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National and European Actions for the Development of Rural Areas - Stimulus for Ensuring the Sustainability of Economic Development

Teodor Marian COJOCARU
West University of Timisoara, Romania
tmcojocaru@yahoo.com

Ramona PÎRVU
University of Craiova, Romania
ramona.pirvu@edu.ucv.ro

Sorin DINULESCU
University of Craiova, Romania
sorin.dinulescu@yahoo.ro

Lili ȚENEA
University of Craiova, Romania
office.tenea@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The policies of the European Union pursue a sustainable and balanced development of the territory of the Community, these aspects being found in the objectives of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030. Among these objectives are some in the field of agriculture and rural development such as: SDG 2: eradicating world hunger, EU agriculture ensures that food is produced sustainably for all EU citizens, and that EU food exports contribute to food security in third countries. EU rural development and agriculture policies also support other SDGs: SGD 1 (without poverty), DGS 8 (decent work and growth), SGD12 (responsible consumption and production) and SGD 15 (terrestrial life). The article analyses the National Rural Development Program that was created to support through non-reimbursable funds from the European Union and the Romanian Government the economic and social growth of rural areas in Romania, starting from the 6 priorities defined at the European Union level. Thus, we will study the rural development measures financed through the NRDP, in the period 2014-2020, with a total financial allocation of 9.333 billion euros, of which 8.015 billion euros from the EAFRD and 1.347 billion euros representing the national contribution. We will present these measures in detail, based on public data available in August 2021.

Keywords: rural development; sustainable development; National Rural Development Program; agriculture.

JEL Classification: O00; Q01; Q56; R11.

Introduction

It is important to mention that rural areas were the main pillar of the common agricultural policy in the 1970s, being identified and defined at this time the second pillar, dedicated to the development of rural areas. In the last decade, the consolidation of the second pillar has been intensified (Adam *et al.* 2021), and as a result of the reforms implemented in rural areas, positive effects are identified in terms of: maintaining the population in rural

areas, protecting the natural environment, the protection of rural traditions and culture, the preservation of the particular family model in rural localities.

It should also be noted that the Rural Development Programs for 2014-2020, 2021-2027 are in fact a continuation of the financial support provided by the EU in previous periods and promote changes in terms of implementation, specific instruments, but also of the monitoring and evaluation system of the activities carried out (Wasilewski *et al.* 2021).

We also identify in these programs a number of key concepts that emphasize the multifaceted importance of rural areas for the European economy, such as the concept of: multifunctional development, social, economic and spatial order, village renewal, bottom-up development, planning strategic development, eco-development (sustainable development), revitalization, globalized development, technological development, innovation and transfer, consolidation of integration processes, etc. (Long *et al.* 2022; Komorowski *et al.* 2021; Nowack *et al.* 2021).

1. Literature Review

EU policies aim to overcome these barriers that affect rural areas, and which must in most cases lead to a change in the status of disadvantaged regions (Keim-Klärner *et al.* 2021). Therefore, the cohesion of the EU area, of all regions / areas is included in Community policies (Komorowski *et al.* 2021), in environmental and climate change policy, as it is known that rural areas are extremely vulnerable to a number of negative factors and less controllable, respectively: climate, birth rate, level of education, state of health, poor general infrastructure (supply of electricity and heat, sewerage, transport infrastructure, etc.).

We are increasingly identifying strategic funding concerns for smart development of rural areas, smart rural localities, implementation of innovative rural development concepts and their inclusion in long-term environmental protection projects (Zhang and Zhang 2020; Cowie *et al.* 2020). All these aspects involve the development of new economic activities, based on the current state of the natural and rural environment, ensuring the continuity of the implementation of environmental protection actions, as well as financing local identity conservation projects, supporting eco-entrepreneurs and financing educational institutions involved in providing entrepreneurial skills and abilities among young people (European Commission, 2020).

We support this idea by the fact that rural areas and rural communities play an important role in the long-term sustainable development strategy and shaping attitudes towards climate change to meet current and future challenges remains a challenge for all economic actors, political, social and environmental issues involved (Yanbo *et al.* 2021). Moreover, providing EU citizens with quality food, increasing consumption of organic agricultural products, is generating a long-term change in the rural economy, which means using resources more efficiently, overcoming the challenges of climate change and reducing society's dependence on non-renewable energy.

The rural economy is also expected to be affected in a very short time by the increase in digitalization, innovation knowledge and green entrepreneurship. Even in this context, agriculture and forestry, as important sectors of the rural economy, must intensely promote among young people the concept of an attractive place to live and work (Ferrari *et al.* 2022; Lekhanya 2018).

Moreover, all these aspects are perfectly correlated with the priorities of the Europe 2020 Strategy, namely: smart development (development based on knowledge and innovation); sustainable growth (economic development using only existing resources); inclusive growth (by increasing employment, providing social assistance, etc.)

For all these objectives, it was necessary to increase funding in the processes of: improving environmental education, research and innovation, the use of information and communication technology, environmental conservation, strengthening the economy and social structure, etc.

On the other hand, it should not be ruled out that the development policy of rural areas must be designed and implemented in close symbiosis with urban areas, by promoting the integrated policy of economic and social development to reduce disparities in the development of different regions, especially the disadvantaged.

2. Methodology

We started the research with the theoretical approach of the concepts by emphasizing the role played by the socio-economic analysis in the study of the countryside in a multidisciplinary scientific context. It highlights the special interest shown by the European Union towards the issue of rural development, materialized in the development of policies and strategies accordingly. At the same time, the impact of socio-human development in the Romanian rural area is highlighted with the help of specific analyses that highlighted the spatio-temporal

reality from which we briefly present some more important elements. The research aimed at identifying both the problems and the potential for development and diversification of agricultural and non-agricultural activities in order to contribute to a better orientation of rural development measures. In terms of application, we analysed the European and national financial allocations for rural development in Romania through PNDR, in the period 2014-2020 on each of the 14 rural development measures for which there are published data, with a total financial allocation of 9.333 billion euros, of which EUR 8.015 billion from the EAFRD and EUR 1.347 billion as the national contribution.

3. Case Studies

Rural development policy is a new EU policy area, which aims to address a wide range of issues and development sectors at different territorial levels in an integrated way (Dinu *et al.* 2020). New forms of governance have been developed, characterized by decentralization, partnership, participation and new formal mechanisms for horizontal and vertical policy coordination. Although the EU's rural development policy defines a new set of policies for the older components, it seems to be expanding and turning into a potentially distinct policy area (Van der Ploeg 2018). However, to this day, this promising area is still overshadowed by the CAP, both in terms of funding and political decision-making.

Following EU policy guidelines, rural development policy contains many important procedures. An analysis of the degree of vertical integration of rural development policy provides significant evidence of an evasive policy, with conflicting policy objectives and conflicting goals, bringing together various policy measures, organizing political actors with unequal powers, and on national and regional levels, actors with diverse institutional and organizational capacities (Papadopoulos 2017, 4-17).

