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**COMMUNITY REGENERATION THROUGH PARENTS’  
ENGAGEMENT FOR EDUCATION. A MOLDAVIAN SOCIO-  
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents a corpus of a qualitative research project conclusions aiming to generate the favorable premises to increase the social cohesion in Republic of Moldova rural communities, a specific case of evolution from traditional to the consumerist society, case related to multiple changes occurred during the last 25 years. The process of increasing the social cohesion itself involves the development of a set of activities which targets to identify and to activate the interaction, collaboration and cooperation mechanism to increase the educational system socio-performance. We highlight the key role of one of the most important endogen agents for the change: the parents, particularly the fathers, as part of the problem and solution for any intervention having as purpose the socio-educational development. The parents’ bonds to education are a precondition for development and a basic element to regenerate the community social tissue, but their action is strongly related to the social capital reinforcement and to the socio-economic status.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding the educational system from the social development paradigm offers also a view of the underdevelopment phenomenon also, particularly the modernization theories and the dependency theories. The development as modernization paradigm follows the evolutionary approach; ‘the modernization theories converge to a common conclusion: underdevelopment is a common characteristic

of societies in an early or intermediate road to modernity, in contrast to developed societies, who have attained this point' (Zamfir & Stănescu, 2007, p. 565).

Rostow's structural model (as cited by Bădescu, 2012) focus on a five stages evolution of communities from traditional society (mainly agricultural, with low efficiency resources use, with a firm and resistant to change society) to the consumerist one. The second stage of development, 'the preconditions to take-off', is characterized by technical progress and industrialization, by openness to trade and to the outside, by changing its structure and social mobility through the national identity and shared interests development.

Education plays a key role in the transition to modernity, diminishing the resistance to the new and becomes an adjuvant to reconfigure the social change. The sociological perspective on the modernization integrates the economic, but also the social and cultural determinants of modernization. These factors explain differences in economic development between countries by socio-cultural differences between their societies.

New approaches of the underdevelopment phenomenon shed a new light on the social capital and on the human capital. Those two pillars are indicators and predictors of social development as well (Preotesi, 2013).

The community development is a particular case of the social development. The measurement of local/community development (Sandu, 1999) identifies the local infrastructure and the human capital as two types of structurally related factors. Human capital is considered an indicator and a trigger of consumption, being operationalized in three dimensions: (1) the educational capital (at communitarian level); (2) the number of people locally employed as a predictor of social development; (3) the weight of population employed in agriculture, which negatively correlated with the degree of social development (in terms of Romanian rural areas where agriculture is the dominant form of subsistence, a prerequisite for a low material and cultural consumption).

The existing data and our research experiences allow us to consider the model transferable and applicable in Republic of Moldova, appropriate to the theoretical approach presented above. The local infrastructure precariousness, the low educational capital, the low share of the employed active population and the high percentage of people laboring in subsistence agriculture are predictors of the local underdevelopment that largely characterizes the nowadays-rural space. Secondly, high rates of circular migration increase the negative impact of the local context on Moldovan villages' children chances for life (Mînăscuță, 2007).

The notoriously Coleman Report (1966) stated that family history was a more powerful predictor of school performance than any of the schools features themselves. Recent data show that individuals deprived of social networking vulnerable communities have a low mobilization of resources related to their own objectives of socio-professional insertion (Smith, 2000), even they belong to societies in another stage of development than the 'preconditions to take-off'. The social capital defined as 'interactions in which individuals take part, being included in social networks and norms associated with them' (Voicu, 2005, p. 105), explains the dynamics like those conceived on the community educational issues.

Dissolution or absence of social capital has a direct impact on the school, on the quality of the education, on the individual academic performance and on social relations, particularly. Meanwhile, the generational changes and social evolution show new ways of updating the social capital (Kapucu, 2011).

The local context relationship with the educational system was operationalized from a practical approach of initiating mechanisms for the community involvement process into the local development. Education as a strategic variable in a local social development process is the basic theme for a comprehensive research approach, whose results are subsequently summarized.

The analysis we proposed focuses on the parents' bond with the educational system. It is based on the E DURability comprehensive framework, consisting in researches and interventions developed in Republic of Moldova starting with June 2014. All the three projects cover the areas of public participation, community development, advocacy, and policy-making in order to increase community participation to education.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The research sample consisted of the target group of the '*E DURability+. Activation of parents, core actors the educational system*' ongoing project: vulnerable families (parents and children). The following groups were considered: single parent families, families with children whose parents experienced the frequent circularly external migration, families with children raised by grandparents or other relatives (if the parents are abroad for long periods). The unit of selection was the family (N = 51).

