
THE PROFILE OF A RURAL COMMUNITY: VITOMIRESTI, OLT COUNTY¹

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2022.1.06>

Abstract: *The article is based on a data collection from the project Marginal Rural, a grant of Romanian Academy, carried out between 2019 and 2022. The aim of the project was to collect data from several rural and small urban communities and analyze socio-demographic data, but also look at indicators regarding infrastructure, health and education services, sources of income, local employers, or the phenomenon of migration for working. The analysis included different perspectives, respectively an institutional one (through the opinions of representatives of public institutions), an entrepreneurial one (through the opinion reflected in interviews with local entrepreneurs) and the vulnerable groups' one (through the opinions reflected from the focus group organized with disadvantaged people). We looked at the phenomenon of rural development/underdevelopment and potential marginalized rural areas. Marginalization represents a social phenomenon, fuelled by the socio-economic context that followed the 1989 revolution. The completion of the transition from the socialist regime towards free-market economy implied high social costs for a part of the population, including poverty and social exclusion.*

Key words: *rural community, social inclusion, education, employment, migration.*

¹ This study was financed by research grant no. GAR-UM-2019-XI-5.6-7 / 15.10.2019, entitled Typologies of underdevelopment and marginalization in rural areas and small towns in Romania (MARGINALRURAL), a grant with financial support from the Recurrent Donor Fund, available to the Academy Romanian and managed by the "PATRIMONIUM" Foundation GAR-UM-2019.

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Context

Marginalization of the communities represents a social phenomenon, fuelled by the socio-economic context that followed the 1989 revolution. The completion of the transition from the socialist regime towards free-market economy implied high social costs for a part of the country's population. A consistent part of active population has chosen to emigrate in search of a decent living standard.

The Atlas of Marginalized Rural Areas and Local Human Development in Romania (World Bank, 2016), based on the results from the 2011 census analysis, shows that at the national level, 6.2% of the rural population lives in marginalized rural areas. The main features of marginalized rural areas from Romania are a significant part of the population with low education stock (Cace, 2018a), a population that earns living in the informal sector, in low skilled jobs or in subsistence agriculture, or even without a workplace, people that lives in precarious conditions (Cace, 2019) even compared to the low standards applied to rural areas (overcrowded housing and / or without access to running water or electricity).

The people in these communities have low level of education and skills to access labor market and have low access to formal jobs. The lack of employers in rural areas is an important factor that triggered migration for working abroad. Even more, these communities have weak infrastructure: the roads are unpaved, the housing is precarious, most of the time not connected to running water or sewage, exposed to environmental risks (such as floods or landslides), and public services (education, health services, social assistance services) are of poor quality or non-existent. Also, the same report shows that 42% of marginalized rural sectors have large percentages of Roma population (World Bank, 2016: 26), Roma is a vulnerable group major exposed in some rural areas.

The most relevant variables, as different studies show (Sandu, 1999, Zamfir, 2002, Preotesi, 2014) through which the concept of marginalization is operationalized are human capital, employment and housing quality. Human capital, in the context of marginalization, refers to "the proportion of the population aged 15-64 who have graduated at most 8 classes", "the proportion of people with disabilities, chronic diseases or other medical conditions that hinder their daily activities" and "the proportion of children (0-17) years of the total population"(World Bank, 2016). Employment is measured by the share of people aged 15-64 who are not employed in the formal labor market and do not follow any form of education. Housing is one of the most relevant variables in determining and measuring the degree of marginalization. Proportion of households without electricity, overcrowding and housing insecurity are the most important indicators of the housing variable in the context of marginalization. Infrastructural isolation also is one of the factors of marginalization: roads of poor quality, lack of paved roads or ones that become very hard to travel during winter or raining time. The long-term effects of poor infrastructure on a community resides in the reduction of access to jobs outside community (Cace, 2018b) and public services. Such public services can be educational, medical ones, but also in the field of social assistance. As a result, most marginalized communities, where the need for social

services is the greatest, cannot actively benefit from these services and "geographical isolation comes with an institutional marginalization" (World Bank, 2016).

In the case of Vitomiresti commune, indicators such as the distance from the nearest town, the number of active population in the commune, the number of local employers and employees and the number of people commuting lead us to the hypothesis that the locality should have a rather low potential for development, with marginalized areas, but the collected data during the study showed that a couple of factors influenced local development context.

