

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS AT ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL LEVEL FROM THE WEST REGION BASED ON THE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2007-2013 WEST REGION

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Abstract:

The article intends to bring a contribution to the increase of competitiveness among administrative-territorial units from the West development Region, so that the local public authorities can efficiently use the non-reimbursable funds for the next planning stage (2014 – 2020). This objective can be obtained by guiding the local authorities towards elaborating and politically assuming development strategies, which should correspond to the community development needs and be integrated and correlated with the regional and national strategies. Such strategies can be implemented with a lower financial effort by means of projects financed from the European Union grants and shall be based on the experience accumulated so far by the administrative-territorial units from the West development Region in accessing governmental funds, pre-accession funds, as well as the structural funds available in the current planning stage (2007 – 2013).

Key words: *administrative-territorial units, development strategy, region, strategic planning.*

JEL classification: *O21, P48, R58.*

Spatial and strategic planning

The spatial planning refers to the territory planning activity, including strategies, policies and field programs, as well as integrated specific documentations with a view to the spatial balanced and lasting development. Thus, at the level of the administrative and territorial units, the conditions for a rational territory organization, for environmental protection and for the accomplishment of economic and social objectives are fulfilled. Spatial planning is the expression of four types of policies: economical, social, ecological and cultural¹.

The general features of the European spatial planning are: the existence of a specific legislation; responsibilities at all administrative levels; differentiated competences; hierarchical relations among territorial levels; the existence of structural/managing plans and mandatory/regulatory plans; the existence of plans correspondences; a plan cyclical updating procedure; population participation; the plans – as an instrument and support of specific policies; economic, social, ecological and spatial integration.

Spatial development planning is a part of the complex development planning process relevant for a human community, the space/territory being at the same time the physical development support and one of the essential resources for that. Strategy is defined as the setting which guides the choices and which determines the nature and direction of the community. The strategy helps to set a conjunct direction for the community according to its operational objectives and it provides the basis for the necessary resources allocation for its orientation towards the reach of such targets.

¹ The European Charter of Territory Development – The Charter of Torremolinos, 1983

Strategic planning is a systematic process by means of which the community, which could be an administrative-territorial unit, a region or a micro-region, agrees upon certain priorities, which are essential for the fulfilment of its mission and are in conformity with the evolution of the surrounding environment.

The main features of strategic planning for local development are:

- It has in view the development, being based on the existing practices, and also the introduction of new opportunities for action;
- It operates within a well-defined territory, both spatially and administratively;
- It approaches the issues at macro level and it does not focus on isolated issues;
- The political support is an essential element;
- It brings new elements in the technical, management and financial fields, by adapting the experiences which proved to be successful;
- It generates resources, setting a direct connection between planning and implementation.

Sustainable development

Sustainable development answers to current needs, without compromising the needs of the future generation and, generally, involves the investment in long term economic development, by protecting and at the same time improving the environment and promoting equal opportunities and social inclusion.

The managing principles for the lasting territorial development of the European continent² aim to ensure the coherence of economical and social approaches in relation with the territory and its ecological and cultural functions. The application of the managing principles requires a close collaboration between territory development and sectorial policies which influence the European territorial structures (the territorial development policies).

The managing principles are:

- Promoting territorial cohesion by means of a balanced social and economical development and through competitiveness increase.
- Stimulating the development generated by the urban functions and improving the relations between towns and villages.
- Promoting more balanced accessibility conditions.
- Facilitating access to information and knowledge.
- Reducing environmental degradation.
- Valuating and protecting natural resources and patrimony.
- Valuating the cultural patrimony as a development factor.
- Developing energetic resources in security preservation.
- Promoting lasting and qualitative tourism.
- Preventively limiting the natural calamities' effects.

Should an administrative and territorial unit not have a well-defined strategy, it shall be forced to face the daily events as they occur. Any modification shall represent a major challenge. On the other hand, if a strategy is available, the representatives of the administrative-territorial unit and the entire community shall have the possibility to focus on the aimed objectives and on the actions that must be performed in order to accomplish such objectives. Thus, by following certain initially planned objectives, the resources within a community can be efficiently controlled and guided. Modifications and adjustment can interfere, but they do not substantially modify the previously defined objectives and actions.

Planning must be considered as a cyclical, repeated process. All planning process consists of establishing the objectives, the planning itself in order to accomplish

² adopted during the European Conference of Territory Development Ministries, at Hannover, in September 2000

them, a self-control process and a periodical revision system, followed by an evaluation of the results and by the decision to resume the planning process.