The subjects' selection has been conducted by using the snowball sampling procedure with different starting points to avoid the sample artificial uniformity. The selection was oriented by the profiles identified in the national research project developed in in the summer of 2014 (Cace, Pârvan, & Sali, 2015). Over half of them (55.3%) are found in the 30-39 y/o age category, compared with 30.3% in the 40-49 y/o category and with the percentage of those over 50 y/o (the highest respondents' age was 63), representing 5.5% of the sub-sample.

A sub-sample of parents ( $n = 18$ ) was selected to participate in experimental activities organized in a Romanian camp. The parents have been sampled from households in three communities objects of the initial stage based on availability criteria. The participants did not receive any incentive but the organizing team covered all the transport and accommodation fees.

As for the education level, the national data has the highest rate among graduates of secondary school or medium vocational school (35.8%), followed by the category of respondents who have completed university studies (22.2%) and those who graduated college with 17.5%. 10% of our sample subjects completed the college and about 70% graduated secondary school or medium vocational school.

The research study benefited from an interdisciplinary perspective, blending sociological and educational approaches. Our analysis integrates findings of an initial evaluation research carried-out in communities and an ongoing evaluation based on direct observation, in-depth semi-structured individual and group interviews. The interviews were conducted inside and outside the communities as a part of a complex set of activities addressing the sub-samples of parents and children.

## 2.2. Procedure

A two-stage research framework was designed. For the initial stage, we designed customized data collection tools: the household datasheet and a questionnaire for parents. 51 household datasheets were filled-in in the three selected communities (25 in Racovăț, 11 in Lupa Recea, and 16 in Codreanca, the last two villages being part of the same commune).

For the second stage, preset scenarios were implemented simultaneously in an open and controlled environment. Mainly, the parents were involved in educational activities. The children benefited from co-curricular recreational activities. The activities were designed to support participatory and reflective involvement, recently associated with long term positive outcomes such as higher education attainment and greater future earnings (Snellman, Silva, Frederick, & Putnam, 2015).

Each day proposed a balanced mixture of free-to-choose activities, less-structured (sightseeing, hiking), and well-structured (e.g. role playing, practical skills - crafts, cognitive challenges). Facilitating the interaction was meant to increase the group cohesion in a less familiar environment and to change the nature of parent-parent and parent children relations. During and after these activities, the researchers were interested in monitoring the relationships between subgroups of subjects, such as those of Lupa Recea versus Codreanca villages or those from Racovăț versus those in Codreanca communes.

The subjects experienced activities stimulating the within-group and between-group interactions, allowing to monitoring and evaluating the progress of these interactions. The design followed the experiential and collaborative learning principles. The psychologists, educational experts, and sociologists to identify socio-educational problems and solutions for specific interventions have systematically monitored/evaluated the activities, group interactions, and subjects' reactions to the lived experiences. There have been planned and conducted focus groups and unstructured interviews with similar topics as the questionnaires, but with a higher degree of flexibility, in line with the qualitative methodological requirements.

The evaluation provided benchmarking standards to develop other future activities and monitoring tools for continuous and impact evaluation.

## 3. Results

It is important to mention that the research revealed an interesting phenomenology of vulnerabilities related to the families and subjects participating in this research.

*The first vulnerability* is caused by the revenue scarcity. In some cases, it is high for people without school, employed as 'housemaids' and for other people with a (theoretically) higher status: 'part-time caregiver', 'part-time nurse', 'teacher in kindergarten' etc. Most of the female subjects in the study reported themselves to work as seamstresses and house cleaners. In addition, both women (mothers) and men (fathers) declared to work as seasonally agricultural laborers. The socio-occupational status of adult family members was identified to be the main factor of vulnerability. It is associated with the income level, the frequency, the certainty, and the practical means to producing it. In each of the three communities, the dominant model is the one of families without set income sources, get from the formal

labor market employment. The families where both parents are employed are rare: n = 3 in Racovăț, n = 2 in Lupa Recea, and n = 0 in Codreanca.