The main factor that seems to enhance the living standard in the commune is migration for work abroad. The respondents showed that half of the families in the commune has relatives working abroad. Part of the work is seasonal and implies low skilled jobs, nevertheless, they are an important element because of the remittances sent by migrant workers to their families. That can also explain the low number of people that accessed Minimum Guaranteed Income (MGI) in the community (only 6 requests, as official data show).

As Skeldon R. (2012) and other authors show (Serban M, 2014, Constant, Nottmeyer & Zimmermann, 2013), circular migration extends the resource base of the households, minimize social risks and support subsistence. Long-term, rather than shorter-term circulatory movements has the potential to improve the welfare of the families, but there are certain risk related to the fact that these people are low skilled, they access low position jobs abroad, many times have only seasonal jobs and limited in time earnings, live in precarious conditions abroad, lack access to social and medical insurance and therefore are at the risk to become trapped in marginal positions in destination countries, as they were in the country of origin.

From the perspective of poor migrant households, remittances are a way to reduce poverty levels and they are spent on improving nutrition, financing children's schooling, basic health care, or house building (Julca, 2013). While remittances serve to improve the livelihoods of receiving households, they also serve to reproduce inequalities in the community on several dimensions, but inequality in the short term seems a likely effect for migrant-sending communities.

Shera & Meyer (2013: 15) conclude that remittances flows can be analyzed pointing at different references. One motivation of the emigrants to remit can be explained as a combination of economic, but also social motivations: self-interest, altruism, investment, loan repayment. These determine the transfer of resources between the emigrants and the household members at home and they can serve for meeting the basic needs of the family at home, but also investments in human capital; or investment in inheritable assets (housing) (...). Therefore, the effect of remittances in the economic growth depends on the way which they are spent. If remittances are spent only for consumption, not invested in human capital, the welfare impact is limited, therefore, spending the remittances on traded or non-traded goods is important.

Another author, Ratha argues (Ratha, 2013) that remittances sent by migrant workers to their families are an important, but they cannot sustain local development and migration cannot be a substitute for domestic development and implies that remittances, typically a fraction of a migrant worker's income, are not a boost on the host economy.

Another factor that influenced local developing context in Vitomirești was involvement of local leaders. The vitality of a rural community is dependent not only on infrastructure, access to education and health services and creating opportunities to access jobs, as Cavaye shows (Cavaye, 2001), but also on activating the active population and local leaders. This can help people gain better access to information and public services and increase access to health and education in the community.

As we shall see in the analysis of data from Vitomirești community, there are still problem of accessing services, although infrastructure improved significantly in the last years. The leaders' involvement plays a major role, but the decreasing of active population and aging of rural communities because of the migration of young, fertile population to urban areas in the country or working abroad is a major problem for these communities. An aging population will not be able to secure resources for local development.

A third factor that might enhance the local development is the existence of a high school in the locality. That has increased the number of pupils that follow the high school at the end of eight classes form of education to almost 100%, a much higher percent than other communities studied in the project, but the quality of education at the local high school is rather low, and the percent of students that finish with baccalaureate diploma is only of 20%.

Methodology

The project GAR-UM-2019-XI-5.6-7/15.10.2019, entitled Typologies of underdevelopment and marginalization in rural areas and small towns in Romania (MARGINALRURAL), proposed a qualitative methodology and looked at several dimensions regarding local development as socio-demographic indicators, local infrastructure, level of employment and sources of income, access to public services as health and education, local projects of development and authorities' implication in the effort of local development.

Other indicators there were analyzed were distance to the nearest city and distance to the county capital; the share of Roma in the total population, at local and county level; types of vulnerable groups, share of employees, in total population; navetas or migration for work abroad, the share of persons employed in subsistence and semi-subsistence agriculture / agriculture; infrastructure and the share of households connected to basic utilities: running water, electricity, gas, children enrolled in different forms of school and rate of school dropout rate; the share of qualified / unqualified educational staff, number of schools / high schools at local and county level; the share of MGI (minimum guaranteed income) beneficiaries in the population.

