



Criteria, problems and prerequisites for sustainable development of Bulgarian cities and rural areas

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Annotation: In this report, subject matter of analysis and assessment are the opportunities, challenges and role of public authorities for the achievement of sustainable development of Bulgarian cities and rural areas: Criteria, conditions and prerequisites for achieving local sustainability; Problems, challenges and opportunities for sustainable development of cities; Problems, challenges and opportunities for sustainable development of rural municipalities.

Key words: sustainable development, local sustainability, sustainability criteria, urban systems and functions, sustainable urban regions competitiveness, integrated recovery of urban environment, rural areas, municipality.

Criteria, conditions and prerequisites for achieving local sustainability

There are many definitions of sustainable municipality, as far as different emphasis is put on them: economic, social, ecologic. In general terms, a municipality may be defined as sustainable if its economy is competitive, its living conditions are socially acceptable, and, as a whole, its development is ecologically compatible with the requirements of environmental protection.

Based on the above definition, relevant *sustainability criteria* may be derived. In the context of implementation of “Europe 2020” Strategy at local levels, as sustainable may be defined such municipality that:

- integrates systematically economic, social and ecological aspects in making decisions at municipal level;
- creates regulatory environment, supporting and stimulating the generation of wealth for the community through entrepreneurship and innovation, designed to strengthen and improve the condition, competitiveness and viability/sustainability of the municipality. Supporting the development of small and medium enterprises – the backbone of the European economy, is a priority;
- realizes the need and continuously invests in high-quality infrastructure, connecting it to the regional, national and international economy;
- focuses on “smart investment” – sectors, creating new jobs and where there is a significant growth potential;
- makes major investment in its educational systems in order to provide access to education and training programs to population so that citizens can apply for new jobs and thereby making the municipality more attractive for businesses;
- suggests (educates) its citizens, especially the young ones, attitudes, values and beliefs which are crucial for the upward mobility in the knowledge-based economy of 21st century;
- makes efforts to reduce geographical, racial and/or ethnic and class disparities by investing substantial resources in many institutions that build up the municipality, strives to improve social structure as well as to provide access to education and economic knowledge to its members,

especially those that are socially or economically disadvantaged;

- actively seeks strategic alliances and partnerships with other communities (territorial, civil society structures, private sector), within the same country, and especially with those from other countries, with the intention not only to build new cultural relations, but also to carry out activities, generating profit and creating jobs for local residents;
- absorbs EU funds sustainably by integrating global environmental issues in the regional and local development in order to improve its residents’ quality of life;
- applies horizontal priorities for sustainable development, gender equality, good governance, social inclusion and development of information society.

The conditions and prerequisites for achieving local sustainability, which are associated with certain policies and actions by the central government and are primarily related to:

Promoting territorial cohesion through balanced socio-economic development and improvement of competitiveness

Decisions and investments having territorial impact are oriented towards a polycentric development model. This suggests improvement of economic investment attractiveness in large cities as well as increasing the attractiveness of structurally weak regions. In particular, this applies to regions with outdated technology industries and rural areas.

Creating development incentives, generated by urban functions and improvement of the links between cities and villages

Urban systems and functions, including those of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas, should be developed so that to facilitate the access of rural areas to urban functions. Settlement networks establishment and strengthening enhances their mutual complementarity, increases synergic effects and economies of scale, promotes specialization and generates benefits through economic competitiveness while avoiding any “underwater” stones.

Partnership between town and country will play ever more important role in creating a balanced settlement structure, in development of public transport networks, in reviving and diversification of rural economy, increasing the productivity of the various types of infrastructure, developing recreation areas for urban population, in conservation and valorization of natural and cultural heritage. The conditions for effective partnership between town and country lie on sound and equitable cooperation between territorial communities.

Creating more balanced conditions for transport access

Sustainable development policy should provide better interconnection between small and medium-sized towns, rural areas and islands with transport centers (railway stations, highways, ports, airports, intermodal centers) and construction of missing interregional connections. Transport accessibility at regional scale should be improved by building the missing units between municipalities.