By accessing European funds for agriculture, agricultural farms have been equipped with new, modern equipment, and some of them are equipped with a high technology of implementation in modern agrotechnics of many agricultural farms in Romania, especially those with large areas of land (Avram *et al.* 2007). After the European integration, large areas of agricultural land were merged in Romania, which allows the application of modern technologies of high productivity and economic efficiency. It was understood that modern agriculture can only be practiced on large areas of land, with the possibility of crop rotations to prevent the spread of common diseases to crops and the possibility of applying specific treatments to cultivated plants (Avram *et al.* 2007).

The increase in the level of agricultural production is thus the result of equipping Romanian agriculture with tractors and agricultural equipment, including specialized equipment for livestock farms, milking facilities for dairy cows, feeding facilities for fattening animals or laying birds and meat, etc. (Rusu 2021). Starting with the second programming period of European funding, 2014 - 2020, high-tech technology has started to enter Romania, there is more and more talk about precision agriculture, using tractors and equipment driven by robots or satellites, on agricultural areas delimited by GIS technology with the help of modern software programs. Everything is also talked about more than the digitalization of agriculture, all these aspects will lead to obtaining high quality, competitive productions on the Single Market (Dăianu, s.a., 2019, 3).

In the period 2001-2008, the Romanian economy grew by an average of 6.3 percent per year, representing one of the fastest growth rates in the European Union. In the period 2009-2012, Romania's GDP had an oscillating trend. Thus, after a period of average annual growth of 7.2% in 2006-2008, there was a sharp contraction of -6.6% in 2009, mainly due to the economic decline that followed the economic and financial crisis of 2007 -2008. Economic growth returned in 2011 (+ 2.3%), but slowed in 2012 (+ 0.6%), due to the combined impact of a severe summer drought that affected agricultural production, which overlapped with the effects of the eurozone crisis.

In 2013, Romania's GDP increased by 3.5% compared to the previous year. 2013 was the third consecutive year of economic growth, and the growth rate recorded in 2013 was the highest rate recorded by the Romanian economy after the crisis of 2007-2008. It should be noted that the 3.5% increase in GDP in 2013 placed Romania in the first place among the EU member states, given that the average economic growth in the EU was 1.0%.

To complete the starting picture when negotiating European financial allocations for the 2014-2020 programming period, we must also mention that the general level of economic activity in Romania is still at a low level, among the main challenges for rural development being the ugly ones:

- the current dependence of employment on subsistence agriculture, with a very low added value, but also the absence of economic alternatives;
- the very high share of small farms (almost 93% of all farms), which have access to a limited market, have a low productivity, as well as an underdeveloped level of technical endowment;

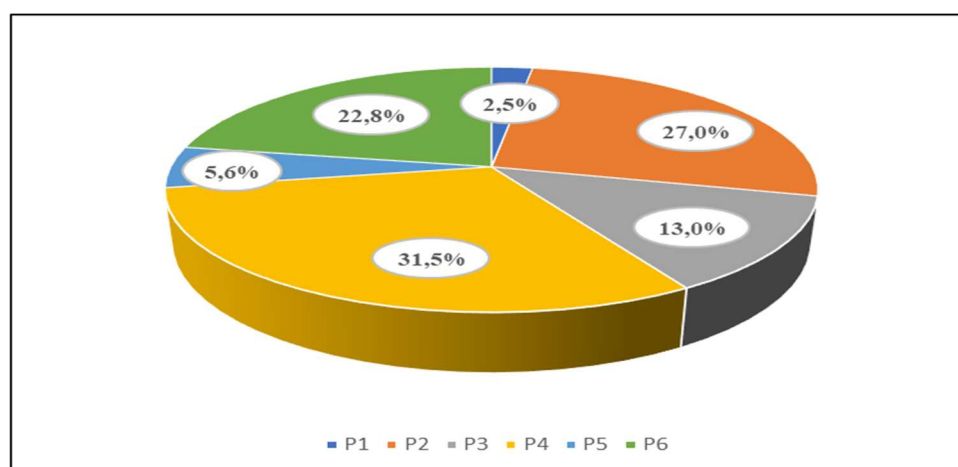
- the character of culture at the level of agricultural enterprises is reflected by the relatively low activity in all development regions (except the Bucharest-Ifov region) and the orientation towards low value-added economic activities;

- levels of domestic productivity below the European competitiveness threshold;
- the limited share of services with higher added value within the Romanian economy;
- fragmentation, excessive standardization, and inefficient use of resources involved in research and development.

The National Rural Development Program (PNDR) was created to support through non-reimbursable funds from the European Union and the Romanian Government the economic and social growth of rural areas in Romania, starting from the 6 priorities defined at the European Union level (Figure 1):

- Priority P1 - Promoting the transfer of knowledge and innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas;
- Priority P2 - Improving farm viability and competitiveness for all types of agriculture in all regions, as well as promoting innovative and sustainable agricultural technologies in forest management;
- Priority P3 - Promoting the logistics of the food segment, but also the activities of processing and distribution of agricultural products;
- Priority P4 - Restoration, conservation and improvement of ecosystems in agriculture but also in forestry;
- Priority P5 - Promoting resource efficiency and supporting change towards an economy based exclusively on low carbon emissions, with an emphasis on incorporating climate change into all economic segments specific to rural areas;
- Priority P6 - Promoting social inclusion, reducing poverty and economic development of rural areas.

Figure 1. Share of EAFRD funding according to EU priorities (percentage)



Source: European Commission, August 2021

In order to significantly contribute to rural development in Romania, in line with European priorities, the following national priorities for the period 2014-2020 have been defined through the NRDP:

- efficient exploitation of agricultural areas, consolidating their sustainable functioning, as well as promoting agricultural products to another level of efficiency;
- supporting the change of generations of farmers by promoting rural values among young people;
- adapting the rural infrastructure to the specific tendencies of the modern living standards, by stimulating the entrepreneurship, the investors, the increase of the employability potential;
- promoting entrepreneurship, creation and development of SMEs especially in the non-agricultural segment of rural localities;
- encouraging the development of the fruit segment, by gradually eliminating specific problems;
- implementation of LEADER concepts, by paying high attention to quality of life and diversification of the economy in rural areas.

The National Rural Development Program supports the long-term development of the rural area and aims at the following:

- Strategic objective OS1 - Efficiency of farms in agricultural areas.

▪ Strategic objective OS2 - Sustainable management of natural resources in order to contribute to climate change management.

▪ Strategic objective OS3 - Creating new economic activities, increasing jobs, as well as stimulating the creation of an infrastructure that supports a high level of quality of life.

In order to achieve the targets set by Strategic Objective 1, the PNDR measures aim at:

▪ Investments at agricultural farms;
 ▪ Financing of processing and marketing activities, to which are added investments in green energy systems, virtual marketing, implementation of the latest standards in all levels of the economy, etc. ;
 ▪ Financing the restructuring and management processes of the farms, including the human resources involved;

▪ Reducing the risks specific to the agri-food sector;
 ▪ Providing counseling services, training services, by implementing the latest practices specific to the field.

Strategic Objective no. 2, through PNDR can be achieved by financing the following segments:

▪ The afforestation of the territory but also the "construction" of the forest curtains;
 ▪ Tax incentives for farmers who voluntarily promote sustainable actions in agriculture;
 ▪ Fiscal incentives for farmers who implement ecological practices in agriculture;
 ▪ Fiscal incentives for farmers working in areas where there are frequent natural constraints, etc.

