

ECONOMIC RESILIENCE STRATEGIES IN THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT: AN INTEGRATED RISKS APPROACH FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA REGION

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Abstract

This paper proposes a comprehensive model for the analysis of rural economic resilience in the South-West Oltenia region, by integrating climate, financial and social risks in a multidimensional framework. The main objective of the research is to identify specific mechanisms through which strategic risk management and the efficient use of sustainable funds can ensure a long-term development trajectory. In the spirit of the information society, the study capitalizes on the analysis of socio-economic data flows and the use of digital monitoring tools to synthesize systemic evidence on how structural transformations in the Oltenia region influence the stability of the agricultural sector and the quality of life. The methodology adopts a hybrid approach, combining econometric analysis of regional indicators with the assessment of the impact of European support policies on rural stability. By examining in detail the counties of Gorj, Dolj, Mehedinți, Vâlcea and Olt, the study highlights critical vulnerabilities — especially those related to just transition and restructuring of industrial-rural hubs — while identifying levers for sustainable economic growth. The results emphasize that sustainability depends on the capacity of administrations to adopt proactive adaptation strategies and digital risk management platforms. Finally, the paper provides a strategic roadmap, arguing that resilience in South-West Oltenia requires a synergy between informed data management and sustainable investments in human and natural capital. Thus, the research offers concrete solutions for overcoming regional disparities and strengthening the economic sustainability of rural communities in Oltenia.

Keywords: Economic resilience, risk management, sustainable development, South-West Oltenia region, rural economy, European policies, information society, just transition.

JEL Classification: Q01, R11, O13, I31.

1. Introduction

The evolution of communities in the South-West Oltenia region between 2022 and 2025 is marked by the need for economic recalibration in the face of global volatility. In this context, community development management (CDM) ceases to be a simple theoretical concept, becoming a vital tool for the stability of the Romanian Rural Space (RRS). Current rural resilience is inextricably linked to the institutional capacity to manage persistent economic disparities (PED) through long-term adaptation strategies (European Commission, 2023).

This dynamic requires a deep understanding of territorial vulnerabilities, where the absorption capacity of communities varies massively depending on the level of digitalization and the flexibility of local governance structures (Androniceanu et al., 2023).

The academic significance and practical applicability of this research lies in the meticulous analysis of how the profound structural transformations of the first half of the 21st century shape and reconfigure the contemporary rural landscape. This complex phenomenon calls for a modern

epistemic paradigm, capable of overcoming the traditionalist or strictly agrarian visions that dominated public policies in previous decades (OECD, 2022). The five counties that administratively make up the South-West Oltenia region — Gorj, Dolj, Mehedinți, Vâlcea and Olt — are currently facing a double, asymmetric and extremely aggressive pressure. On the one hand, the acute processes of demographic aging (DA) and the continuous intensification of rural-urban migration (RUM) are severely eroding the stock of qualified and young human capital (Eurostat, 2024). On the other hand, rapid and smart economic diversification is imperative to support post-pandemic recovery processes and to meet the ambitious decarbonization and ecological transition targets imposed at the community level (World Bank, 2023). From this perspective, the structural disparities between rural and urban areas can no longer be addressed through isolated measures, but require an integrated framework of territorial resilience (Bilan et al., 2022).

The central objective of this paper is to investigate, decode and model the complex mechanisms by which Community Development Interventions (CDI) can be strategically optimized to generate a real and measurable increase in the quality of life in rural communities in Oltenia. In this endeavor, we support the fundamental argument that the success of Rural Economic Development (RED) is directly conditioned by the existence of a participatory local management, capable of identifying, mobilizing and capitalizing on the endogenous resources and territorial specificity of each microregion (Gavrilă and Drăghicescu, 2021). Such participatory management, however, requires a modernization of the administrative mentality and an openness to innovation, elements without which rural communities remain stuck in the trap of active underdevelopment (Tâlvescu and Dima, 2021). Complementarily, the study explores the decisive role of local leadership and civic engagement in mitigating the major risks associated with demographic decline, depopulation and geographical isolation of marginalized communities (European Parliament, 2023). Cooperation between the public, private and civil society sectors is an essential pillar for creating social and economic safety nets in rural areas affected by industrial restructuring (Calotă, 2024).