Developing access to information and knowledge

Special attention should be paid to all municipalities to provide them with access to information, that is not restricted by physical or other reasons. It is imperative to modernize telecommunication networks and to reduce tariff rates as well as to promote interconnection at national and regional level between providers of information and their potential users, such as: technological parks, institutes of technology transfer, research and training centers. Creation of regional databases (product, know-how, tourism, etc.) is to be encouraged to facilitate communication between municipalities as well as their interrelation with the global economy.

Decreasing the number of environmental violations. Valorization and conservation of natural resources and heritage

Environmental issues that may be due to insufficient coordination of sectoral policies or local decisions should be rationalized and planned in advance. In this perspective, particular attention should be given to preventing and decreasing environmental violations, for example by: using environmentally friendly technologies in agriculture and forestry, promotion of green transport and energy systems, regeneration of derelict urban land and rehabilitation of the surrounding area, industrial accident prevention, restoration of environment in areas, damaged by polluting industries and old military zones, as well as suburbanization control.

Problems, challenges and opportunities for sustainable development of cities.

Improving competitiveness of cities and providing conditions for development of sustainable urban regions is an important prerequisite for enhancing the competitiveness of Bulgarian economy, as well as for achieving the objectives of "Europe 2020" Strategy, because: in Bulgarian cities a large part of human, social, cultural and economic capital is concentrated, and optimizing and re-evaluating this capital is the key to global competitiveness strategy; challenges related to demography, social cohesion, integration of needy individuals, unemployment, education, poverty, disrupted ecological balance.

Urban system sustainability should be seen as its ability to preserve its elements and functions as well as to restore its condition after the occurrence of certain changes due to influence of internal processes or adverse external effects. Urban areas for habitation, recreation, work, service and municipal transport should be built and operate in an integrated network.

However, the occurrence of spatial segregation, isolation and poor accessibility damages "urban fabric", increases its vulnerability and reduces its sustainability. Problems of socio-economic sphere of the city are also a projection in the space and complicate the possibilities for urban structure sustainability.

Urbanization and urban sprawl (in global and national scale) raise new problems for sustainable urban development. As such may be mentioned: degradation of city centers, giving rise to a downward spiral of poverty; excessive traffic load; noise, soil and air pollution; lack of quality housing; social and health problems; conflicts between generations and ethnic groups; high level of unemployment, especially among young; deterioration of historic centers, etc.

Level of city security in respect to natural disasters, technological failures, crime, social injustice, ethnic and religious conflicts, terrorism and others decreases. Built-up environment and urban activity affect adversely the health of individuals and individual communities, living bound with urban development economic, social and economic parameters. In

many cities, there is almost no social approach in solving urban issues, including increased social sensitivity, social responsibility and efforts for inclusion of marginalized urban communities (against social exclusion and isolation, threatening the society in general).

If one discusses and examines the impact of the above issues and the challenges on Bulgarian cities from the classical point of view of the dimensions of sustainability (economic, social, ecological, cultural and management), the clearly *integrated recovery of urban environment* could play a real strategic part.

The recovery of the urban environment is highlighted as a priority in the National Reform Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria (2011-2015) [8], where the following specific measures are indicated:

- Implementation of the Joint European Support for Sustainable Investments in City Areas JESSICA.
- Development and execution of Integrated Urban Regeneration and Development Plans.
- Support for development of critical, secure, safe and reliable public ICT infrastructure.
- Support for the provision of appropriate and effective state social infrastructure, contributing to the development of sustainable urban areas.

The use of financial engineering documents as well as absorption of EU funds in support of the sustainable and integrated urban development is an important stimulus to attract investment and public-private partnership in cities.