Also, the achievement of Strategic Objective no. 3, focuses on the following:

▪ Financial support for non-agricultural micro-enterprises;
 ▪ Financial support for the general local infrastructure but also in the one specific to the educational, medical and social system;

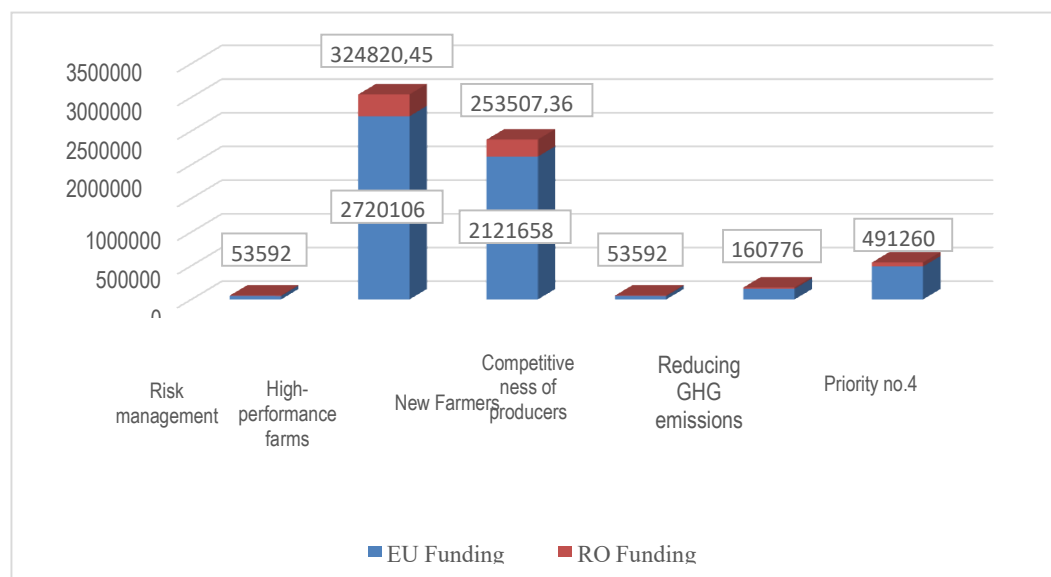
▪ Financing the restoration processes but also the conservation of the local cultural resources.

Through the NRDP, in the period 2014-2020, 14 rural development measures will be financed, with a total financial allocation of 9.333 billion euros, of which 8.015 billion euros from the EAFRD and 1.347 billion euros representing the national contribution (MADR, 2021). We will present these measures in detail, based on public data available in August 2021.

"Measure 01 - Actions for knowledge transfer and information actions" - provides for increased access to knowledge and information specific to the food chain, to which we add the dissemination processes, absolutely essential aspects in the process of training technical and economic skills.

All these aspects will contribute to supporting farmers in obtaining efficient results, to implement new and innovative technologies and work processes, to allocate resources efficiently, to implement environmental standards. Managing the risks that farmers have to manage are also new funded actions, to which we add other examples in this regard, namely: acquiring skills to obtain insurance systems, obtaining compensation for losses caused by multiple causes and so on the total budget allocated to this measure is 6.27 million euros (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 01 (euro)

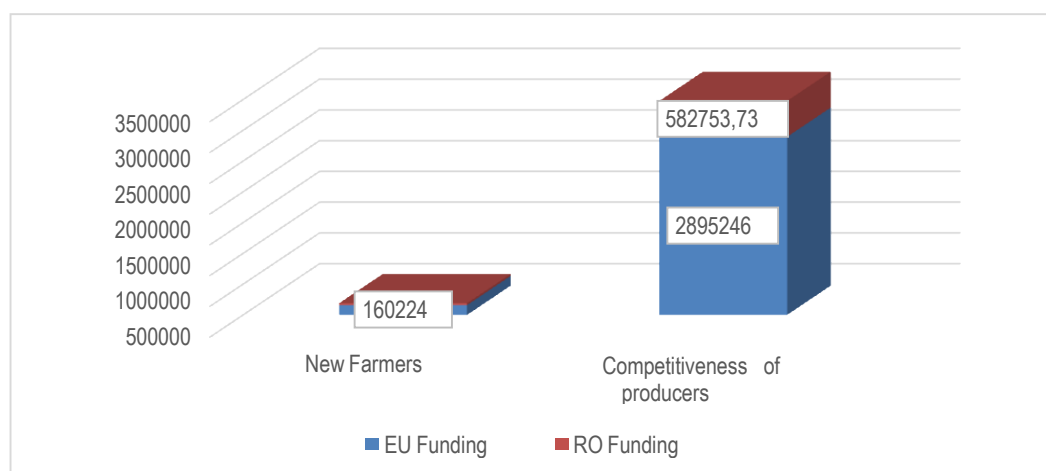


Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 02 - Counselling services, farm management services and on-farm replacement services" - groups in the financing processes counselling services to increase production, overall productivity and efficiency of organizational structures, regardless of their size.

It should be noted that the non-existence of agricultural advisory services mainly influences the performance of young farmers who need prompt, quality counselling services, specific to their requirements and very necessary for the development of the farm and its adaptation to market standards and changes. The total budget allocated to this measure is EUR 3.67 million (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 02 (euro)

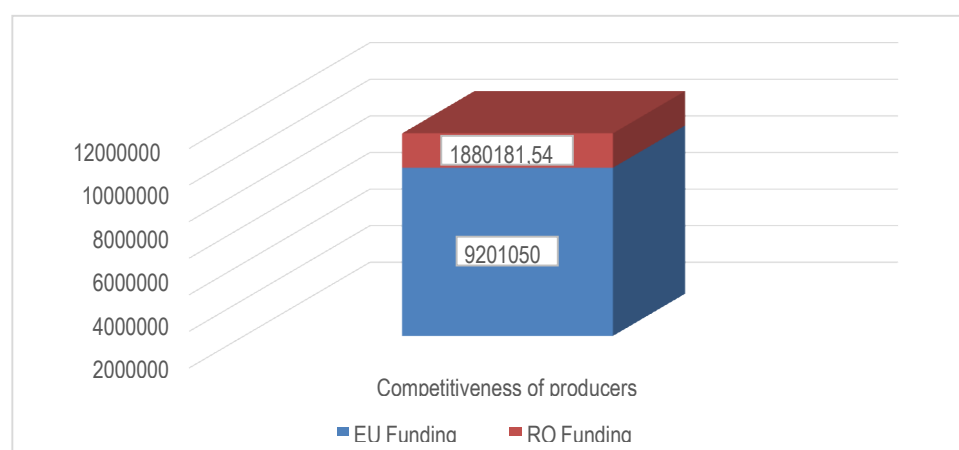


Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the author

"Measure 03 - Quality systems for agricultural and food products" - aims to generate more added value for agri-food products, but at the same time aims to generate growth, new jobs, and integrate producers into the agri-food chains.

This measure also aims to promote investments in quality systems to promote compliance with EU standards, giving priority to products that will generate high added value, as well as projects that promote associative formulas for the growth or modernization of units agricultural collection, storage, etc.