**Table 1.** The structure of sample by employment status (N = 51)

	Racovăț	Lupa Recea	Codreanca
Families with 2 employees	3	2	0
Families with mother laboring only	11	2	2 - seasonal labor 1 - employed mother, seasonal laboring father
Families with father laboring only	4 - seasonal labor incomes (from Russia)	1 seasonal laborer life partner 1 employed father	4 – father only, seasonal 1 - father only, abroad
Families with no labor incomes	7	5	0
Other	0	0	7

The subjects' employment status is consistent with the situation of rural areas in the Republic of Moldova. The research revealed differences between the current situation in rural areas and the nationwide situation (for a detailed discussion see Cace, 2015). In sum, at the national level, 34.2% parents are employed in the public sector, 22.2% are employed in the private sector, and 26.7% are inactive (unemployed, housewives, jobless); 3.3% reported themselves as entrepreneurs, and nearly 5% are self-employed agricultural laborers (N = 600 parents).

A third important social vulnerability is *the family structure* as the data analysis reveals:

- 2 of the 51 families have only children and grandparents.
- Other 4 are extended families (including grandparents).
- Father is the missing parent in nearly half of the single parent families, with 1 exception (where mother is missing).
- The mother's life-partner is not the children's biological father in almost a quarter of families.
- Subjects involved in the experimental activities belong to 7 one biological parent families (including adults in cohabitation) where the mother or father have a physical or neuropsychological inability.
- Most households in the sample have at least three minor children. The average is 3 children per family, and most households have 4 children, with a minimum of 1 child and a maximum of 7.

The income of vulnerable families in the sample ranges between 500 and 3,000 MDL ( $M_{income} = 1500 \text{ MDL}$ ). Please note that precise calculations cannot be made, as the subjects' estimations are either lacking or approximate. For an appropriate connection to the socio-economic context, in July 2016 the average gross nominal earnings constituted 5,274.0 Lei, an increase of 8.0% compared to July 2015. The index of the real salary in July 2016 compared to July 2015 was 100.9%, 0.9% higher compared to the previous year. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, employees of ICT industries (10,800.3 MDL) and of the financial industries (10,025.2 MDL) scored the highest values. The lowest were in the leisure services (3,221.9 MDL) together with the primary economic sector employees (agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting) with about 3,567.7 MDL (National Bureau of Statistics, September 2016).

The main sources of income are the social benefits (child-raising allowances or for schoolchildren, disability compensations etc.), from the subsistence agriculture or the semi subsistence (based mainly on economic practices such as barter - exchange of products); from occasional and/or seasonal labor abroad.

It is interesting to notice that the estimated level of this type of income does not differ greatly from that earned inland, with one exception: a person who said that without the labor in Russia would not be able to pay prior loans for the house building.

Related to the *subjective perception of income*, half of vulnerable families say income hardly assures the survival of the family. The other half say it is not even enough.

In addition to the investigation of socio-economic status and its impact on parents' participation, the authors were interested in understanding how the parents in these three communities interact with the educational system, particularly in contexts when their involvement is requested. The data collected through individual and group interviews validate and complete the results of questionnaires applied to parents in the target group.

Answers like 'to work with the school and teachers for better education', 'I advise teachers', 'check my child homework', 'have an active part in school life', 'to help him materially and emotionally to attend classes' provide a representation of paternal roles. Table 2 synthetizes the most frequent parental roles and relevant quotes to support the ideas expressed by the parents during interviews.

Discussions with parents and especially with children and teachers (in the communities) reveal an insufficient cognitive equipment or a **reduced capacity of parents to help their children** with homework, for example. Parents cannot provide appropriate support, fact proved by observations made during the camp organized trips. The vast majority of parents could not provide basic explanations when they were asked by children or about the history of the places they visited, about natural phenomena and their consequences, by visible and impressive aspects such as caves or keys ('I asked my mother how to last so many years the castle. And she didn't answered'. 'My mother knew, but I asked the guide', says one of the children). Many children have not even tried to ask their parents, feeling they have difficulties to answer, but asked the experts during or after the trips or activities.

**Table 2.** Parental roles in vulnerable families

Parental roles	Relevant quotes
Educating children in the family	'Raising the child and educating him in the spirit of love and respect for parents, adults and teachers' 'To educate my children to be good people.'
Material, moral, and emotional support to children development	'To do my duty as a parent to support the child.' 'To offer moral support to my children.'
Offering values-based education	'To support material, moral and emotional my children.' 'To look after my children not to offer bribes.' 'To announce when someone is dealing with corruption.'

