

USE OF STATISTICAL DATA IN THE ELABORATION OF THE NORTH REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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Regional development policy is one of the most important and complex policies in the European Union, being addressed to all regions and cities, supporting job creation, business competitiveness, economic growth, sustainable development and improved quality of life. The sustainable regional development is an imperative assumed by the Republic of Moldova and the Moldovan Government confirmed its string commitment for equitable distribution of development opportunities throughout the country. This is confirmed both at the legislative level through Law No.438-XVI of December 28th 2006 on regional development in Moldova, as well as at the level of strategic planning, regional development occupying an important place in national development strategies.

The core element of an effective regional development policy is strategic planning. The main reason to develop a strategic plan is finding a coherent response to the development needs in order to overcome economic and social problems. The so-called "evidence based policy" is an approach that helps authorities make well informed decisions about policies, programs and projects, putting development and implementation of policies based on the best available evidence.

The North Regional Development Strategy (North RDS) is the main mid-term strategic planning document at regional level to ensure equitable and sustainable socio-economic development of the North Development Region of Moldova. It was developed under the legislation of the Republic of Moldova and according to the strategic framework on regional development. North Regional Development Strategy serves to guide the development of the region within the period 2016-2020. The strategy was developed respecting general principles of policy documents: *consistency* with national strategic documents, *participation* of regional actors in developing the strategy and *transparency* of decision-making process, based on socio-economic analysis of the region.

North RDS is related to the main policy documents on regional development, namely:

- National Development Strategy of the Republic of Moldova 2012-2020.
- National Strategy for Regional Development 2016-2020 – main sectoral policy planning document under the responsibility of the Ministry of Regional Development and Construction.
- Other sectoral strategies in the priority areas of regional development.

In the development of the North RDS there were undertaken several steps, the most important ones being: establishing the methodology for regional policy development; establishing the Regional Committee to coordinate the strategic planning process until 2020; data collection and processing; development of the socio-economic analysis of the North Development Region; conducting Working meetings (6 sessions) to establish the socio-economic profile of the region and SWOT analysis; establishing regional vision and strategic objectives, public consultation of the North RDS 2016-2020 and finally, approval of the North RDS by the North Regional Development Council. It should be mentioned that the Working group format provided a fair representation of local authorities in the districts of the region, of the private sector, civil society by means of the presence of NGOs, business associations, observing the fair representation of genders and social strata.

The starting point in developing the strategic planning document was the elaboration of the socio-economic analysis, which had to describe the economic and social context of the region and provide an evidence for the future objectives and measures to be taken. The socio-economic analysis being one of the main steps in the planning process had to provide answers to questions like: "Where were we?", "Why were we there?", "What was the

development potential and what were the opportunities?”, “What were the problems and causes?” and estimate of expected changes in demographics, housing, public services, and even the aesthetic quality of the community that will result from the development. Equally important, the assessment had to provide an opportunity for diverse community values to be integrated into the decision-making process. Together, these components of the analysis provided a foundation on which decisions about whether to alter or change a proposed development could be made.

The elaboration of the socio-economic analysis of North RDS underwent 3 phases: 1 - data collection, 2 - data processing and 3 - data analysis and identification of the problems. Information that served as a basis for conducting the socio-economic analysis was disaggregated at regional and district levels and collected as statistical indicators: simple indicators, complex indicators, dynamic indicators and indicators of relationship.

As a result, the analysis was structured into 5 compartments:

1. General characteristics of the North Development Region
2. Economy
3. Society and human capital
4. Transportation and communications
5. Public utilities.

The justification of the analysis was based on 3 types of sources: documents (projects, analyzes, reports, records, books, portfolios, etc.), views of people involved (questionnaires, interviews, focus groups) and direct observation (guide observation, observation sheet).