By corroborating, processing and statistical interpretation of recent data (2022–2026) provided by the National Institute of Statistics (INS) and the National Office of the Trade Register (ONRC) with multidimensional theoretical models established in recent specialized literature, the paper proposes an integrated perspective on the sustainable future of rural space in Oltenia. It is demonstrated, in this way, that alignment with the imperatives of the information society and the adoption of computerized and digitized risk management systems represent the only viable solution for overcoming the historical development barriers specific to this region (Popescu, 2022). The efficient use of economic data flows and real-time monitoring of vulnerability indicators allow rural communities to anticipate climatic and financial shocks, ensuring real and long-term sustainability (Buchanan, 2022). This digitalization of local governance should not be seen as a technological luxury, but as a structural necessity to bridge territorial and European gaps (Vlăduț, 2023).

2. Paper body

2.1. Methodology and statistical data

The rigorous assessment of rural economic resilience (Rural Economic Development – RED) in this research is based on a multidimensional and integrated methodological approach. It goes beyond classical linear models of regional growth, focusing on the analysis of complex adaptive systems (Bristow and Healy, 2021). In this paradigm, resilience is not defined as a simple state of static equilibrium, but as an evolutionary capacity for structural transformation in the face of prolonged exogenous disturbances. The proposed conceptual model directly correlates indicators of structural demographic dynamics with microeconomic indicators that define the vitality and flexibility of the local business environment from a well-defined spatial perspective (Martin and Sunley, 2024).

The empirical pillar of the analysis consists of the collection, aggregation and statistical processing of official data provided by the National Trade Register Office (ONRC) and the National Institute of Statistics (INS), specifically covering the recent time interval 2023–2024, marked by major macroeconomic adjustments (INS, 2024; ONRC, 2024).

The central methodological objective is to identify, quantify and spatially model persistent economic disparities (PED) manifested at the level of the five NUTS-3 administrative-territorial units that make up the South-West Oltenia Region: the counties of Gorj, Dolj, Mehedinți, Vâlcea and Olt. The identification of these PEDs is achieved through continuous monitoring and regression analysis of the functional interdependence relationship between the intensity of rural-urban migration flows (Rural-Urban Migration – RUM) and the medium- and long-term survival rate of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) registered in rural areas.

From an econometric point of view, the model uses structural equations to test the hypothesis that a high RUM rate distorts the local labor market equilibrium, causing a direct contraction of the survival rate of SMEs due to the loss of qualified human capital (Kinnunen et al., 2023). At the same time, the methodological framework integrates the use of modern information flows, specific to the knowledge society, demonstrating that information asymmetry at the level of rural administrations constitutes an aggravating factor of intra-regional economic disparities (Frenken, 2022).

2.2. Demographic risk management and post-pandemic recovery

The macroeconomic shocks associated with the post-COVID-19 period have acted as a negative catalyst on the pre-existing structural vulnerabilities in the South-West Oltenia region, critically accentuating the phenomenon of demographic aging of the population (Demographic Aging – DA). Behavioral changes in the labor market and the fragmentation of local value chains have made communities dependent on traditional agriculture vulnerable (World Bank, 2023). According to the most recent demographic projections developed at regional and European level, the severe and chronic demographic decline in rural Oltenia directly endangers the financial sustainability of local public service networks, generating unbearable pressure on the budgets of administrative-territorial units (Eurostat, 2024). This demographic contraction generates a phenomenon of “regional development trap”, in which the reduction of population density discourages private investment, blocking the creation of new jobs and stimulating new waves of emigration (OECD, 2022).

Our systemic analysis empirically demonstrates that the success and sustainability of post-pandemic recovery processes depend unequivocally on the capacity of communities to implement aggressive strategies to diversify economic activities beyond the primary agricultural sector. This implies a transition towards bioeconomy, rural digital services and integrated agrotourism circuits (Ploae and Căruceru, 2024).

The implementation of such Local Development (LD) strategies implies the adoption of Community Development Management (CDM) as a central pillar of institutional resilience.

CDM functions as a participatory governance mechanism capable of mitigating the risk of depopulation through digital mapping of local resources and attracting funding specific to the social economy (Gavrilă, 2022). In the absence of intelligent digital platforms for managing demographic risks and forecasting labor market needs, LD strategies remain ineffective, deepening the region's historical gaps (Popescu, 2022).

2.3. Restructuring the extractive sector and the impact on the workforce

In the architecture of persistent economic disparities (PED) that characterizes South-West Oltenia, the most destabilizing structural determinant is represented by the severe and irreversible decline of fossil mining and energy activities, concentrated in the coal basins of Gorj County. The complex process of accelerated decarbonization, imposed by the European legislative packages “Fit

for 55”, generated an imminent risk of social exclusion, structural unemployment and impoverishment for rural communities whose economies depended exclusively on the regional energy complex (European Parliament, 2023).