Synergy provision between separate sectoral policies and their integrated management through sustainable urban development policy will enhance macroeconomic impact of their implementation. Such synergy can be achieved within the Integrated Urban Regeneration and Development Plans. They are a set of policies, projects, actions and investment plans related in time and space, applied in certain urban areas of influence [4]. The Integrated Urban Regeneration and Development Plan coordinates policies and unites various participants for the sake of their joint conduct, contributing to the implementation of the view and strategy for city development, respectively, of specific development priorities, set forth in the municipal development plan, general development plan and other strategic municipal documents. Crucial in this process is timely involvement of all departments, companies and organizations, related to urban development and it is a realistic basis for achieving a consensus among the state, regions, cities, citizens and businesses for obtaining results from the joint absorption of public and private resources.

Development of Integrated Urban Development Plans in Bulgaria is focused on sustainable and permanent surmounting of economic, natural and social problems in 36 cities – centers of agglomerations areas, and has the following specific objectives:

- To be identified areas of influence, including a system of interrelated activities, aiming at permanent improvement of economic, material, social and ecological situation of the urban area and the city in general.
- To be developed relevant Integrated Urban Regeneration and Development Plans for specific areas to promote the realization of the long-term view for the development of the city by implementation of projects in urban areas and/or subsystems in unsatisfactory condition, with negative trends in development and/or unrealized potential, by attracting and managing various types of investment and supported by EU Structural Funds.
- To be achieved a synergy between effective or in process of update strategic planning documents for integrated



sustainable regional and local development, sectoral policies, programme documentation and development schemes with the defined areas of influence.

According to leading specialists and experts [3], a sustainable development of Bulgarian municipalities can be achieved through the so-called regeneration, viewed as a process of improving the condition of west areas and assisting people in serious social situation. "Regeneration" means an integrated management and recovery of urban environment through public-private partnerships and active involvement of citizens! Regeneration is a new industry in support of sustainable development [3]. The process of recovery creates a sustainable development framework.

The specific actions and measures for the implementation of a sustainable urban development policy can be summarized as follows:

From an economic perspective:

- Recovery of urban economy: knowledge, creativity, good quality and innovation, diversification of local production systems;
- Infrastructure and built-up environment modernization: a tool for enhancing the attractiveness of a city and creating new jobs;
- Achieving energy efficiency: of buildings, improvement of heat insulation, renovation of buildings;
- Effective and efficient allocation of public resources;
- Achieving urban metabolism: efficient management of energy and material resources, of water sector, waste.

From a social perspective:

- Achieving sustainable and quality employment: support for social involvement, income support, access to quality services;
- Social integration and cohesion: combat spatial segregation and social marginalization, economic and social assistance, targeted at those most in need;
- Integration of minorities: equal opportunities in education, training, qualification, inclusion, access to services;
- Conducting a balanced housing policy: allows reducing social polarization.

From and ecological perspective:

- Implementation and use of renewable energy sources in urban environment.
- "green planning": protection of landscape, forest and water resources, agricultural areas, replanting;
- transport: accessible and efficient public transport, clean vehicles, "pedestrian", "bicycle" cities.

From the perspective of management:

- Successful implementation of public policies: coordination of intentions with the parties concerned, implementation of public-private partnerships;
- Increasing direct involvement of citizens in management: inclusion, involvement and empowerment of citizens;
- Applying integrated approach: strengthening of cooperation, respecting mutual interests.

Problems, challenges and opportunities for sustainable development of rural municipalities.

In Bulgaria, as rural are identified the municipalities, where there is no cities with population of over 30 000 people and population density of less than 150 inhabitants per square meter [7]. Pursuant to this definition, 231 (of 264) municipalities are classified as rural. They comprise 81 % of the territory and about 40 % of the population of the country. Population density in rural

areas is about 40 people per square meters, while the average for the country is 74,6 people per square meter [7].

Bulgarian rural areas are characterized by underdevelopment in economic, social and cultural aspects, aging population, low standard of living, poor infrastructure and the consequences resulting thereof: poverty, dropping out of education, low access to healthcare, ethnic segregation, limited opportunities for business development, environmental problems.

Statistics show that net revenues from sales of business per capita in urban areas are more than twice higher than those in rural areas. Rural municipalities have more than twice lower net sales revenue per capita than those in urban municipalities. Current trends clearly show that about 80 % of rural municipalities have weak and unstable economy. There, agriculture is the major branch. It tends to shrink more and more, and its development is accompanied by sudden downturns.

