

ENHANCING RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY: TRANSFORMING THE AGRI-FOOD SECTOR IN ROMANIA'S MOUNTAINOUS REGIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the strategic, tactical and operational dimensions of the transformation of the agri-food sector in the mountainous regions of Romania, emphasizing sustainability and resilience. Through a robust methodology involving data analysis, case studies and stakeholder consultations, our research aims to provide valuable insights into the complicated dynamics of these lands. Our findings emphasize the critical role of labor utilization and the integration of innovative knowledge in shaping the competitiveness of agri-food models in mountain areas. We also examine the management of innovative agri-food technologies specific to these regions, from cultivation to market distribution. In addition, we propose a new approach to mountain agricultural production, emphasizing the importance of agri-food resource networks. In the light of our research, we recommend the establishment of an international framework for the classification of mountain agri-food resources in order to standardize the assessment of Romania's agri-food potential in these areas. In addition, we advocate for the development of a Romanian and European roadmap for 2030, with an emphasis on the integration of mountain agri-food resources into wider economic structures. This integration requires a re-evaluation of management methodologies, especially in response to unpredictable events, and the incorporation of technical and technological changes in mountain agri-food systems to shape the domestic economic landscape. Thus, our study highlights the need to rethink the agri-food sector in the mountainous regions of Romania in the context of sustainability and resilience. Innovative approaches and international frameworks can unlock the untapped potential of these areas, encouraging economic growth and environmental stewardship.

KEYWORDS: *agro-food technologies, competitiveness, mountainous regions, resilience, sustainability.*

DOI: 10.24818/IMC/2023/01.15

1. INTRODUCTION

Growing concerns about the possibility of crises, the depletion of non-renewable resources, environmental pollution, underdevelopment, and related challenges have underscored the need to identify economic structures that can collectively address these issues. Sustainable development hinges upon the identification and operationalization of innovative economic frameworks. Ordinary crises are primarily rooted in economic structures, necessitating a shift away from the outdated concept of economic development, which held that "the ensemble matters, the structures say

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nothing." Instead, a new economic evolution model must take center stage, emphasizing structures that ensure the long-term achievement of social, ecological, and economic objectives in line with the broader public interest.

Within the national economy, the mountain agro-food sector represents a distinctive chapter within the overarching economic framework. As national economic structures grow increasingly complex and interconnected globally, adapting to the requirements of the new model of economic, social, and cultural development at local and regional levels becomes more challenging.

This research aims to estimate and predict strategic risks in Romania's Development Regions concerning the sufficiency of agri-food resources, emphasizing the need for strategic, tactical, and operational focus on this sector. It contributes to the conceptual and modeling definition of sufficiency in mountain agri-food resources. Additionally, a model examining the interplay of markets, technologies, and mountain agri-food resources in Romania offers insights into the role and operational alignment of general resource econometrics at both national and European levels.

Furthermore, an aggregate model of indicators for assessing the economic efficiency of mountain agri-food resources throughout cultivation, processing, primary processing, distribution, and consumption activities can serve as a new analytical tool for local food resources within the broader field.

In Romania, mountainous areas hold significant national importance, covering 22% of the total land area and housing 20% of the agricultural workforce. Initiating a project to harness mountain agri-food resources begins with understanding the intricacies of this sector, particularly the architecture and organization of complex agri-food networks, necessitating a regulatory framework to optimize the inherent natural agri-food potential in Romania.

2. SPECIALIZED LITERATURE AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE FIELD

In Romania, the official characterization of mountains found internationally/globally is valid. "Mountain areas are characterized by particular natural, economic and social specificities, including geographical isolation, difficult climatic and environmental conditions, fragile ecosystems, political marginality and, in many cases, poverty. Mountain legislation tries to address these issues (Villeneuve et al., 2002).

In a regional, European vision, the "Common Agricultural Policy contributes to the Europe 2020/25 objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (viable food production, with an emphasis on agricultural income, agricultural productivity and price stability; sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, with an emphasis on greenhouse effects; gas emissions, biodiversity, soil and water; balanced territorial development, with an emphasis on employment in rural areas, economic growth and overcoming poverty in rural areas)" (CAP-EU Strategic Plan 2016 -2020, 2015).

In Romania, Rey (2014) talks about "a scenario of efficient and sustainable exploitation of the mountain product, based on the family farm, in an innovative, adapted associative cooperative system" and takes into consideration elements such as: the preparatory framework international and European politics and the long experience of Western Europe.