Figure 4. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 03 (euro)



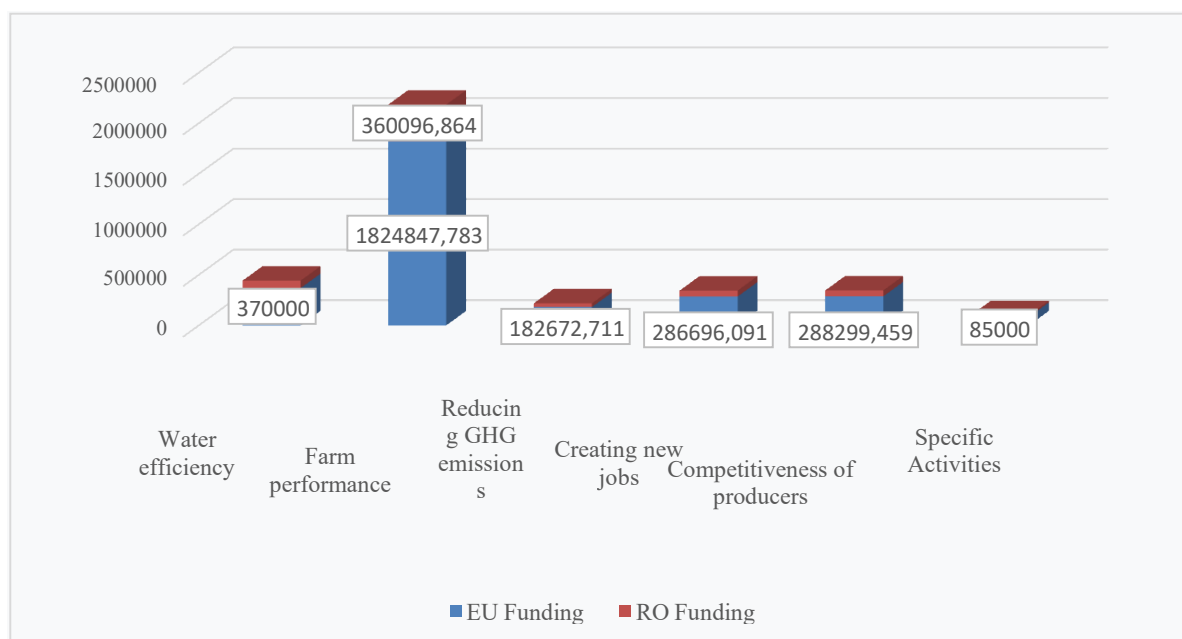
Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the author

"Measure 04 - Investments in physical assets" - refers to the introduction of new technologies, environmentally friendly and to increase the performance of agricultural holdings. We identify this measure as absolutely important for Romania, because we have a low degree of technological transformation of agricultural holdings, aspects that are reflected in the low level of productivity but also in the quality of products. The focus in this case will be on medium-sized farms and / or farms, or with potential for growth as a consequence of investment in this regard. Thus:

- Financing the technical endowments of the farms;

- Financing of vegetable-fruit crops, of the increase of the animal herds but also of the capitalization of the specific / autochthonous breeds;
- Increasing investments in agricultural activities but also stimulating investments aimed at creating farmers' associations;
- Financing the processes of efficient use of resources, air quality, renewable energy production, etc.;
- Investments in agricultural and forestry infrastructure are basic elements of this measure. Also, the relatively low degree of endowment but also the used technologies used in agricultural holdings have as a consequence the low level of labor productivity but also a limited quality of products. The total budget allocated to this measure is EUR 3.641 billion (Figure 5).

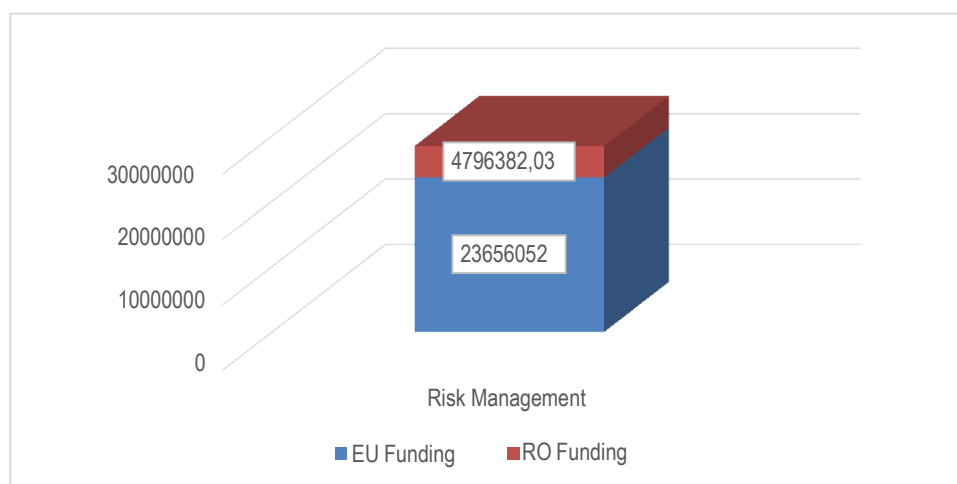
Figure 5. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 04 (thousand euros)



Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the author

"Measure 05 - Restoration of agricultural production potential affected by natural disasters and catastrophic events and the establishment of appropriate prevention measures" - aims to implement projects aimed at increasing the security of Romanian farms against the effects of extreme events caused by climate change, or biotic or abiotic incidents caused by catastrophic events.

Figure 6. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 05 (euro)



Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the author

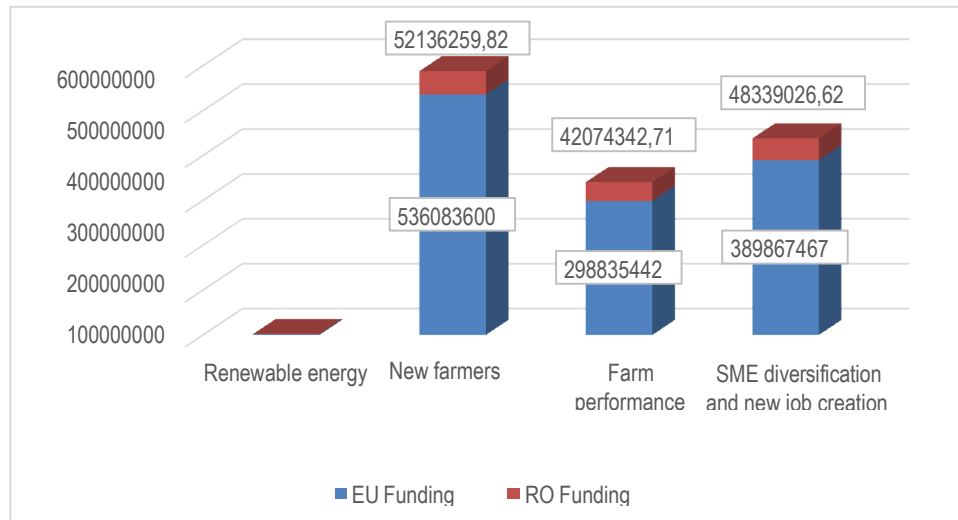
"Measure 06 - Development of farms and enterprises" - aims to develop new economic activities for all types of business, specific and non-specific.