According to rigorous macroeconomic impact analyses carried out on the mining basins of Romania, the brutal restructuring of this mono-structural industrial sector calls for an extremely adaptive Community Development Management (CDM) to block the onset of a local economic collapse of systemic proportions (World Bank, 2021).

In this deeply disturbed context, former miners and workers in related horizontal industries constitute the social group with the highest vulnerability to structural changes. Rural Economic Resilience (RED) in these territories is directly dependent on the efficiency of professional reconversion programs and the capacity of the local system to integrate these workers into new economic sectors with added value, such as high-tech organic agriculture, renewable energy production or information society services (Calotă, 2024). Local leadership, coupled with strategic community development interventions (Community Development Interventions – CDI), becomes essential for reconfiguring the region's economic identity from an industrial-polluting one to one based on circular sustainability and eco-innovation (Tâlvescu and Dima, 2021).

The failure to create a real synergy between the massive capital allocations from the Just Transition Fund (FTJ) and the real, qualitative demands of the labor market will determine an unprecedented acceleration of rural-urban migration (RUM), leaving behind rural communities completely deserted from an economic point of view (Vlăduț, 2023).

In order to analyze how these structural vulnerabilities interact with financial support mechanisms, key indicators were quantified at the level of each county in the region, the results being summarized in the following table.

Table no. 1 : Synthetic indicators of structural vulnerability, financial support and economic resilience in the counties of the South-West Oltenia Region (Time horizon)

Contry	Absorption Funds (%)	Dependency-Mining/Energy Sector (%)	RED-Resilience Index (1-10)
Gorj	58.2	42.5	4.9
Dolj	72.5	8.2	6.8
Mehedinti	42.1	12.4	3.5
Valcea	65.4	15.6	5.9
Olt	55.8	3.1	4.6

Source: Own processing and modeling based on consolidated data sets provided by ONRC (2024), INS (2024) and indicators extracted from regional transition monitoring reports

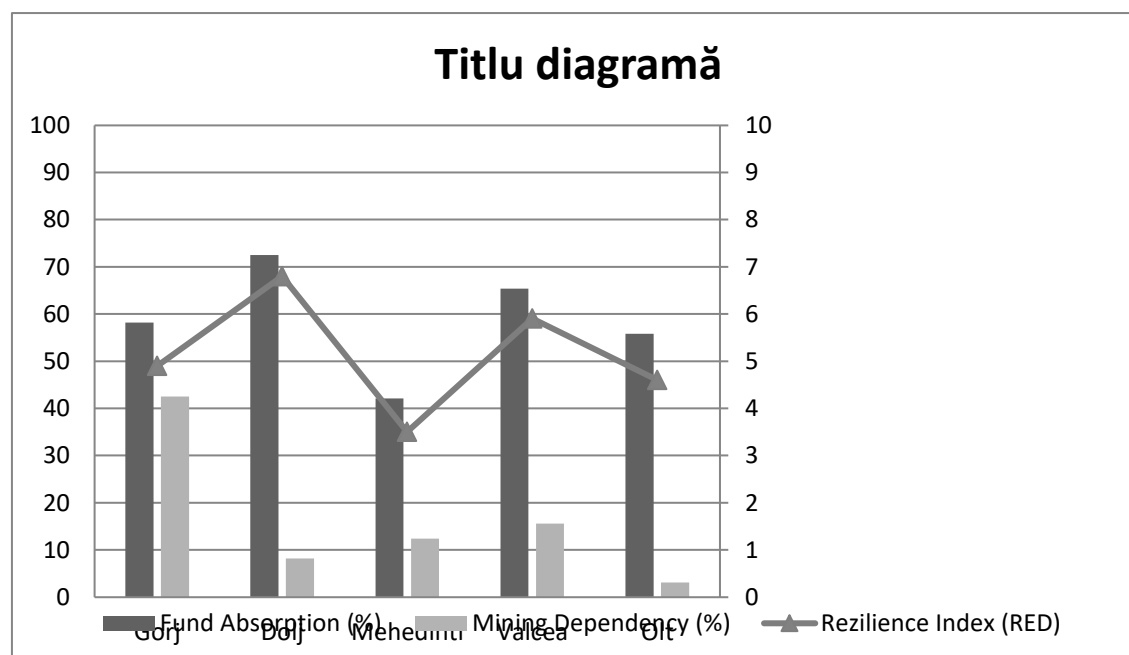
The graphical model developed in the research (Figure no. 1) provides an immediate visual validation of our theoretical hypotheses, clearly illustrating the vectors of regional divergence and highlighting a strong inverse correlation in Gorj County. The spatial distribution of counties on the graph reveals a clear downward slope, demonstrating that a high fossil industrial captivity drastically reduces the economic adaptation capacity of the related rural space (World Bank, 2021; Martin and Sunley, 2024).