The experiences of some countries in the field of associative-cooperative organizations and the valorization of ecological products on the market are capitalized.

Considering the risks of the decrease in the contribution of agriculture and mountain rural life in the mountains of Romania and the growing need for solutions to ensure the continuity and sustainable development of the economy and mountain rural agriculture.

Therefore, new international and EU guidelines for supporting family farms must be adhered to (sale on the domestic market, mountain origin of "mountain products" to ensure consumer credibility).

Gâf-Deac & Ciutacu, (2016), in some papers and communications they contributed to a project of economic involvement of mountain agro-food resources.

On the other hand, Otiman (2013) of the resumption of economic growth in Romania by: ensuring a balanced supply of food for the population (default food security), raw products necessary for non-agricultural activities and an active and profitable export of agri-food products, increasing the landscape resources of rural areas, ensuring at the same time a decent standard of living and environmental protection."

The same author Otiman (2013, pp.138-139), considers that "*The priorities of the Strategy for the period 2014-2030 refer to obtaining an agricultural and food production that ensures national food security (doubling agricultural yields in the next ten years, doubling the value of production agricultural and animal husbandry in the next decade, doubling the value of processed agro-food production); full satisfaction of domestic needs for high-quality food products and obtaining a surplus of food products, available for export; achieving a long-term sustainable ecological balance; conservation and protection of renewable natural resources; development of the national system of education and scientific research; balanced territorial development of the rural agricultural economy, balancing the Romanian food balance and increasing Romanian agri-food exports.*"

In our exploration of Romania's mountain agro-food sector, we draw upon a wealth of scholarly insights and research findings that collectively enhance our understanding of the challenges and opportunities within this unique context. These studies, conducted by esteemed researchers such as Burlacu, Rădulescu, Ladaru, and others, offer valuable perspectives and illuminate critical issues that resonate on both local and global scales.

Burlacu et al. (2022a) bring to the forefront global concerns related to economic and food security. Their research underscores the urgency of developing sustainable strategies within the mountain agro-food sector, emphasizing the imperative of ensuring economic and food security on a global scale.

Rădulescu et al. (2022) direct our attention to the vital concept of decoupling economic development from resource consumption. This notion aligns seamlessly with our exploration of sustainable growth in mountainous regions, where innovative approaches must strike a delicate balance between fostering economic progress and minimizing resource depletion. Their assessment of the evolution of forest areas in Romania adds a crucial environmental perspective to our research. Burlacu et al.'s (2022b) examination of the socio-economic implications of rural population migration resonates deeply with our study of the mountain agro-food sector. Rural regions are integral to the economic dynamics of mountainous areas, and comprehending the complex challenges faced by these regions is paramount to our research.

Furthermore, Burlacu et al. (2022c) delve into the intricate interplay between adjusted net savings, sustainable growth, and resource depletion. Their insights align closely with our mission to balance economic growth with the preservation of essential resources within the mountain agro-food sector. In their exploration of the effects of digital globalization on economics and society (Burlacu et al., 2022d), the authors underscore the transformative potential of digital technologies. This perspective is highly relevant as we contemplate innovative strategies to modernize and optimize the efficiency of the mountain agro-food sector in an increasingly interconnected world.

Additionally, Burlacu et al. (2022e) scrutinize the circular economy paradigm in Romania, aligning it with EU principles and future directions. Their perspective resonates powerfully with our investigation into sustainability, emphasizing the necessity of aligning regional strategies with broader EU frameworks for sustainable development.

The work of Ladaru et al. (2022) on human resources management amid a labor crisis holds significant relevance, particularly within the broader economic landscape. Labor dynamics are pivotal in comprehending the workforce challenges that may impact the mountain agro-food sector.

Belostecinic et al., (2022) study on teleworking and its economic and social impact during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the growing significance of remote work trends, which could have implications for the region.

Lastly, the comprehensive array of studies by Burlacu, Bodislav, Bran, and other researchers (Bodislav et al., 2019; Bodislav et al., 2020; Bodislav et al., 2021; Bran et al., 2020; Burlacu, 2011; Burlacu et al., 2018; Burlacu et al., 2020; Burlacu et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) contributes valuable insights across various dimensions of economic development, environmental policy, and globalization. This diverse body of research collectively forms a robust knowledge base that enriches our research efforts, providing us with a holistic perspective on the multifaceted landscape of Romania's mountain agro-food sector.