It should be mentioned that, in Romania, most farms have small dimensions, and their presence on the market is limited, they have a diversified production, but also reduced technical equipment, aspects that hinder their performance.

Another relevant aspect is related to an aging population in the villages, the mountainous areas being those that face a deepening of this phenomenon, where we also identify very small, individual farms, specialized in raising animals, with negative effects on grazing and the quality of these surfaces.

The total budget allocated to this measure is 1.369 billion euros (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 06 (euro)



Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the author

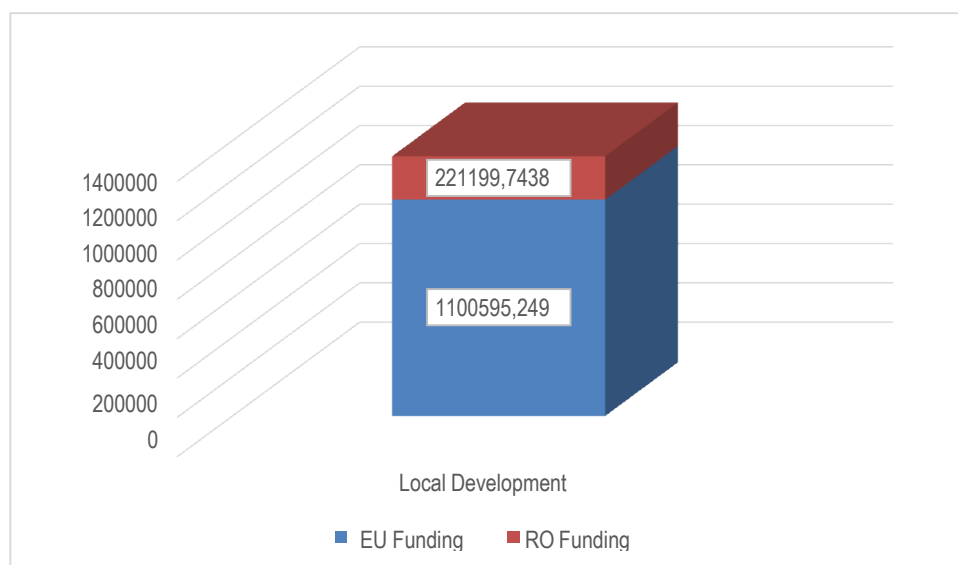
"Measure 07 - Basic services and village renewal in rural areas" - is focused on reducing the risk of poverty, supported by investments in the general infrastructure of rural communities, as well as in the revitalization of cultural resources, specific regional traditions.

It should be noted that this initiative also has a number of multiplier effects in the chain, such as increasing employment, reducing the poverty line, eliminating the phenomenon of social exclusion.

The measure also takes into account investments in the structures providing health services, education, environmental protection, ensuring living conditions with a high level of quality.

The total budget allocated to this measure is € 1.321 billion (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 07 (thousand euros)

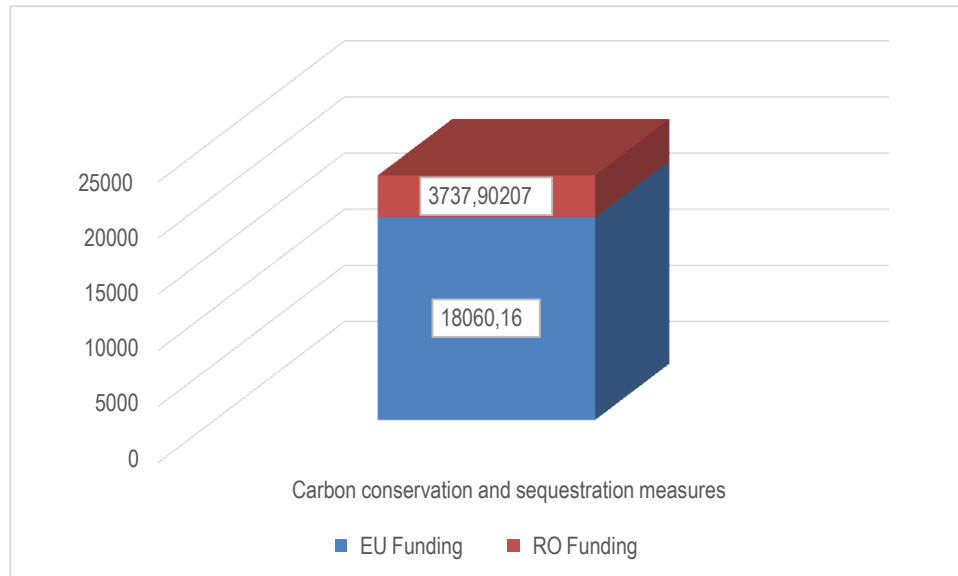


Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 08 - Investments in the development of forested areas and in improving the viability of forests" - aims to reduce the greenhouse effect, but also the specific aspects of soil degradation, in order to help Romania in the process of transition to green economy and prevent climate change with serious effects on the economy and society in rural areas.

The total budget allocated to this measure is 21.79 million euros (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 08 (thousand euros)

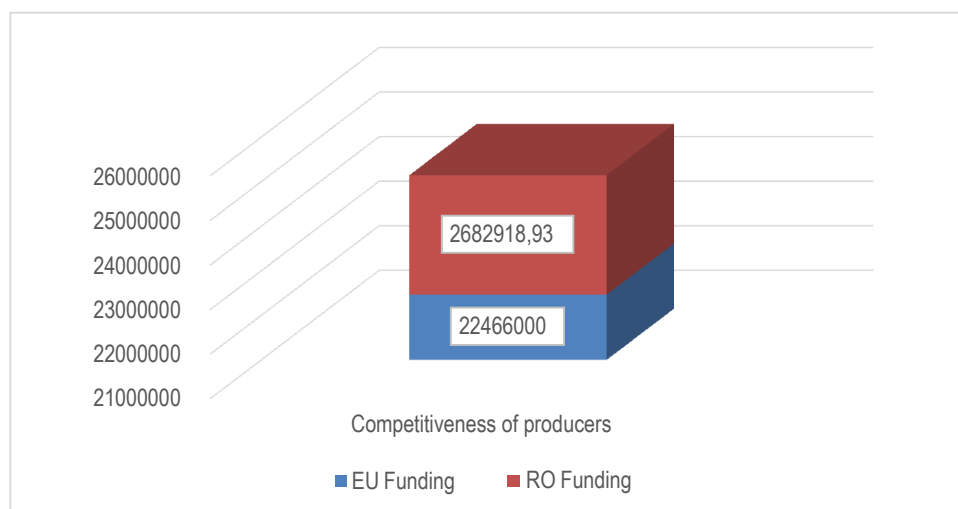


Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 09 - Establishment of producer groups and organizations in agriculture and forestry" - is one of the measures that financially stimulates the creation of forms of association, but also the stimulation of farmers in this regard. The association of agricultural farmers stimulates their ability to implement production technologies necessary for modern trade, adapted to the requirements of the current market.

