainly to the realization of their produce and its sale price, the lack or shortage of capital, hard access to credit, bureaucracy, disloyal market partners, the lack of a state policy, and lack of subsidies and protection of agricultural producers from unregulated import, etc.

Young people indicated feeling most vulnerable and insecure in GJ, mainly due to the lack of permanent work, the shortage of money:

“We are disappointed, we don’t feel like complete human beings in this village. (woman, 32, GJ); We are young, we should have self-confidence, but self-confidence implies income”. (man, 29, GJ)

In a wider perspective the wishes and expectations of people in T and O are united around the effort to overcome the perceptions that peripheral rural communities are undervalued and isolated, and to improve opportunities for economic development:

“They should pay us a bit more attention “up there” (woman, 31, T);

“At the national level they don’t pay attention, neither to potato production, nor to milk collecting. The only livelihood in Trigrad,

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excepting rural tourism, potatoes, and milk, nothing else is produced, and the government has done nothing so far for the mountain region or for the nation as a whole. Perhaps the mistake is made “above”, not only here”.
(woman, 31, T);

On the village level, priorities perceived by the different groups of interviewed rural people are oriented to:

- ✓ improvement of the technical infrastructure (the rehabilitation of the road network between settlements and road surface;
- ✓ the streets within the villages, the access to public transport and services;
- ✓ the gathering and treatment of waste, etc.), and improvement of the quality of the social services (equal access to education for pupils from the remote villages;
- ✓ better access and quality of specialized medical care, the high costs of health services);
- ✓ availability of open agricultural markets.

For youths and young families with children another major priority is the availability of a pharmacy shop and ambulance service. Ambulance is also a priority for pensioners from Rhodope villages.

Young people, commercial farmers and entrepreneurs from all villages, emphasize the great importance of improving the quality of telephone and satellite networks, Mobile and Internet connections. A main priority for young people in all villages is to have better conditions for spending their leisure time, the developing of an entertainment infrastructure.

Rural people feel that villages and rural needs are **not a priority** of state policy, and they strongly **need to feel the respect** of the state toward them as citizens of the county, who pay taxes and have the right to live a decent life. They feel vulnerable, neglected by the “top government”; they lack self-confidence. The attitude of people is often pessimistic:

“We have no hope, we people are desperate, the only reason we keep on living is our children, we try to survive somehow, and there comes a day when you see that you are young and you want to survive for your children, and you get to thinking, if you lived to an older age, what would you have to offer this child of yours? You have nothing to provide it with. ...In the final account we have left ourselves to drift with the current” (woman, 42, T).

Conclusions

The observations have led me to the conclusion that rural people in small and isolated communities are disadvantaged and confronted constraints and difficulties touched their daily life. Their needs and priorities are existential, their claims are not being deprived of the basic needs and access to services in the modern life. Rural people are hard pressed by daily financial and practical problems, which create feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and depression. A survival strategy seems predominant in the majority of the rural households than the strategy of development.

All this suggests that rural policies and measures still lag behind of and are not adequate to the realities and needs of people in small rural areas for a full value life. Regional and rural development policies and measures should be decentralized in order to adapt local human needs and capacities in the mountainous and peripheral areas:

- developing concrete, flexible regional and local programmes for employment and social benefits adapted to specific conditions;
- providing municipalities with target investment intervention;
- targeting human resources development and capacity building in rural areas, with a special focus on young people, women, and minorities;
- making more rational policies in small and remote villages, taking into account the existing local natural and human resources, people's needs and family traditions.

All institutions should implement policy towards local empowerment, especially for greater financial autonomy of the small and peripheral rural communities in order to preserve and revitalize these rural areas which have natural and human potential, and though they may not be very vital, at least they are not withering.

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