3. RESEARCH METHOD. PRELIMINARIES REGARDING THE NEW MOUNTAIN AGRI-FOOD ECONOMY

It is stated that, in a systemic approach, clarifications are needed on some theoretical aspects related to the new role and the place of economic structures in the development of human communities.

Knowing the factors and mechanisms of structural changes, the interconnections between national and world structures, the ways of building the new type of structure related to *the new global economy* is an objective, practical necessity.

It is considered that, in the context of the Romanian economy, it is necessary to outline a possible new economic structure on the horizon of 2025-2035 in which agriculture and the agri-food sector have a concrete role, contributing to development.

The difficulties related to the identification and implementation of an optimal economic structure are amplified by the fact that there is no recognized ideal structure, be it only from a theoretical point of view, which can be applied to all countries, regions or globally.

The diversity of factors that influence structures (natural, social, political, economic, ecological factors) as well as traditions, religion, cultural and educational level, etc. They leave their mark on existing and future economic structures.

The diversity of conditions led to the appearance over time of a great variety of economic structures, which will coexist in the future.

The standardization of contents and structural forms, as well as the attempt to copy a structure that demonstrates its efficiency in each situation, are doomed, according to the vast majority of specialists, to failure.

It is appreciated in the first instance that the identification and practical realization of an efficient agri-food economic structure in Romania is made difficult by the need to combine several essential elements, returned from:

- the existing structure at the time of the initiation of the transition to the market economy.
- the national interest manifested in the decrease and the increase in Romania's participation in the global exchange of values with agri-food products and services.
- the complementarities with the existing structures in the countries of the European Union in which Romania is integrated.
- building a structure compatible with the requirements of sustainable development.
- political and group interests (contextual, conjunctural, subjective).

The evolution of the configuration of economic quasi-structures from 1990-2021 demonstrates that Romania is still in search of its own economic structure, which is characterized by optimality and efficiency.

The changes produced during this period are considered to have been, in general, under the influence of contextual factors and less because of the application of some visions, some long-term strategies, which bear the imprint of the objective evolutions of the external environment as well as of the concrete conditions from the country.

In the field of agro-industrial economic sub-structures, the economic-mathematical models have practical value, and the scenarios can be useful to macro- and micro-economic decision-makers.

It is also useful to analyze the economic system and its structures from the perspective of the general theory of complex systems.

The universality of structures is what leads to the emergence and development of the general theory of systems, offering new ways of analysis.

In the traditional sense, the structure must be seen as a system of relationships that leads to the achievement of the global objective of the general productive-economic system.

Based on some general laws, the modification of an element leads to changes at the level of the other elements, the new relationships between them leading to the modification of the structure.

If this process takes place in the direction of reaching the established objectives, it is appreciated that the structure is self-regulating.

The productive-economic environment characteristic of the industrial period, the related principles and rules were kept quasi-continuous, until the moment when the global evolutionary transformations of society determined the emergence of the post-industrial and post-modern phases of the economy.

For example, in each industrial sector the period of specific technological progress had a beginning (birth) and an end (decline, self-saturation).

We advance the idea that for mountain agro-food resources the mentioned developments did not follow entirely the same process.

Equally, we note that the recording of added value, in absolute terms, could never prove perpetual and unstoppable in well-defined, self-contained, well-contoured systems such as the agro-montane ones that evolved more naturally than industry.

In the modern economic world, in fact, the self-sufficiency of resources and the capacity (potential) to obtain added value was found when the respective industrial system proved to be, over long periods of time, in quasi-stationary maintenance.

Completing the above assertions is done by observing that the declared asymptotic trend towards zero of prices can only be fulfilled in an ideal plan.

Prices decrease or may decrease, but at a certain moment, the downward evolutionary potential, or an imposed level, no longer allows the decrease below the transformative self-saturation limit of the productive-economic system (Gâf-Deac, 2007).

This thesis makes it difficult to focus on a project involving mountain agri-food resources, because the economy based on cycles was the one that imposed the supremacy of the sectors (textiles, transport, electronics, etc.).

In practice, it is proven that the manifestation of competition between sectors with identical material structures and different purposes separates rather than unites the global economic structure of a state or regional-global entity.

That is why the "industrial world" had to move towards a new state, namely the "post-industrial" world.

The mountain agri-food resource sector has not evolved and is not evolving under the impetus or pressures of cyclical economics.

This explains the fact that some companies from the industrial age acquired extremely large physical dimensions, lacking strategic motivation for the remaining time intervals as short and medium horizon lines in contemporaneity.