The methodology of the project included as instruments a file of the locality completed by the local institutional actors (town hall, school, dispensary, social services department etc.), with socio-demographic data, but also collecting data on infrastructure, health and education services, local sources of income (Arpinte, 2015), local employers, commuting. We also looked at the phenomenon of working abroad. The second stage tackled all the issues through interviews with local leaders representing the community (mayor, doctor, school principal, social worker, community worker, priest, local entrepreneurs, and other significative actors for the community). Also, individual or group interviews were conducted

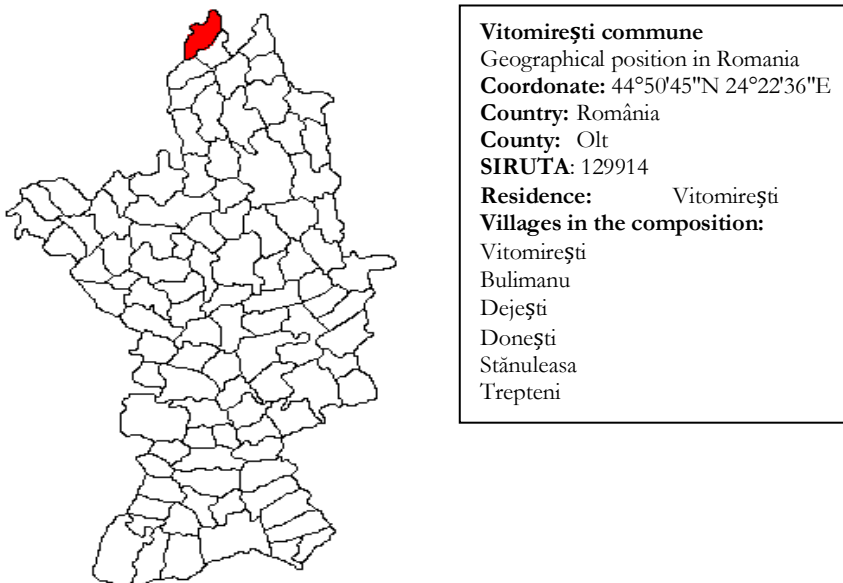
with vulnerable people in the community. In the following we present one of the communities studied in the project.

The case of Vitomiresti commune

The identification of the geographical position of Vitomiresti commune can be done using a landmark known by many Romanians, it is about 15 km away from Cuca Commune – village Măcăi, the locality from which started the well-known Romanian expression “de la Cuca Măcăii”¹ which describes a distant place, which is difficult to reach. That seems to be a potential indicator of isolation. The geographical position of the commune is in the northern extremity of Olt County, at about 70 km from Slatina (residence of the county) and about 35 km from Drăgășani (nearest urban locality).

The commune consists of 6 villages (Vitomiresti, Bulimanu, Dejesti, Donesti, Stănuleasa, Trepteni), with a relief composed of sharp valleys and quite high hills. The total area of the locality is 4569,5853 ha, of which 1832,2 ha of declared agricultural land. From a geomorphological point of view, the territory of the commune falls within the Cotmeana Platform, a subunit of the Getic plateau.

Figure 1. Location of Vitomiresti Commune in Olt County (identified in red in the figure)



Source of information and image: https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comuna_Vitomire%C8%99ti,_Olt

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuca_Arge%C8%99

The population in 2011 was 2282, but after 10 years, in 2021 it decreased to 1700 inhabitants, and 35% of them are over 65 years old. The population has an aging trend. Annually, the number of deaths exceeds the number of births: in the period 2019-2021, there were 38 babies born, as the number of persons who died was of 105. Also in the period 2019-2021, we notice that the number of marriages decreased (in 2019 there were 8, in 2020 there were 3, and in 2021 there were 4), a situation that could have been determined by the restrictive measures imposed to limit the spread covid-19 pandemic, which banned weddings and other gatherings with large numbers of people. In Vitomirești commune there are 990 households, the only ethnicity declared being the Romanian one. *We have no other ethnic groups in the locality*" (representative of local public authorities, Vitomirești commune).