The strategy for local development represents a participating instrument which involves the entire community and which has as target to ensure the economical development. In most of the cases, a strategy for local development is a long term process, being a future projection of the community. This vision on the community with respect to its future development should be shared by all the significant local actors and it should be mirrored by a set of particular objectives and by a concrete action plan.

The Administrative Organization of the Romanian Territory

In Romania, the communes, towns, municipalities and counties are defined as administrative-territorial units within which the local autonomy is exercised and the authorities of the local public administration are organized and operate.

The local, communal, town, municipality and county councils, as deliberative authorities, and also the mayors and the presidents of county councils as executive authorities have the duties to solve the public matters of the community, acting as authorities of the Romanian public administration.

The development regions are territorial-statistical units, made up of 4-7 counties (except for the Region Bucharest-Ilfov), through the free association of County Councils, according to Law 151/1998 (subsequently altered by law 315/2004). They correspond to the NUTS³ II level according to the Eurostat classification. Determined on a voluntary basis, they do not have the statute of administrative units, but they represent territorial units large enough to be a good basis for the elaboration and implementation of regional development strategies, allowing the efficient use of financial and human resources. At a regional level, there have been created eight Regional Development Councils and eight Regional Development Agencies, and at a national level, the National Council for Regional Development was founded.

The West Development Region is administratively-territorially made of four counties: Arad, Caraş-Severin, Hunedoara and Timiş. Within the West Region, 323 territorial administrative units are registered, which could be distributed as following: 12 municipalities, 30 towns and 281 communes made of 1327 villages.

Regional Development Plan 2007-2013 West Region

The Regional Development Plan 2007-2013 West Region (RDP West 2007-2013) is the strategic planning document of the West Region, elaborated within a large partnership, having as a goal guiding and stimulating the economical and social development at the regional level for the planning period 2007 – 2013 and to ground the access of the West Region to the Structural and Cohesion Funds of the European Union. The Regional Development Plan 2007-2013 of the West Region is intended to be a document which should: correctly diagnose the real situation of the region; guide the region development during 2007 – 2013; substantiate the access of the West Region to the European Union funds; represent an instrument through which the West Region should reduce development disparities towards the European Union; provide information in order to substantiate the sectorial priorities within the Development National Plan and the Reference National Strategic Context; provide information in order to substantiate the Regional Operational Plan and the Sectorial Operational Programmes.

RDP West 2007 – 2013 is made up of: the Social and Economical Analysis of the West Region, the SWOT Analysis and the Regional Development Strategy.

³ Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics or Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics according to EUROSTAT

Structures created for the elaboration of a strategy for local development

In order to carry out the process of strategic planning at the community level, a series of structures could be created in order to support the planning activity. In this respect, consulting committees and/or coordinating committees could be created to join the work group.

In order to gather the opinion of citizens, periodical work meetings may be set with the members of Advisory Committees. These committees are mainly formed of citizens/inhabitants of the community. Within this kind of meetings, questionnaires for the inhabitants of the locality/township/micro region/region may be created and distributed so as to evaluate the inhabitants' opinion regarding the current state and the development opportunities. Theme and strategy's consultancy-validation workshops may also be organized.

The coordinating committee is the structure whose role is to coordinate the whole process. Usually, this structure shall comprise of the initiators of the strategic planning project. In most cases, this is the administrative-territorial unit. In the case of micro-regional type associations between administrative-territorial units, the coordinating committee shall have members representing all components communities.

Regional Committee for the Elaboration of the Regional Development Plan⁴ (CRP) represents the general framework of the West Regional Development Council for the elaboration of the West Regional Development Plan and plays an advisory role. CRP is coordinated by Regional Development Agency West, which also ensure its secretariat. The members of the Regional Committee for the elaboration of the Regional Development Plan 2007-2013 for the West Region are: Regional Development Agency West, the four County Councils, Prefectures and City halls in the region, the County Agencies of Economical Development, the County Agencies for Employment, the Chambers of Commerce, the Regional Agency for Environment Protection, the Regional Directorate of Statistics, the Regional Directorate of Roads and Bridges, the Business Centre Reșița, the Rural Centre, the Romanian-German Foundation, the National Centre for the Development of Vocational and Technical Education, the National Centre for Vocational and Technical Education, the National Agency for Qualifications in the Higher Education and Partnership with the Economical and Social Environment, the Association for Many-Fields Research, universities and Companies from the West Region.