Basically, the philosophy of "almost unlimited capacity" was established, of the effective development of companies, based on variably increasing, quasi-infinite (non-finite) capacity, ignoring the limiting nature of resources.

The above considerations gradually underwent an erosion process, due to the self-saturation of the industrial productive-economic system. For example, the inadequacy of the theory that proclaimed that "inflation as a process can disappear" was soon proven.

Equally, the era of technologies in perpetual improvement, able to completely counteract the general "insufficiency" of resources in society, respectively to generate results that satisfy any kind of life requirement, based only on modifications that put in evidence of quasi-unlimited endogenous performances.

After the 1980s, the *New Economy* took shape. The first essential characteristic of this emergence is that the New Economy presents new ways of economic-productive access, therefore *different* and *differentiated* in relation to the Old Economy.

The second fundamental characteristic, in context, expresses the fact that the differences between the New and the Old Economy *are the result of changes* (Gâf-Deac, 2010).

However, the basic ideas related to the above changes can influence the conceptual/strategic framework for the elaboration and assumption of contributions to a draft order to involve mountain agri-food resources.

We advance the idea that a specific action to involve mountain agri-food resources for development can be formed on sub-system areas, of a mountain economic-productive nature, by:

- a) *Mountain agri-food resource networks* (by increasing the information flow; mountain agri-food companies accept outsourcing; increasing income from specific mountain agri-food production).
- b) *Stocks and markets of mountain agri-food products* (integrated investment schemes are accepted in mountain areas; the speed of transactions may increase).
- c) *The management of mountain agri-food resources*: (it will be assisted to maintain the small size of the companies; information technologies inevitably enter the field; knowledge-based management increases; the area of outsourced mountain agri-food resources of the company is expanded; agro-mountain innovation can be produced in real time).

As such, we believe that there will be a re-ordering of the types of productive-economic operationalizations of general resources and of mountain agri-food resources.

In order to increase mountain agri-food resources, new types of sharing/distribution of economic results in mountain agro-areas are needed.

In science and economic practice for mountain agri-food resources it is possible to unfold the "*quiet revolution*", in which, however, responses to changes appear / are operationalized relatively quickly, marked by a certain replicative automatism.

Such an alternative is observable for the medium and long term of the evolution of the general economy in which the system of mountain agri-food resources is also found. (*Figure 1*).

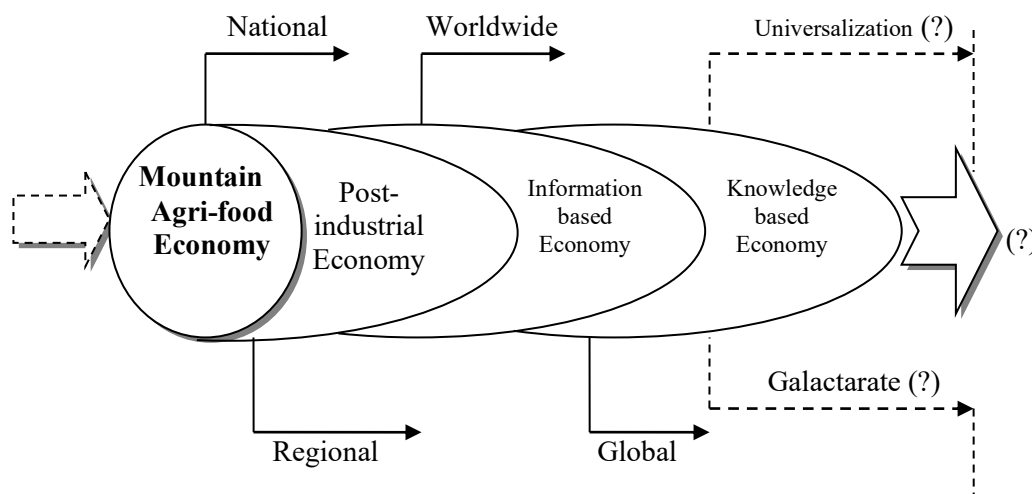


Figure 1. The vision of the "quiet revolution" in the general economy in which the system of mountain agri-food resources is located
 Source: adapted from Gâf-Deac (2010)

To define cooperation systems in the system of mountain agri-food resources, in the preliminary phase it is necessary to establish an open set of criteria, grouped into categories.

In such a situation, the taxonomy of cooperation has as premises "a large number of entities (firms) of type with mountain agri-food resources, which accept a large number of criteria in a multitude of categories, in order to be integrated in a network.