The infrastructure of the commune

The distance between the commune and the nearest city and the existence of proper transport facilities can be an indicator of the development of that community. Vitomirești commune is crossed by 2 county roads, respectively DJ 678 B and DJ 648, which connect urban centers such as Râmnicu Vâlcea (located about 50 km away), Pitești (located about 65 km away) and Slatina (located approximately 65 km away). The distance to these cities is a medium one, making harder for the inhabitants of the communes to access work in the urban area or other types of services.

In the last 5 years, the commune has developed from the perspective of infrastructure. Although Vitomirești is fairly isolated from certain areas considered as development poles, it still has a local network of asphalt roads that reach the corners of the commune: *"95% asphalt ... things have improved in the last 3 years"* (representative of local public authorities, Vitomirești commune). The disadvantages identified by the interviewees, referred to the fact that there are few public transports that facilitate travel between localities of the commune: *"a problem is transport if I wanted to work somewhere, I have to go 5-6 km to get to the main road, to be able to get to the transport to go to another locality"*; *"there are not many minibuses... that came and go at several hours"* (vulnerable person, Vitomirești commune). The transport seems a real problem in the community.

Vitomirești commune has a water network that ensures the provision of this service in all villages, even if there are houses positioned at appreciable distances from the main road. *"100% of the water network is extended throughout the commune, and in terms of sewerage, the network has a coverage of about 75%"* (representative of local public authorities, Vitomirești commune). The role of local authorities that managed to improve the local infrastructure is commendable.

Despite these local improvements, the commune still has no connection to gas. *"Investments were made in infrastructure, sewerage, water, the authorities took care of it"* (entrepreneur, Vitomirești commune). However, the sewerage network is not extended in all villages, the local authority making constant efforts to ensure this service to all households, *"We have water, but the sewerage is not in the whole commune. There is also a garbage collection service in the whole commune. The gas has not yet reached the commune."* (vulnerable person, Vitomirești commune). The houses are mostly heated with solid fuel, using firewood, because the gas is not accessible to the commune.

Waste collection is done through a specialized company, a service that should solve the problem of pollution generated by random garbage, but unfortunately, there are still residents of the commune who are not interested in protecting the environment and the quality of life of the community members, "it *changed a lot... garbage cans were brought to every house*", "*enough pollution because there are still people throwing garbage everywhere.... Better a poor horse than no horse at all.*" (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune), "*waste is collected throughout the commune, and the sanitation system we work with is from Slatina*" (representative of local public authorities, Vitomiresti commune). Educating the population in terms of environmental protection and not throwing garbage out of the local garbage collection system is a topic that still need to be solved in the community. The involvement of local high school can be a solution to this issue.

Sources of population income

Agricultural activity

Usually, Romanian rural environment is having a large share of employment in agriculture and a set of local values oriented towards tradition (Mihalache, 2020). In case of Vitomiresti, a consistent percentage of the inhabitants (32%- 620 people) are self-employed in agriculture in their household, on their own land. That is a subsistence agriculture that characterize in work poverty specific to this type of agriculture. Even if this type of activity equals a non-quantified income, it offers only the possibility of a decent living. The period of the post-socialist transition was marked, especially in the first decade, by the exponential increase in the number of people who turned to agricultural work, in a non-mechanized and subsistence-oriented manner. There is a correlation between in-work poverty and the large number of people working in small-scale agriculture. (Mihalache, 2020).

Underdevelopment is, among other things, an effect of the agrarianization of the economy. The orientation of a segment of the population towards agricultural activities within one's own household has led to the preservation of a large number of people at risk of poverty. The 1990-2000 period has been the peak of this phenomenon. Due to the lack of decently paid jobs, many people have turned to non-mechanized farming. Unfortunately, this option has led to a delay in the development of the Romanian society and an increase in the share of marginalized people. (Mihalache, 2020).

In Vitomiresti, data show that out of the total land area related to the commune, 1832,2 ha are registered in the town hall records as agricultural land "*70% fruit growing, the rest subsistence agriculture*" (representative of local public authorities, Vitomiresti commune) "*is a hilly area, where fruit growing*" (entrepreneur, Vitomiresti commune). The inhabitants of Vitomiresti carry out the main agricultural activity, but not for commercial interest, but more to ensure their necessary agricultural products.