Obviously, the creation of these forms of association further stimulates their bargaining power, increasing the level of access to agricultural technologies, loans, the integration of innovations and innovative management. The total budget allocated to this measure is 21.79 million euros (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 09 (euro)

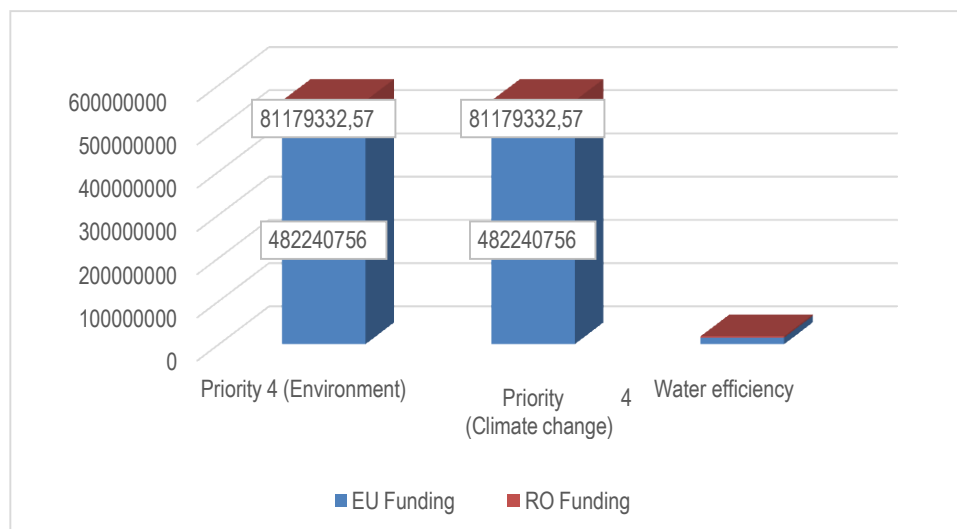


Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 10 - Agri-environment and climate" focuses on environmental protection in accordance with the Common Agricultural Policy. This measure provides for the rural areas of our country the preservation / conservation of environmental characteristics / values, the preservation of their specific habitats, the sustainable use of natural resources and the conservation of specific landscapes.

And this measure encourages farmers to implement agricultural methods that contribute to the protection of the environment, its resources. The total budget allocated to this measure is 1.145 billion euros (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 10 (euro)

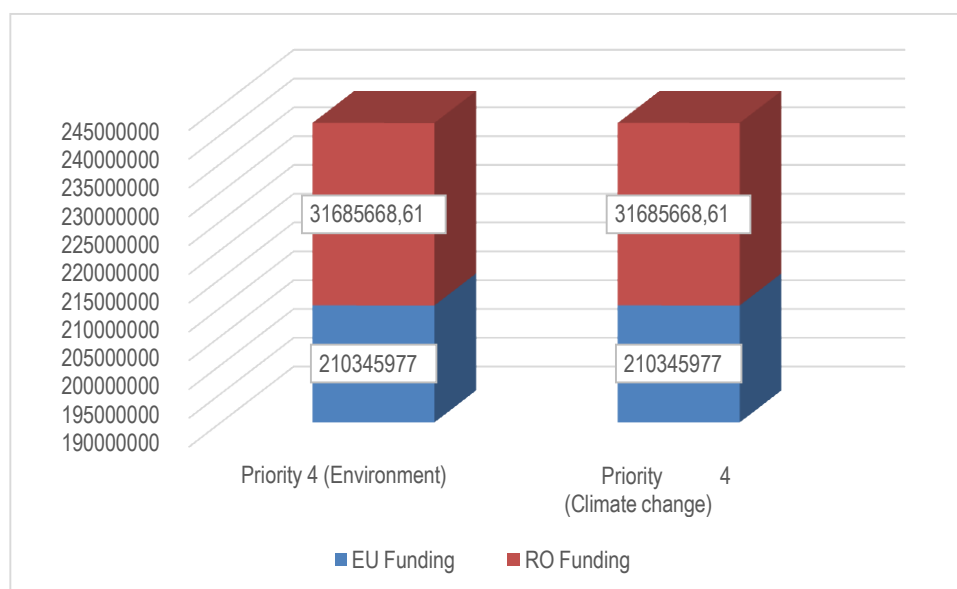


Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 11 - Organic farming" - is one of the most important measures for the future of society in all its aspects, as it supports the implementation of agricultural practices that provide environmentally friendly public goods, but also to increase demand for organic products. It should be noted that the practices of organic farming stimulate other positive effects in the chain, such as reducing water pollution, increasing the performance of environmental management, reducing carbon dioxide emissions, etc.

Overall, we are also talking about increasing the added value of economic activities in rural areas. The total budget allocated to this measure is 484.06 million euros (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 11 (euro)

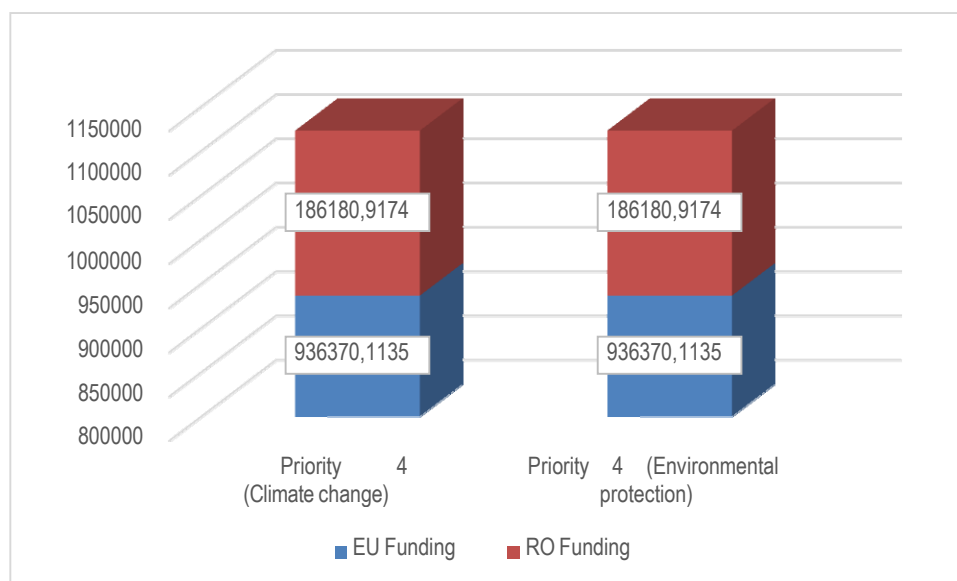


Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 13 - Payments for areas facing natural or other specific constraints" - provides for the granting of economic compensation in the event of problems of a different nature in agricultural activities, such as: decreased productivity of agricultural land, additional costs to maintain the productivity of agricultural farms, etc. Encouraging farmers in these areas consequently stimulates the continued use of agricultural land, with a positive impact on soil protection.

Also, such measures, of agri-environment and climate, stimulate the maintenance of a functional system, so that the objective of increasing the quality of the environment, of the agricultural territory is reached. The total budget allocated to this measure is 2.245 billion euros (Figure 13).