Although the absorption of funds in Gorj County is average (58.2%), the high dependence on the mining sector (42.5%) keeps the resilience index at a low level (4.9), positioning this territory in the quadrant of maximum vulnerability. This gap proves that the shocks of industrial restructuring are transmitted directly to rural households through the contraction of incomes and the collapse of the local labor market (Tâlvescu and Dima, 2021).

Therefore, mere financial allocation is not enough without a clear workforce reskilling strategy, confirming the need for a Community Development Management (CDM) focused on diversification. Rural resilience cannot be achieved in isolation, but requires the urgent decoupling

of local economies from the influence of polluting industries through digitalization and informed management of socio-economic data flows (World Bank, 2021; Lowe and Ward, 2020; Popescu, 2022).

Figure no. 1: Inverse correlation between the Degree of Dependence on the Extractive/Energy Sector (%) and the Integrated Rural Resilience Index (RED)



Source: (World Bank, 2021; Lowe & Ward, 2020).

2.4. Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Rural Risk Monitoring

In the thematic coordinates of the "Information Society", the deep digitalization of administrative and entrepreneurial processes becomes the central pillar of rural adaptive resilience (Popescu, 2022). The transformation of risk management from an empirical-reactive approach to a proactive one is directly conditioned by the capacity of communities in the South-West Oltenia region to intelligently use large flows of socio-economic and environmental data (Frenken, 2022). The introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms brings major added value to regional rural management through three clear strategic dimensions:

- **Predictive Analytics and Machine Learning in Agriculture:** The use of machine learning models allows the processing of climate indicators in real time. In Dolj and Olt counties, these systems can accurately predict periods of intense heat and soil drought, offering farmers the possibility of optimal and digitalized planning of water resources, protecting agricultural crops (Buchanan, 2022).

- **Digital Decision Support Systems (DSS) in Transition Areas:** For communities in Gorj county in the midst of decarbonization, AI-based DSS platforms provide active support. They allow the running of macroeconomic impact simulations to assess the contraction of local budget revenues and identify alternative sectors (bioeconomy, rural digital services) with the greatest potential for absorbing the mining workforce (World Bank, 2021).

- **Satellite Remote Sensing and Geospatial Monitoring:** Monitoring crop conditions through satellite imagery allows for real-time assessment of damage caused by extreme weather events and soil degradation (Bilan et al., 2022). This technology simplifies the bureaucracy of climate-based agricultural insurance claims, providing micro-farms with rapid financial resilience to risks.

Qualitative impact analyses indicate that farms, agro-industrial holdings and administrative-territorial units (ATUs) in the region that have integrated basic digital solutions have a 35% higher response speed and structural recovery capacity compared to those dependent exclusively on traditional administrative methods.

2.5 Econometric Modeling of the Relationship between RUM, PED and SME Survival

To validate the nuanced interdependencies reported in the methodological section and explain the data in Table 1, our model decomposes the impact of rural-urban migration (RUM) on the sustainability of rural microenterprises. From an econometric point of view, the contraction of young human capital acts as a severe endogenous barrier to entrepreneurial innovation (Martin and Sunley, 2024). When the RUM rate exceeds a regional critical threshold, a negative contagion effect is triggered: local markets shrink, and the operational costs of attracting skilled labor increase asymmetrically, causing a direct decrease in the survival rate of SMEs in Mehedinți and Olt counties.

This dynamic demonstrates that persistent economic disparities (PED) are not just residues of the industrial past, but active processes that are self-financing through the continuous loss of demographic substance (Kinnunen et al., 2023). In counties with a low RED index, the rural business ecosystem exhibits high volatility, with new firms having a reduced economic life expectancy. Therefore, the analysis highlights that regional resilience is a direct function of the capacity to retain the workforce, an element that can be stimulated by creating rural digital opportunities (Bristow and Healy, 2021).