An important role in the elaboration of the strategic planning document was the collaboration with institutions that produce statistical data, the involvement of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of the Republic of Moldova (www.statistica.md) being considered one of great value. Collaboration between the NBS and the Ministry of Regional Development and Construction, and Regional Development Agencies was enhanced through the European Union financed technical assistance project for “*Improved Regional Statistics in the Republic of Moldova*” (EuropeAid/135932/D/SER/MD, contract n° 2014/349632). Other important sources of regionally disaggregated data that were used, were the publication “Territorial statistics”, available from 2013, statistical publications: “Statistical Yearbook”,

"Moldova in figures", analytical notes on specific topics from the perspective of strategic objectives in regional development, reports offered by the Ministry of Economy (SADI (small areas of deprivation index) - aggregated indicator constituted under a set of relative indicators grouped into socio-economic areas, which offers a comparative view on the level of development of the research units (rural localities)), Ministry of Health ,Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family and other related ministries.

The analyzed evidence had to be:

- ✓ Valid: evidence had to be significant and support the identified strengths or weaknesses;
- ✓ Quantifiable: internal and external performance indicators were used, both numbers and percentages were used, clear, unambiguous and verifiable;
- ✓ Sufficient: evidence was complete and sufficient to cover all needs;
- ✓ Ongoing: recent enough evidence to provide a precise picture of the situation at the time of writing the analysis;
- ✓ Exact: the evidence was allocated to identifiable and verifiable sources.

As a result of a socio-economic analysis of the North Development Region (NDR) as well as of national development policy reflected in the National Strategy for Regional Development, the following strategic objectives were established for the period 2016-2020:

- Overall Objective: *Effective cooperation for balanced and sustainable development of the North Development Region*
- Specific objectives:
 1. Ensured access to quality public utilities and services.
 2. Sustainable economic growth in the North Development Region.
 3. Improved governance on regional development.

The overall objective of North RDS 2016-2020 "Effective cooperation for balanced and sustainable development of the Northern Development Region" will become the motto of development process for the next 5 years for both the region and the entire country. This objective will be achieved through a set of specific objectives and measures that reflect the synergy of sectoral policies and social, economic and institutional needs of the region. Through these strategic objectives, North RDS seeks to eliminate the factors that block the

balanced development of the region, using all the advantages that provide development opportunities. These goals are to be achieved in the period 2016-2020 through the implementation of development projects and other activities to promote the economic, social, cultural and investment potential of the North Development Region. In order to achieve these objectives, it is necessary to involve all regional actors and stakeholders in the North Region: North Regional Development Council, North Regional Development Agency, local public authorities, academia, entrepreneurs, governmental organizations and media. Only in a joint effort, the North Development Region of Moldova will become prosperous, competitive and attractive for its residents, where present and future generations will benefit from a better life quality, economic diversification, openness to technological innovation, healthy environment and distinct culture.

The expected impact of the objectives implementation is:

- ✓ Living standard of the population in the region is improved.
- ✓ Regional disparities are diminished.
- ✓ Migration process in the region is diminished.

The strategic planning process is complex and not always smooth and it is often geared towards overcoming some challenges. Analyzing a considerable number of strategy development processes at local and regional levels, it has been proved that data collection is a critical stage in the planning process and it is one of the most difficult to control. Collecting information tends to exceed the initial term, and using resources from subsequent stages can turn into a handicap for the planning process. Involvement in excess of the planning team in the collection of data does not allow focusing on the most essential issues of the strategy - the problems and needs, goals, actions or organizing its implementation.

The biggest challenges in elaborating the North RDS were: lack of data or limited available data, ignorance of possible sources of information; using available and easily accessible data, yet mismatched or outdated; collecting too much data, much of which was superfluous to strategy and not used in the analysis; collecting information took so long that when the analysis was done, the situation had changed already.

Using regional statistics in the development of a strategic planning document at regional level is the key to ensure its sustainability and truthfulness. The quantity and quality of information affects the quality of the analysis and conclusions, respectively – the quality of strategy. The analysis of a strategic document serves as a basis for formulating objectives and strategic actions by assessing the current situation, identifying trends, highlighting the main problems, needs and opportunities. Successful implementation of regional policy will foster and accelerate the development of the region, which will ultimately improve the quality of life condition of the North Development Region, will create preconditions for attracting investment and business development in the region.