**The parental roles distribution** in family appears to be unbalanced emphasized from an educational perspective. Mothers and older siblings can and are willing to provide answers for existential questions or to fulfill the cognitive interest, in some cases. Here are some quotes from discussions with the children: 'My father rarely helps me, my mother do it more.', 'My brother helped me...', 'I once asked my father and he said he did not know. He was pretending, just to leave him alone. I go to my mother...'

The importance of fathers in education seems to be minimized including by mothers who believe that ‘if he remained with his mother, I think does not matter. For example, my kids were constantly with my mom.’ ‘You know, from my own experience I would like to say, I had more influence on children when I was single.’ In addition, it seems the male parent’s strategies are challenged: ‘But why is not right? If they remain with Dad, Dad give them *raslabuhă*’ (Leave them alone, NB.) ‘And it looks the father, in a way, too much freedom gives them.’

Another aspect considered to be monitored during the experimental-applicative activities was related to **the ways and forms of local identity ownership**. Identity, from family to the local level and to the national level, is reflected and assumed by attitudes transferable to the individual and group behaviors. On the other hand, the behavioral aspects of identity intersect our attitude towards otherness. As humans, we have a tributary tendency to minimize uncertainty and a preference for a mental comfort zone represented by the facts perceived as familiar. In this context falls the initial spontaneous groups’ organization of participants in experimental-applicative activities, from how they decided to placed themselves in the bus and then for the first organized activities. Along the days, as the participants began to know each other, we acknowledge differences in interactions between children and parents in terms of increased density, variety and intensity.

Among the elements of identity, we considered relevant for the analysis the description each group of participants made for their commune, as a planned exercise. The identification and emphasizing of some or other significant aspects in describing their community, from the historical times to nowadays, reveals different ways of taking local identity. A relevant comparison is the case of two villages of the same commune: while Codreanca village is presented as ancient village of free peasants never laboring for the landowners, the Lupa Recea villagers relate their history to one of the local boyars (like those in Racovăț). Pride of the village is considered to be the manorial mansion where functioned the school until the recent *schools’ network optimization*. The subjects from Codreanca described themselves as hardworking people and using elements as traditional habits or jobs (woodworking). The Lupea Recea people highlight the beauty of nature, forests, cold springs, and nostalgic insights for better times people living in harmony with nature and satisfied, even they were laboring the nobleman’s land.

The Racovăț presentation put less emphasis on the past (briefly mentioned as ‘ancient settlement, which took its name from a nobleman, Racoviță’) and focuses on current and proud certain skills locals have (as well the art of folk dances). An excellent proof has been provided in the campfire evening. The first songs were initially individual initiatives, supported by a greater or lesser extent by family members. The next step was the building of an *ad-hoc* ‘local group’ of singers. Along with the songs and their lines, to the end of event, almost all participants (be they children, parents and teachers) sang together in a collective endeavor to assume the national identity.

#### 4. Discussions

The analysis of data collected in the three communes’ households leads to some conclusions:

- mothers are employed more than fathers (male life-partners);

- fathers (male life-partners) are mostly employed in seasonal job, temporary or casual;
- slightly more than half of families have experienced migration, exclusively in Russia and in the former Soviet Union space;
- only for 7 families (about 14% of subjects) laboring abroad provide now a revenue,
- the abroad labor cannot be considered a successful alternative, only a survival debouche;
- there are no major differences between families having revenues from domestic/inland labor, from laboring abroad or from pensions and social benefits – labor wages are on a level that cannot provide a decent living.

Analysis of data collected through individual and group interviews with all the 18 experimental activities participants (including 8 vulnerable parents) validates and completes the conclusions above. Some of the cases of vulnerable families in depth analyzed in the context of the experiment activities can be considered exemplary by their drama and overlapping vulnerabilities.

Related to the parents' perspective on the importance of school, on the interaction of children with the education process and on the expectations they have from this interaction, the opinions converge to a particular social conformism. It generates a certain tendency to exacerbate the school importance and therefore an exacerbation of assuming their role of parents in relation to school.

Practical aspects of the family everyday living negatively influence children's school results. This covers conditions improper for habitation, the income precariousness (reflected in some cases on an insufficient and inadequate nutrition of children), but also unable to provide minimum resources necessary for vulnerable families pupils to participate with equal opportunities in the education process.