The interest for sending vegetables by couriers increased during pandemic and the profits also for some local entrepreneurs in agriculture that had known how to access information and technology: "*in the pandemic hundreds of envelopes of vegetables were sold, it was fantastic what increased interest they had people for agriculture*". (Entrepreneur, Vitomiresti commune).

Although in previous years many local farmers were engaged in animal husbandry, now the interest in this type of activity has greatly diminished, as the population is aging, and the new generation is not interested in this type of activity: *“the number of animals has decreased every year. There are still animal breeders, but there are fewer of them, they have got older”, “people don't raise pigs anymore, most of them buy, only to grow”* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune). To have a correct vision on the decrease of livestock, we made a comparison using the information described in the Development Strategy¹ of Vitomiresti commune for the period 2014-2020 (see table no. 1).

Table 1. The situation of the existing livestock in Vitomiresti 2014-2022

Animal species	Livestock in 2014	Livestock in 2022	Percentage differer
Bovine	505	150	-70,3 %
Cabaline	158	51	-67.73%
Swine	780	714	-9%
Ovine	810	826	+2%
Goats			
Birds	9.900	7784	-21.38%
Bee families	1235	250	-79.76 %

Not even the fiscal facilities offered by the state through subsidies are no longer a motivation, *“less and less interest in raising animals, although subsidies are taken for animals and land”* (representative of local public authorities, Vitomiresti commune). One solution to the problems described above was proposed by local entrepreneurs, who believes that smart farming is practiced by accessing new technologies, *“someone from the town hall should call from the Agricultural Directorate to analyze the soil, to determine the pH to see which crops are going, which trees are going... There is no more agriculture made at random.”* (Entrepreneur, Vitomiresti commune).

The major problem identified by the interviewees is related to local jobs. The living standard of the members of the community is average or above, the people being housewives and managing to procure what they need for their daily food/food needs through what they produce in their household, *“there are no jobs in the locality”* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune).

The commune has only 5 people who are registered as paid unemployed and 12 people registered as beneficiaries of the guaranteed minimum income in 2021. The number is very small compared to the number of inhabitants can be explained by the number of people that benefit from remittances from relatives working abroad or work on informal market. The main factor that seems to enhance the living standard in the commune is migration for work abroad. The respondents showed that half of the family has relatives working abroad. Part of the work is seasonal and implies low skilled jobs, nevertheless, they are an important element because of the remittances sent by migrant workers to their families.

¹ <http://www.primariavitomiresti.ro/portal-administratie-publica/vitomiresti/primaria-vitomiresti/primaria/programe-si-strategii>

In spite of this, a part of the people has no support from outside and are part of the vulnerable groups, in difficulty of having a suitable home or resources for a decent living. They were supported by the local authority by providing social housing in the patrimony of the mayor's office, *"we have 12 social apartments, social housing... 100% occupied at the moment"* (representative of local public authorities, Vitomiresti commune).

Labour migration

The phenomenon of labor migration had a consistent effect in the community. There are many people who have chosen to go to work abroad to ensure financial comfort for their families, especially since there are very few employers in Vitomiresti. Because households in the commune are multi-generational, the effort to raise the children of those who choose the path abroad is distributed to extended family members. In addition, the income sent to the country covers current expenses and even enough to make investments in rehabilitating homes or buying better cars. *"About half of the households have people who go to work abroad"* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune). *"My husband and I would go abroad, but only seasonally, I would not settle abroad", "more than half are who go to work abroad Germany, Spain..."* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune).

There are a few private employers in the commune, but their number has decreased from year to year, also, it is hard to find qualified workforce in the community *"I have 19 employees, they have all become more expensive, we work with wood... it is very difficult", "my oldest employee is 23 years old since he works in the company, but we also had employees who stayed for a month"* (entrepreneur, Vitomiresti commune).

There are, of course, public institutions employers, in the category of which we can list the town hall, the local council, the educational units, the police station, but the number of employees is relatively small, *"1% of those who finish high school have the chance to work in Vitomiresti"* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune).

The inhabitants of Vitomiresti have the desire to work and for that, they are really willing to commute to the neighboring localities, *"Here the women also want to go to work, they even commute. Women don't just stay home to raise their children."* (entrepreneur, Vitomiresti commune). Sometimes, however, he gives up this option, because from the cost-benefit analysis people conclude that it is not efficient to commute, *"if I commute it would not be convenient, because the commute is expensive, and to rent in another locality is also too expensive"* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune). A solution for jobs at the local level, would be to attract potential investors, who *"create jobs, to ensure the development of the community"* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune).