Graduates are concentrated mainly in big cities – there, they are 3.8 times more than those in rural municipalities, while in rural regions the prevailing population has primary or below primary education. This explains to a certain extent poor entrepreneurial activity in rural areas, which, at times, becomes a limiting factor of their socio-economic and sustainable development.

A limiting factor for the diversification of the rural economy is also the road network, which density is below the national average and the condition – unsatisfactory.

Territorial distribution of the network of educational institutions is characterized by regional disproportions, which necessitates its adaptation to the population and labour market structure.

At the same time, these regions have significant natural, human, economic and cultural potential, which development and full utilization is mandatory. Therefore, government support should compensate inequalities between Bulgarian villages and towns in respect of available services, social conditions and opportunities for sustainable development.

The national policy for sustainable development of Bulgarian rural areas is a set of measures for targeted influence and is part of the common rural policy of EU. For the period of the programme 2007 – 201, it is executed through the implementation of the National Plan for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Programme for Rural Development. These documents outline the approaches and actions to tackle the existent trends of social exclusion, deterioration in quality of the social capital and increasing disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of economic development, level of education and access of population to basic services. The effect is achieved in the following thematic axes of sustainable development:

- *Economic sustainability:* development of competitive agriculture and forestry, based on innovations in food processing industry; building of local employment and diversification capacity; strengthening the role of small and medium-sized towns as well as of some major villages as centers for providing services for establishment of small and medium enterprises;
- *Ecological sustainability:* conservation of natural resources and environmental protection.
- *Social sustainability:* promoting employment opportunities and improving quality of life.

In the context of the sustainable development of rural areas, competitiveness requires a reasonable balance to be found between viability of farms, environmental protection and social dimension.

Achieving competitiveness means improving the economic performance of the agricultural sector by reducing production costs, increasing the economic size of the farms, promoting innovations and enhancing market orientation. It is necessary to strengthen the effectiveness of the measures for support of investments in physical capital (innovation in farms, processing, marketing, agricultural infrastructure), as well as such, related to human capital (early retirement, young farmers, training and consultancy services). The measures may be divided into three groups: human resources, physical capital, and quality.

Payments for land (environmental) management are intended to ensure rendering of ecological services through agri-environment measures and to maintain land management, including areas with physical or natural deficiencies. These activities contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas and encourage farmers to maintain the management of their land in a manner, protecting and improving countryside and landscape. This means protection and improvement of the natural resources as well as ensuring the sustainable use of forest resources. Such measures help to prevent agricultural lands abandoning, providing payments to compensate natural deficiencies or those, resulting from environmental restrictions. Co-financing of operations should be explicitly focused on the priorities of “Europe 2020” Strategy: combating climate change, improvement of biodiversity and quality of water, reducing the risk or impact of natural disasters.

Improving the quality of life and achieving a “vital rural environment” means supporting rural areas to maintain and improve their social and economic structure.

Improving the attractiveness of rural areas requires promotion of sustainable growth and creation of new employment opportunities, especially for young people and women, as well as of better access to relevant information and communication technologies. Diversifying farm activities with non-agricultural ones, supporting activities outside the farm and strengthening the relations between agriculture and other rural economy sectors play an important role in achieving sustainable rural development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it may be generalized that changes in global economy, driving it towards global integration, and in compliance with the new strategic policy of the European Union (“Europe 2020” Strategy) will require governments to reconsider their sustainable development policies and to establish new systems of governance, through which to develop economically viable and socially just societies. Countries that seek to maintain economic growth, to raise the level of employment and hence – the standard of living, will need to base their policies and strategies for sustainable development on enhancing the capabilities of regional and local authorities to participate actively and successfully both in the formation of the national sustainable development policy and in its implementation.

Local authorities should be well aware of the resources they avail of – historical heritage and natural wealth in order to preserve them and use them effectively and purposefully as an incentive for sustainable development and welfare of people. This is an approach that has achieved significant results in many European countries and around the world.

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