Maybe the most cited and real reason is the Republic of Moldova experience of an aggravating social underdevelopment, negatively enhanced by the amplitude of a relevant circular migration. The abroad labor and the significantly lower successful rate of this strategy increases the individual and collective vulnerability. One of these is the temporary abandonment of children and the emergence of a new type of family: the family temporarily disintegrated, that can be considered an alternative form of family (Minăscuță, 2007).

Two-thirds of the migrants are men and the women a third. Among female immigrants, 70% are from rural areas. Though the proportion of mothers who leave to work abroad is low, the results on the family seem to have a more negative impact than the departure of fathers: a third of families where the mother frequently leave to work abroad is falling apart (UNDP, 2016).

Despite the circular migration, one of the reasons for this quasi-absence of fathers in the children education is the type of activity generating income they perform. We often have periods of absence from the family life for seasonal abroad labor or even in Moldova. In other cases, the work difficulty drains resources assigned to the children, theoretically. The reasons put forward to explain this behavior aim attitudinal and behavioral aspects, rather the passive educational perspective. On the consequence, based on the educational model assumed in most of these vulnerable families, 'the education is the wife/mother education is charged with the education, we only support her, from time to time'.



Sentimental assertions, such as those made in the lyrics of one of the village representatives ('Small is our village, Lord, how small!') correspond to the pragmatic description of marginality. This leads to direct effects on socio-economic development of the own community, but also on the individual wellbeing. This case, the marginality is identified in relation to the commune center, but also to the situation of being on the border of three districts, actually belonging to none of them. Other reasons for frustration are the recent effects of the school network optimization, old educational facilities remaining only a relic of a past, missing any functional bond to the present.

## 5. Conclusions

The socioeconomic picture of rural communities in Republic of Moldova reveals aspects largely consistent with those that define a significant area of the current Romanian rural. Dimensions such as scarcity of local infrastructure, low educational capital, the weight of the low employed laboring population and high percentage of people employed in subsistence agriculture are the premises of social underdevelopment of these rural communities.

The almost total lack of alternatives to provide a decent life for those left home created significant differences between those were able to access alternative employment abroad and had a contact with other social realities. The gaps between those who have worked abroad and the rest of the population (both parents and children) are embodied in the iconic marks of prosperity and social prestige symbols or the family survival only. These discrepancies turns into social polarization in some cases and sharpen the social inequality and individualism, making room for the potential growth of low social solidarity. Social relationships have evolved in conjunction with collective and individual experiences of the community members, manifesting an obvious erosion over the past 25 years, including small villages and relatively isolated, functioning on a rather traditional social relations model at the community level.

This paper analyzes how parents from disadvantaged communities, most of them touched by the *leaving for work* abroad phenomenon, are a frequent situation with multiple effects on children's education. It emphasis sharing traditionalist roles in the family, father keeping mostly an economic role and a title rather honorific, 'head of the family'.

An approach to education and parental participation, empowerment and engagement in raising children, involves the reinstatement of the community social fabric broken wires. The potentially involvement identified in people statements and beliefs requires a conversion into concrete action that supposes the activation of traditional family and community actors, non-functional or dysfunctional at the moment. Reconfiguring the role of fathers is the result of an intelligent and depth effort aiming to develop/train parenting skills in relation to the socio-economic facts, first. Related to the social development paradigm, increasing the education system socio-performance necessarily requires social capital reinforcement and actions on a socio-economic level.

Our findings validates a harsh 'diagnoses' arising from the previous researches and interventions: 'The villages in Moldova experience (...) the consequences of the phenomenon of disintegrated family. Formally, it exists, but actually not as the traditional perception of this social institution: communication, relationships, living together. This situation generates the diminishing premises of educational effects to develop the personality. It disappears the formative influence of a significant educational factor, which

results in increased negative effects on the evolution of humans as a social being. In fact, is lacking the parents modeling effect' (Dandara, 2014).

Despite this pessimistic conclusion, our operations ran in the Republic of Moldova lead to favorable premises to reset or reinforce the community bonds. The local identity building and re-build exercises reveal some social relations (created in the experimental context) can be replicated in real contexts as the starting point of a successful regeneration of the community social tissue process. Secondly, we can assert all participants in the activities (parents, students, and educational staff) can also become catalysts of such a social changing process.

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