Identifying the general objective and the specific objectives, the strategic axes, the intervention fields and the priority projects for community

Based on the Social-Economical Analysis and on the performed SWOT Analysis, the strategy mission is established and also the development directions by the team which elaborates the strategy for local development.

Starting from the identified problems/opportunities at community level, we begin to develop the General Objective of the Development Strategy. These problems/opportunities are examined and measured through the filter represented by the Social and Economical Analysis. The relevant data, identified in the Social and Economical Analysis, are put in words with the SWOT analysis.

The analysed, quantified and prioritised problems/opportunities are then synthetically formulated in the General Objective and the Specific Objectives.

The role of the objectives within the strategy is to orient measurements towards the intended development process, representing in the same time the optimal control instrument for both the measures and the result of their application. The objectives of a

⁴ Government Decision 1323/2002 regarding the elaboration of the National Development Plan in partnership

Development Strategy should be specific, measurable, realizable, relevant and time-integrated.

The General Objectives – explain the reason why the strategy is important for society, in terms of long-term advantages for the final beneficiaries. Using the General Objective the community's development vision is being expressed (what is the final destination of the projects' implementation at the end of the reference period).

The General Objective for the Regional Development Plan 2007-2013 West Region is: "Harmonious development of West Region, in order to become a competitive region within the European Union, having a dynamic and diversified economy, with highly trained human resources, and the regional Gross Internal Product / inhabitant to reach until the year 2013 the value of 45% of the average Gross Internal Product within the European Union (UE 27)"⁵. The General Objective relies on specific objectives. It is advisable to use at most 5 specific objectives.

Specific objectives (the aim of the project): these are the objectives to be reached by the implementation of the development strategy. The aim should be solving some central problems, defined in terms of sustainable benefits for the target groups.

Generally, the specific objectives are achieved with the accomplishment of an activity/series of activities (component) within the strategy, whereas achieving the general objective is a consequence of reaching the specific objectives.

The specific objectives for the Regional Development Plan 2007-2013 West Region are:

- Increase of the attractiveness degree of the West Region by the development of the infrastructure and consolidation of the territorial cooperation relationships;
- Development and diversification of the economical activities within the region by innovation, attracting strategic investments and development of the business environment, in the conditions of compliance of the European norms regarding the quality of the environmental factors;
- Increasing the occupation degree within the region, ensuring equal opportunities for all the social categories and improvement of the population's living standard;
- Diminishing the intra-regional disparities by the polycentric urban development and support of the rural areas;
- Improvement and preservation of the environmental factors' quality in order to ensure the lasting development and promoting the tourism in the region⁶.

A single Specific Objective could not accomplish by itself the General Objective of the development strategy, but it shall contribute along with the other Specific Objectives to the accomplishment of the General Objective. General and Specific Objectives are described in details in the Priority Axes (also called strategic axes).

The strategic axes comply with the fields investigated in the Social and Economical Analysis. When determining them, one should take into consideration the fields diagnosed in the elaborated social and economical Analysis. The number of fields in the social and economical Analysis shall always be higher than or equal to the number of Priority Axes.

The Priority Axes of the West Region Development Strategy 2007 – 2013 are: Transportation and energy infrastructure; Economical competitiveness; Tourism; Territorial cooperation; Rural development; Development of human resources and of social services; Environment; Urban development.

⁵ Regional Development Plan 2007-2013 West Region elaborated by The Regional Development West Agency

⁶ Regional Development Plan 2007-2013 West Region elaborated by The Regional Development West Agency

Each Priority Axis is described in details in the according Key Areas of Intervention (also called Measures). In its turn, each Measure is implemented through individual projects.

The project represents a series of actions and/or purchase of goods or services meant to achieve an indivisible and precise goal of technical, economical or social nature whose objectives are clearly identified and measured. The applicants may act individually or in partnership with other organizations, based on a partnership agreement. The applicant's partners take part in the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of the project, while the costs they are bearing are eligible under the same conditions as the costs assumed by the beneficiary of the non-reimbursable financing.

For each identified intervention field, it is recommended for the team to elaborate the local development strategy and to draw up Lists of projects (also called Operations) specifying a group of same-type projects.