On the other hand, it is observed that any form of "collectivization", potentially adaptable among companies of the type with mountain agri-food resources, is dependent on a certain *contractual hazard*, or on uncertainties, dependent on the contractual relations, marked essentially by the economic-productive cost and managerial collaboration.

In essence, the presence of *hybrid relationships* in a network of a type related to mountain agri-food resources with a certain configuration and the attachment to them means access to higher forms of action, which counteract the uncertainties and the effects of risks in the productive-economic sphere of the companies in cooperation in the area's mountains.

In this case, the involvement of cooperation with mountain agri-food resources is carried out between partners through the "alliance of joint action chains".

As such, uncertainties are equally accepted (or neglected), as specific targets for mountain agri-food resources become precise and imperative.

In conclusion, economic cooperation determines the increase of mutual dependencies.

It is found that the managers who manage the mountain agri-food resources do not remain neutral or insensitive, when the resources of their companies are directed into inputs, which are found in transformation processes dependent on the network formulas (of other companies), in the integrative-cooperative mountain context.

In context, in mountain agro-food resource networks, managers seek to position themselves on the border between rationality and opportunistic behavior.

Windeler (2003) shows that networks can be:

- a) *hierarchical* (for strategic purposes) and
- b) *heterohierarchical* (for consensual purposes).

Atomized networks (non-integrated or very weakly integrated) and singular networks (with elements marked by singularity) are added to them.

In the network of mountain agri-food resources in Romania, in our opinion, it is possible to register individual performance levels, based on the empirical operational involvement of the participants.

Basically, it is appreciated that in such a network a certain "strategic self-sufficiency" is obtained/formalized.

In fact, we consider that two meanings of the concept of structure are specific between the agro-industrial and agro-food fields:

- *in the narrow sense*, in which the structure of an economy (national, for example), is interpreted as a system of relations between branches in interaction, as proportions of activities, for example, agro-industrial and agro-food, characterizing a certain stage of development.
- *in a broad sense*, in which the structure of a national economy signifies the unity between the structures of the production factors and the results, respectively it represents the organizational and managerial structures, the structure of the form of ownership and their informational structure.

Various types of structures are encountered in the evolution of society and the economy, along with the factors that influence structural changes based on the objective laws under which they operate.

It is considered that for Romania it is necessary to analyze the future structures of the economy from the perspective of sustainable development in which agro-industrial and agro-food alignments can be decisively contributory.

The rethinking of branch structures (agri-industrial and agri-food), the identification of appropriate policies for the application of measures capable of guaranteeing quick and efficient responses to the requirements of various types of development require essential changes in the allocation of investments and in the processes of education, training an economic-productive consciousness, of distribution and consumption corresponding to the new type of society.

Based on the general theory of systems, cybernetic schemes of the national space can be developed, from the perspective of sustainable agro-industrial and agro-food development.

The analysis of the evolution of the macrostructures of the Romanian economy during the transition period can be done with the help of methods and indicators for assessing efficiency.

For example, *vector methods* can analyze structural changes at the level of gross added value, a relevant indicator for macroeconomic evolution.

The same method is applicable at the industry level, respectively in the agro-industrial and agro-food spheres.

The exemplary results for Romania in recent years highlight the conjunctural character of the evolution of the structures, as well as the fact that the restructuring process, especially in agriculture and the food industry, was slow and had a low efficiency.

The necessity and usefulness of using economic-mathematical models for the analysis and forecasting of economic indicators is realized in the construction of the models.

What proves important in the conceptual approaches stated above, regarding the development of the field of mountain agri-food resources, is the ability to obtain the necessary balance between

strategic and consensual formulas in the establishment of modern, clustered mountain agri-food production networks.

The developers of strategies and tactics in the field of mountain agri-food resources in Romania can no longer propose command measures for the development of the field but must apply the results of the knowledge of the inter-relationships between the actors producing in the mountain areas.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The realization of the growth of mountain agri-food resources in Romania can also be found by accepting strategic self-sufficiency in the field.

The results of knowing the inter-relationships between actors producing mountain agri-food resources should not be ignored. We advance the idea that a certain management of the organization of mountain agro-food resources can be formed on sub-system areas, of a mountain economic-productive nature.

We believe that the small size of companies in the field of mountain agri-food resources will be maintained. Information technologies will enter the field more strongly. At the same time, knowledge-based management will increase. The expansion of the outsourced area of mountain agri-food resources of the company can favor real-time agro-mountain innovation.

The complex agri-food networks in Romania need a regulatory context for recontouring the natural mountain agri-food potential.

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