In Vitomiresti there are 65 people with physical disabilities and 6 people with mental disabilities. Regarding the elderly, in the records of the local authority there are 600 people over the age of 65, of which 22 are immobile and 150 are single. These people are covered by social assistance benefits, but social services would be needed, especially for lonely old people that have difficulties in mobility. If we refer to children with parents who went to work abroad, *"there are children with parents who went to work abroad, but not so many"* (representative of local public authorities, Vitomiresti commune).

Access to health services

The inhabitants of the commune have general health problems, mostly related to their age. They rely on family doctor from the community and avoid self-medication: *"people follow my instructions, any problem they have, call us... signal us that they have problems"* (representative of the medical system, Vitomiresti commune).

In Vitomiresti commune there is only one family medicine office, where a percent of 70% of the total population of the locality are registered, *"insured and uninsured we have about 1300 approximately, it is different from month to month"* (representative of the medical system, Vitomiresti commune). The percent of insured inhabitants is low in comparison with other communities that we studied within the same project, (90% of local population in Moroeni, Dambovită are registered to local family doctors).

The family doctor knows his patients very well and this is also an advantage of the family doctor in rural communities, where everyone knows everyone. The doctor shows flexibility in the relationship with the patients, and this aspect emerges from the interviews with the community members, *"the doctor is from Sâmburești, but he comes to the locality and when we need, he answers any question."* (Vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune).

The interviewees reported that only some of the people follow the doctor's recommendations during the Covid-19 pandemic and got vaccinated, but the rate of vaccinated children with compulsory scheme is high: *"at first people were detained, then as they received more information, people understood that the vaccine is good, we made 40 doses, it is not a large number, but we are satisfied", "I do not have an unvaccinated child with the obligatory vaccines, there are some exceptions that have contraindications"* (representative of the medical system, Vitomiresti commune).

The effort of the medical staff to cover even preventive services is a commendable one, especially in the context in which this office is the only one in the locality, *"it is a huge volume of work, but we all go through it", after each holiday, without having a contract with the mayor's office"* (representative of the medical system, Vitomiresti commune) and their try to develop medical services by accessing funds to support this approach, *"we are involved ... it is a program ~ Everything for your heart ~ and we try to sign up. The program is funded by European funds, just like in 2007, a very good screening program", "all people over the age of 45 are eligible and in the program, they can take a blood pressure, put on a holter, it's a program very good"*. (representative of the medical system, Vitomiresti commune).

The local pharmacy has a reduced schedule of only twice a week, and this is a barrier in accessing medication, *"we have only one pharmacy in the locality, with a schedule only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I think it would be necessary to have a daily schedule"* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune).

Other identified problem is that of poor information regarding family planning/sex education, which led to situations in which several minors became mothers, *"I also had several minor mothers"* (representative of the medical system, commune Vitomiresti). Sexual education and education for health are needed in the community.

Access to education

A factor that might enhance the local development is the existence of a high school in the locality. This has increased the number of pupils that follow the high school at the end of eight classes form of education to almost 100%, a much higher percent than other communities studied in the project, that have access to education only outside communities, most of the time in the closest urban area near the commune. The quality of the education in this local school is questionable, and the motivation of students to receive a formal high school education, as only a percent of 20% finish their education with baccalaureate, as representative of the authorities declare.

In terms of access to education, the rural environment is deeply deficient, different reports show. For the population aged 15-64, the share of those who graduated only eight classes is 47% and in marginalized rural areas this percentage increases considerably, reaching 80% out of the total. This situation has direct implications for employment in the formal economy. The share of people who are not in any form of education or do not hold a job in the formal economy, for the age range 15-64, is 54% in rural areas. For marginalized rural areas the percentage reaches 83% (Preotesi, Tomescu, 2019).

The number of children in Vitomiresti (between 0-18 years old) is 342, of which 41 are enrolled in kindergarten, 148 are enrolled in primary and secondary school and 125 are enrolled in high school. As the number of children decreased in the last 10 years, a number of 3 kindergartens and one primary school (that from Dejesti), were closed between 2014 and 2022. This is reducing access from the inhabitants from far away to center of commune villages (See table no. 2).