It is practical and useful in every list of projects to undertake a hierarchy of the projects based on their importance (taking into consideration the fact that the resources are limited, it is very unlikely for all projects to get financing), to identify potential financing sources and the people/institutions responsible for the implementation of the projects. The administrative-territorial unit, as beneficiary, shall be responsible for the initiation and implementation of the approved projects.

For instance, for the intervention field regarding the Rehabilitation of educational Infrastructure, one may use the following priority list of projects:

Table 1. Example of List of priority projects within an intervention field

Project name	Relevance for the project	Estimated amount	Financing source	Responsible	Accomplishment deadline
High school rehabilitation	1	1.2 millions euro	POR 2014-2020	Administrative territorial unit	2015
Building a nursery	2	1.9 millions euro	Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism	Administrative territorial unit	2015
School rehabilitation	3	0.7 millions euro	Ministry of Education	Headmaster	2016

Source: information processed by author

Monitoring the implementation of the strategy for local development

The implementation of a strategy for local development could be financed from the following sources: the state budget, the local budget, external funds – bilateral programs, refundable funds and non-refundable funds, donations, sponsorships and other contributions from physical persons or legal entities within the country and abroad, other financing sources, in conformity with the current legislation. For the purpose of achieving the expected results of the Strategy's implementation, an estimate of the financial resources to be allocated shall be undertaken.

Many times, huge energy is being used to elaborate strategies, yet neglecting their implementation. However, the success of a strategy is directly dependable on the administrative-territorial unit's capacity to implement it.

During the implementation phase, there are a series of resistances or real obstacles. They may be in the same time financial and organisational factors, as well as issues regarding the mentality of the people who shall bear the changes brought by the implemented strategy.

The monitoring is performed on three levels:

- General monitoring – to be performed by the institution which generates the planning process (usually the territorial administrative unit);
- Sector monitoring – to be performed by the individuals appointed as theme group leaders or by a specialized service (with competencies in the respective field);
- Monitoring on development projects – to be performed by the coordinators of the project implementation teams appointed at the community level.

The monitoring will be periodical and mandatory and it will imply the elaboration of periodical reports regarding the fulfilment degree of the general and particular objectives. The monitoring process should provide credible and useful information, allowing the integration of lessons learned and good-practices in the future planning process.

The monitoring process of the strategic planning could be carried out during the implementation period of the development strategy (“intermediary monitoring”), upon its completion (“final monitoring”) or after the period proposed for the implementation of the actions plan (“ex-post monitoring”), in order to help for a better guiding of the implementation of the development strategy or to learn useful lessons for future planning exercises.

The monitoring results are notified to the initiator of the planning process in order to define other action directions, measures or actions which will be the object of a new strategy.

At present, the Regional Development Agency West has started a new process of updating the Regional Development Plan 2007-2013, West Region, according to the evolution of statistic data and to economical and social situation in the region.

Conclusions

The first step to be taken by a local public authority in order to perform a coherent and durable development of the community is represented by the elaboration of projects in conformity with the development needs.

The solving of the community problems depends on the level of the available resources, on the management quality of such funds, but also on the cooperation between the various structures of the local administration. This cooperation should be a permanent one, from its very early stage of activities’ prognosis on long and medium-term up to the financial decisions’ implementation stage. It has a highly important role, especially under the circumstances of decentralization of new activities that administrative-territorial units, for the time being, are not able to manage accordingly, and when the national budget goes through austerity.

It is thus essential to find ways to increase competitiveness of administrative-territorial units under the current circumstances of economic crisis, with the help of existing economic levers which are being successfully used at region levels in the European Union.

According to the Law of the local public finances, the local budget incomes could be made also of the non-reimbursable funds granted by the European Union. The cohesion policy of the European Union has as objective the reduction of the development gaps between the member states and between the richest and poorest regions, being financed from the budget of the European Union from three funds: The European Fund for Regional Development, The European Social Fund and The Cohesion Fund, referred to as the Structural Instruments.

The Development Strategy of West Region is representing the basic document of the Regional Development Plan, playing the role of orientating the region’s development in the period 2007 – 2013 and to ground the access of the West Region to the Structural and Cohesion Funds of the European Union.

The methodology proposed in this article is intended to be a guide for the administrative-territorial units in the systematic mobilization of the existing local energies and resources by means of projects which should meet the specific needs for development and which should involve the attraction of non-returnable funds with a minimum effort of co-financing.

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