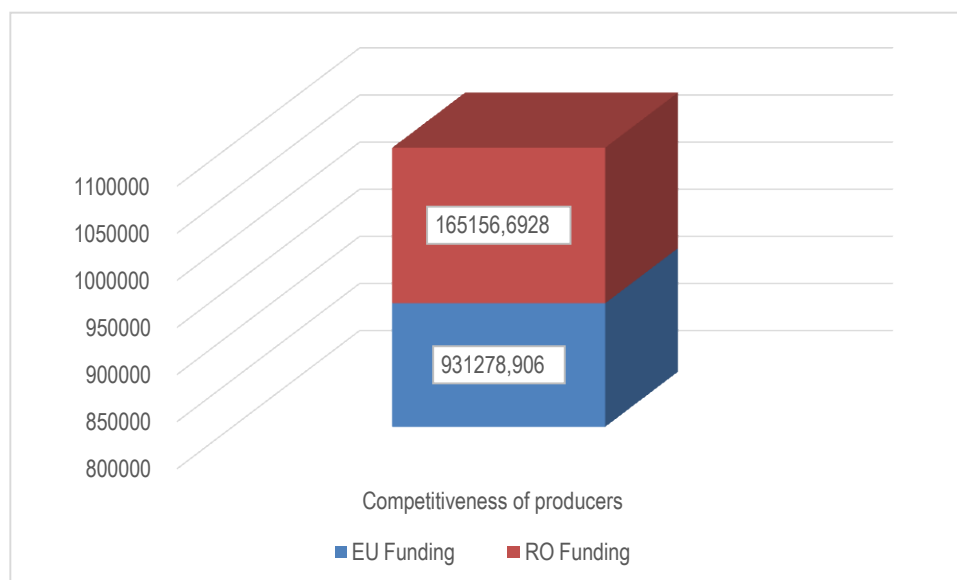
Figure 13. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 13 (thousand euros)



Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 14 - Animal welfare" - envisages measures to increase the application of higher standards of animal welfare on poultry and pig farms compared to the mandatory minimum standards. This measure involves improving the level of animal health, increasing the quality of food, the drinking process and housing conditions, with the ultimate goal of ensuring the health of the population and providing a response to consumer interest in high quality poultry products and pork.

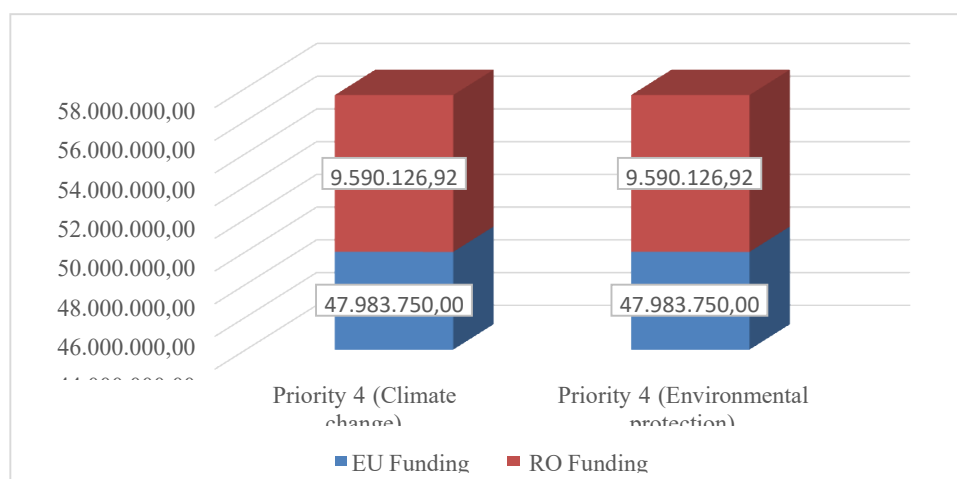
Figure 14. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 14 (euro)



Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 15 - Forestry services, climate services and forest conservation" - aims to implement a set of measures on the conservation of biodiversity but also of soil resources and forest fund within the forest lands in Romania. The total budget allocated to this measure is 115.14 million euros (Figure 15).

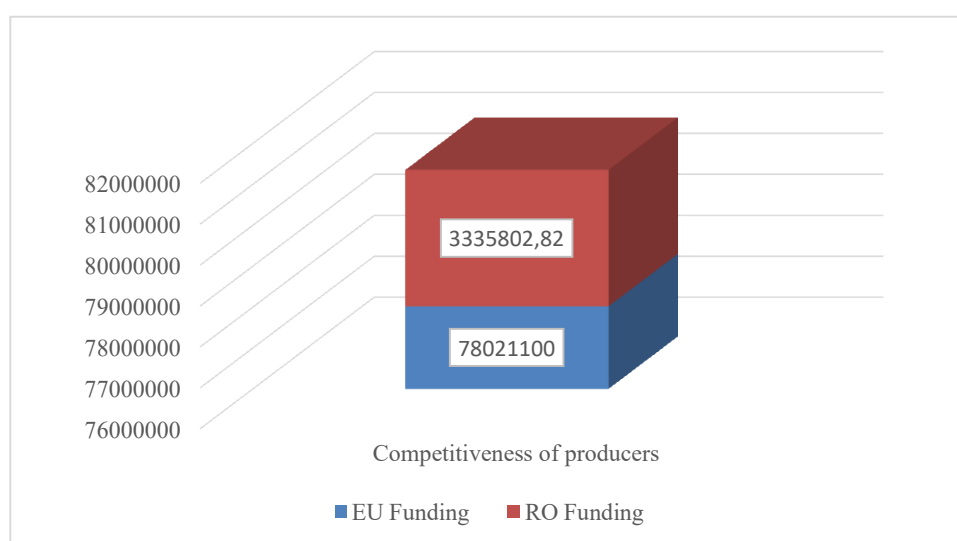
Figure 15. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 15 (euro)



Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 16 - Cooperation" - refers to financial support for all actors involved in the long term in sustainable rural development, by supporting business development but also to provide in rural areas the various services so necessary for environmental protection. We note that cooperation can eliminate a number of specific disadvantages caused by the fragmentation of the agricultural sector, which is characterized by the presence, in particular, of small farms. Stimulating the creation of operational groups in rural areas aimed at supporting development and innovation projects to minimize the effects of specific problems, but also to capitalize on all opportunities in the agri-food and forestry segments. The total budget allocated to this measure is 81.35 million euros (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 16 (euro)

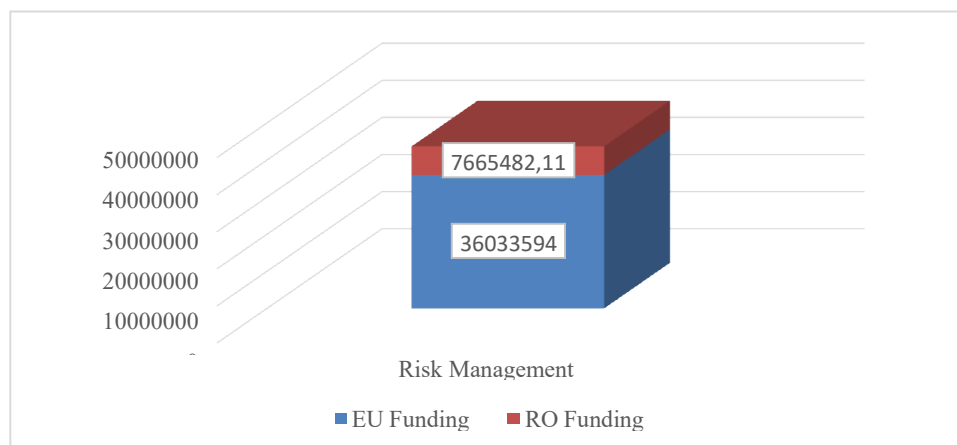


Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 17 - Risk management" - refers to facilitating access to funds created to partially offset the losses of farmers caused by the occurrence of natural disasters and other negative phenomena. Funds can cover multiple damages, such as those caused by unfavorable climatic phenomena but also those caused by animal, plant, environmental incidents, etc.