Table no. 2. The comparative situation of the educational units. 2014 -2022

Type of school unit	The situation in 2014	The situation in 2022
High school	Vitomiresti Vitomiresti Technological High School - high school education	Vitomiresti -Vitomiresti Technological High School high school, middle school, primary education. -Vitomiresti Kindergarten
Primary school	Dejesti, Dejesti Primary School- primary education	Dejesti kindergarten that works with a group of preschoolers
Kindergarten	Donesti Kindergarten with normal program Donesti-preschool education	-
Kindergarten	Bulimanu Kindergarten with normal program Bulimanu-preschool education	-
Kindergarten	Trepteni Kindergarten with normal program Trepteni-preschool education	-

Residents are disappointed that schools have been dismantled in the villages, because traveling to the village of Vitomiresti with young children is quite difficult, as they have to walk a considerable distance to the place where they are picked up by the school minibus, which it takes over at very early hours.

"except for the village of Vitomiresti, only in Dejesti there is another kindergarten", "it would be good if there were kindergartens and primary schools in every village... there are churches in every village", "it would be good if it would reopen the middle schools ...as it used to be", "there is only one minibus to transport the children to school and we have to take them to the main street at 7 o'clock in the morning. " (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune), *"the minibus should transport a lot of students and it must make a lot of trips, sometimes it doesn't fit in time. The first transport leaves at 7 and some children arrive too early..."* (representative of the education system, Vitomiresti commune).

The number of children who manage to graduate from high school with a baccalaureate degree is small, and it kept reducing over the last years. This directly influences the possibility that they can continue their educational path in a higher education unit, *"children who now finish high school no longer go at college"* (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune), *"last year there was a percentage of up to 20% promotion to baccalaureate from those participants"* (representative of the education system, Vitomiresti commune), *"the number of those who graduate high school with a diploma baccalaureate is much lower than in previous years"* (representative of the education system, Vitomiresti commune).

The efforts of the representatives of the educational units to increase the quality of the offered services exist, and this was also reflected in the diversification of teaching methods, but also through the acquisition of higher teaching materials. *"I learned on the go. We would attend classes, we would get a free platform that we still use "*, *"I say we had to learn a lot. We don't do so many papers anymore, we can give tests online... it would be bad to give them up"*, *"we have three classes equipped with intelligent equipment"* (representative of the education system, Vitomiresti commune).

Vitomiresti City Hall representatives were also actively involved, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when teaching was transferred in online environment, and many of the students did not have the necessary gadgets (smartphones, computers, tablets). The authorities distributed tablets so that the children could access online courses. *"2 years ago, The City Hall gave us tablets with internet for all children in primary and secondary school, we have 170 tablets. The children have them at home. high school students received 65 laptops through a Rose program. The classes that finish the 8th grade hand over the tablets to those from the 1st grade."* (representative of the education system, Vitomiresti commune).

The budgetary effort to maintain a reasonable standard of the school is influenced by costs for heating and transportation, *"we have wood heating, but the costs was ok because we have about 700 students. The problem is that we can't buy certain things out of the amount allocated for each student. Sometimes the mayor's office supplements our income. Now I have submitted a project for the prevention of school dropout"*, *"for the minibus the high school pays the fuel"* (representative of the education system, Vitomiresti commune).

However, there are still necessary investments, and these exceed the financial potential of the school, *"we need a program for the rehabilitation of high school buildings, but also specialists*

to support us in writing and implementing the project", "there is a sports field, but it should be rehabilitated, and we cannot use the gym because it does not have a permit and it cannot be entered" (representative of the education system, Vitomirești commune).

These equipments were still used during our data collection (spring 2022), although the courses returned to the physical presence, especially for children who could not return to school because of health risk, *"we have a period with sick children, and the children had to stay at home and the teachers taught them online... somehow in hybrid format."* (Representative of the education system, Vitomirești commune).

The school has a psycho-pedagogical counselor, who lives in Vitomirești, this aspect being an advantage in the relationship with students, in this context knowing quite well the individual situation of those with whom he interacts professionally, *"we have a psycho-pedagogical counselor, who lives in Vitomirești"* (representative of the education system, Vitomirești commune).