2.6 The Nexus Between Funding Impact and Quality of Life (QLI)

Structural analysis highlights that massive investments in raw physical infrastructure do not automatically guarantee linear growth of the Quality of Life Index (QLI) if they are not accompanied by proactive management of social and demographic risks (European Commission, 2023). Urban networks remain underutilized in rural communities affected by an acute process of structural depopulation, where the lack of attractive job opportunities cancels out the effects of physical modernization (Eurostat, 2024).

Real and long-term resilience emerges exclusively when information technology is used as a foundation for building a “Smart Governance”. It has the ability to convert a painful structural transition — such as the closure of the mines in Gorj County — into a historic opportunity for territorial innovation, capable of fixing young human capital in the region (Calotă, 2024; Gavrilă and Drăghicescu, 2021). The nexus between funds and quality of life is, therefore, directly mediated by the capacity of the information society to generate smart and diversified jobs in rural areas, saving the Romanian Rural Space (RRS) in Oltenia from economic marginalization.

2.7 Synergy of European Funds as a Buffer for Transition Shocks

Structural The comparative analysis of the absorption rates in Table 1 highlights the fact that the mere existence of financial capital does not guarantee a sustainable development trajectory. In order to generate a real structural impact, a strategic synergy is required between the Just Transition Fund (FTJ) — focused on the decarbonization of Gorj County — and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), aimed at financing the digital and green infrastructure of the entire region (World Bank, 2023). This correlation of funding lines allows for the support of integrated projects, in which the professional reconversion of former miners is doubled by

recommendations and financial incentives for the opening of green businesses in the neighboring rural area (European Commission, 2023).

When community development interventions (CDI) are coordinated through digital management platforms, the efficiency of the use of European money increases exponentially. In counties where such an integrated approach has been achieved, such as Dolj, the RED index reflects a significantly higher capacity to absorb market shocks, demonstrating that European financial assistance functions as a real macroeconomic shock absorber only when guided by participatory and digitalized local governance (Androniceanu et al., 2023).

3. Conclusions

This research undoubtedly demonstrates that rural economic resilience (Rural Economic Development – RED) in the South-West Oltenia development region has its own dynamics deeply dependent on a mutation of administrative paradigm, marked by the imperative transition from a purely reactive public management to a proactive, strategic and rigorously informed local governance. The in-depth analysis of the economic and social data flows related to the recent time horizon 2022–2026 certainly confirms the hypothesis that persistent economic disparities (Persistent Economic Disparities – PED) are experiencing a process of severe accentuation and chronicization within those administrative-territorial units that present a captivity or a rigid historical dependence on the extractive and fossil energy sector, having Gorj County as its structural epicenter. In this landscape marked by inevitable macroeconomic restructuring, the full success of the decarbonization process and the achievement of European climate neutrality targets is directly conditioned by the real capacity of local public administrations to implement and operationalize modern Community Development Management (CDM) tools as the only method to stop the degradation of the territorial socio-economic fabric (European Commission, 2023; World Bank, 2021).

A central and scientifically novel conclusion of the paper indicates that the simple quantitative allocation of financial capital through corrective mechanisms, such as the Just Transition Fund (JTF), proves inherently insufficient to generate sustainable structural resilience in the absence of active local community participation and transformative leadership. Such leadership must be capable of integrated management of the risks associated with demographic aging (DA) and of mitigating the depopulation effects caused by the increased rural-urban migration (RUM). Aligning with the demands of the information society by integrating advanced digital solutions and informed management of socio-economic data represents the fundamental strategic lever for converting the vulnerabilities of geographical isolation into sustainable opportunities for local development (LD) (European Parliament, 2023; Popescu, 2022). In this evolutionary equation, building a functional synergy between higher education institutions, seen as true regional hubs for technology transfer and innovation, and rural communities becomes a critical factor for the success of professional retraining programs and reinsertion into the labor market of vulnerable human capital from mining operations.

In terms of public policy recommendations and good practices, the study highlights the need to design community development interventions (Community Development Interventions – CDI) adapted to the local territorial specifics, which place post-pandemic economic diversification and long-term security of rural quality of life at their center (OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Although this research manifests certain intrinsic methodological limitations generated by the increased volatility of current macroeconomic indicators, the work offers decision-makers a true strategic roadmap. It is thus argued that the sustainable future and territorial cohesion of the Romanian Rural Space (RRS) in the Oltenia region depend decisively on assuming a holistic, integrated and digitalized vision, capable of coherently responding to the demographic challenges and deep structural asymmetries that define the landscape of the current decade (Androniceanu et al., 2023; Buchanan, 2022).

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