The total budget allocated to this measure is 81.35 million euros (Figure 17).

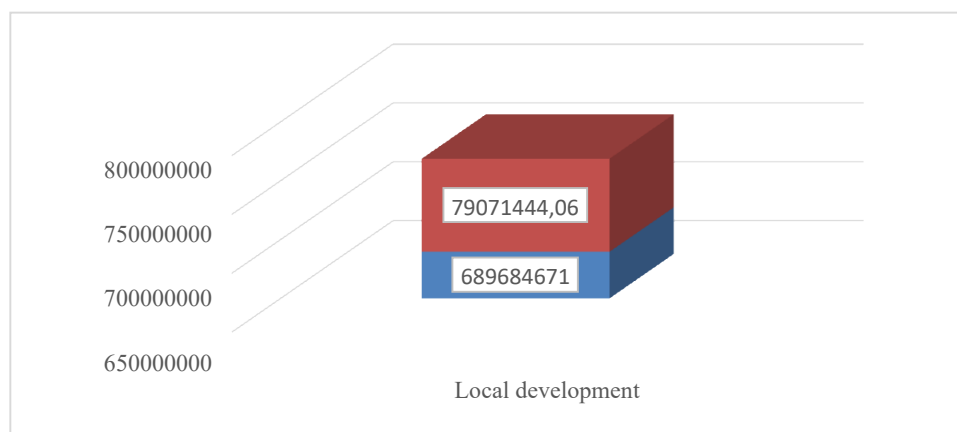
Figure 17. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 17 (euro)



Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

"Measure 19 - Support for local development LEADER (DLRC - Local development under the responsibility of the community)" - Implementation of the LEADER system in order to ensure a balanced development of the territory and to eliminate the critical mass necessary for the effectiveness of specific strategies in rural areas. It should be noted that LEADER aims to contribute to the balanced development of rural areas, as well as small cities with a population of up to 20,000 inhabitants, but also the implementation of innovative, multisectoral projects, aspects that support the implementation of specific objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy. The total allocated to this measure is EUR 768.75 million (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Allocation of financial resources for Measure 19 (euro)



Source: European Commission, August 2021, edited by the authors

Conclusion

The rural communities received in the period 2007-2013 and in the period 2014-2020 substantial amounts to support their development strategies, the specific programs of the rural environment can be correlated with the financing programs through regional policy, environmental policy, enterprise policy, policy in the field of education, health policy, etc. Within the financial perspective of the European Union, rural communities have the opportunity to be co - financed both by funds specific to the Common Agricultural Policy and by financial instruments of other Community policies, in particular the structural funds of regional policy.

In conclusion, we can say that economic development cannot be achieved without a viable agriculture, a reform process in all closely related sectors, and without the mobilization of all segments of civil society, not just the government. Agricultural development, rural development and the modernization of villages are a continuous, very complex process, which must be accompanied by measures aimed primarily at the sensitive sectors.

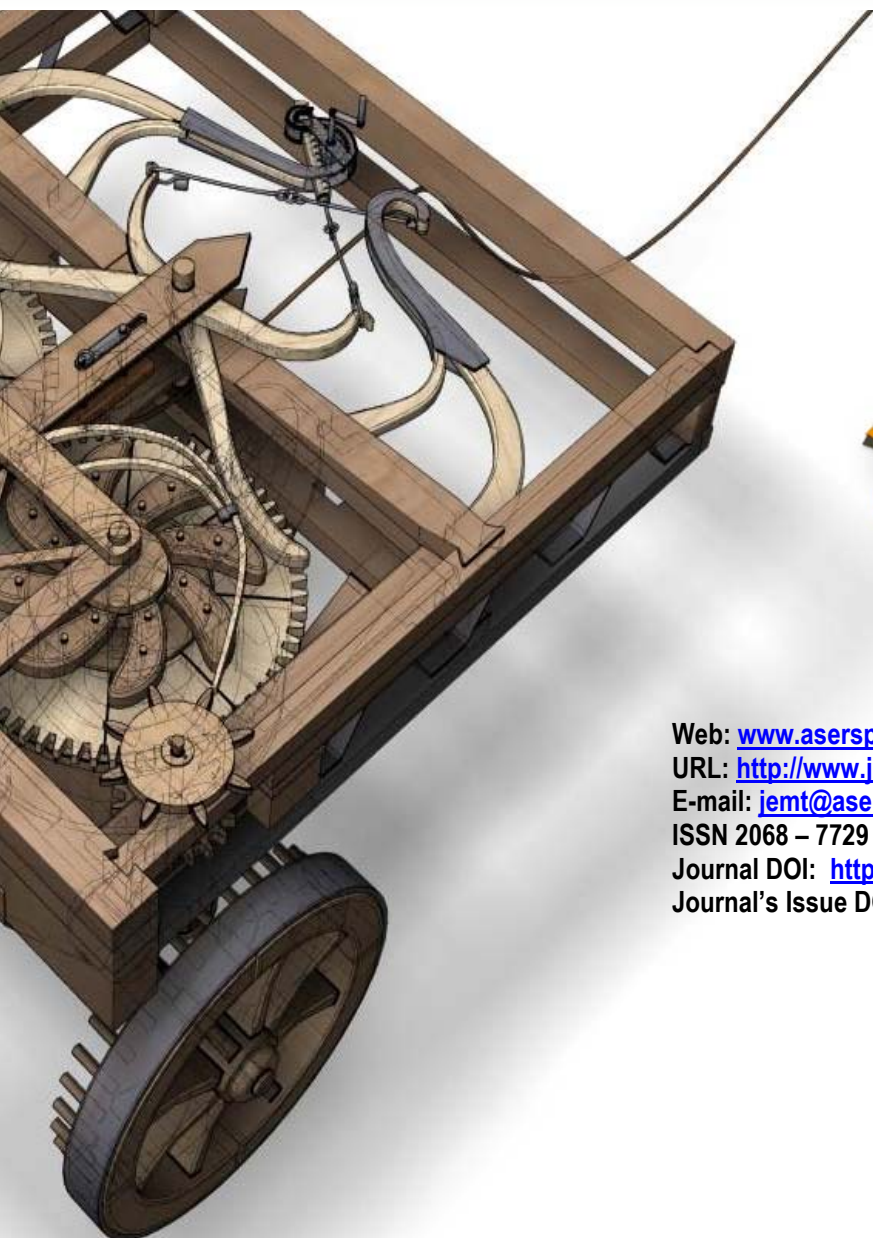
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