There was a school camp in the village, which was a point of interest for leisure. According to the Local Development Strategy of Vitomirești commune, it consisted of 34 houses, a central pavilion, a kitchen and a swimming pool, but no longer obtained an operating license and was transformed into a social center for institutionalized children. Unfortunately, over time, the buildings have deteriorated, and the space is unusable now because part of the main building caught fire in 2020.

The phenomenon of school abandon is almost existence in the locality: *"we do not have school dropout until the 10th grade, it is only one 8th grade child in this situation"* (representative of the education system, Vitomirești commune).

Conclusions

The study conducted in Vitomirești commune revealed some local factors that are contributing to local development: the mentality of the people in terms of pro-work and pro-education, the desire to increase their standard of living through their own resources, one strategy being that of working abroad and sending resources to the family at home, but also the active involvement of representatives of the local authority. The income earned by the inhabitants who went to work abroad has an important influence on the community development, even if their work is often seasonal.

The community of Vitomirești is homogeneous, having access to public services, even if the access is much harder for the inhabitants from some of the villages, that are not leaving in the village residence of the commune (Vitomirești village), but in the most remote village.

Children are educated from an early age in the family co-opted in specific activities for household maintenance or in agriculture. After graduating from high school, the young people's options are rather to leave community towards urban areas. That has implication upon the trend of population aging and it is a common phenomenon in rural areas in Romania. The lack of local opportunities is stimulating this migration trend.

Although connections with urban areas are difficult, residents are willing to commute to provide financial comfort to family members. There is a growing interest in connection with others and there are available cable and internet services in the commune, that are frequently used.

The main factor that seems to enhance the living standard in the commune is migration for work abroad. The respondents showed that half of the families in the commune has relatives working abroad. Part of the work is seasonal and implies low skilled jobs, nevertheless, they are an important element because of the resources sent by migrant workers to their families.

Another factor that influenced local developing context in Vitomiresti was involvement of local leaders. The representatives of the local authority are actively involved in accessing the projects financed by European or budgetary funds, to increase the living standard of the inhabitants of the commune. This is demonstrated by the investments made in recent years, an aspect mentioned by all respondents of the study. The leaders' involvement plays a major role in local development, but the decreasing of active population and aging of rural communities because of the migration of young, fertile population to urban areas in the country or working abroad is a major problem.

A third factor that might enhanced the local development is the existence of a high school in the locality. That has increased the number of pupils that follow the high school at the end of eight classes form of education to almost 100%, a much higher percent than other communities studied in the project, but the interest to finish high school with a diploma decreased over time and the quality of education. These are local problems that have to be considered by local authorities.

The study concluded that there were no marginalized areas in Vitomiresti, although harder access to health and education was present in some villages. Also, the short program of the local pharmacy and lower percent of people insured for health represent a risk for local population and had to be solved by authorities.

Also, environmental problems should be tackled. Educating the population in terms of environmental protection and not throwing garbage out of the local garbage collection system is a topic that still need to be solved in the community. The involvement of local high school can be a solution in this issue.

Local leaders identified several future development opportunities in the localities of the commune:

- Further development of fruit cultivation. Agricultural areas which are conducive to the development of fruit-growing activities and animal husbandry.
- Rehabilitation of the camp that can bring profit to the owner of the spaces, but also to the community.
- The development of ecumenical tourism, since in the locality there is a wooden church dedicated to "*Saint Paraschiva*" listed as a historical monument, dating from 1795. However, the locality lacks the potential of development in the field of tourism,

"tourism does not have much chance of development in the locality" (vulnerable person, Vitomiresti commune).

Acknowledgements

The study was accomplished inside the Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy. The data for Vitomiresti commune were collected by Drăgan Corina.

Funding

The case study related to Vitomiresti commune from Olt County was financed by research grant no. GAR-UM-2019-XI-5.6-7 / 15.10.2019, entitled Typologies of underdevelopment and marginalization in rural areas and small towns in Romania (MARGINALRURAL), a grant made with financial support from the Recurrent Donor Fund, available to the Academy Romanian and managed by the "PATRIMONIUM" Foundation GAR-UM-2019.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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