

Strategic Planning in the Framework of Metropolitan Areas in Romania: Going beyond the Requirements of the Law and Transforming it into an Effective Planning Tool

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Abstract

This paper strives to discuss the role played by the newly created metropolitan areas around the seven growth poles from the perspective of the cooperation between the urban centers on the one hand and the neighboring rural communities on the other. It looks at the governance mechanisms in place at the level of the metropolitan areas and tries to assess if the cities and the neighboring communities are equal partners in these cooperation schemes. The paper also looks at one of the most important functions of these metropolitan areas – strategic planning in the form of drafting the integrated plans for urban development (IPUDs). We look at this function also from the perspective of the relations between the cities and their hinterlands. The paper has the following structure: section two briefly examines the concept of growth poles and their creation in Romania; section three looks at strategic planning as a tool for the implementation of the growth pole policy; section four presents the methodology of the study; section five details the main findings of the research, while section six briefly presents the recommendations and the conclusions. The empirical research for the study consisted in interviews with public servants working for the communities that are part of the metropolitan areas formed around the growth poles. As for the conclusions, the authors wish to emphasize that metropolitan areas should be understood in the broader context of the territorial reform.

Keywords: growth poles, metropolitan areas, associations for intercommunity development, cooperation, strategic planning, integrated plans for urban development

1. Introduction

Immediately after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Romania adopted a new Constitution, which, in article 3(3), stated that “from an administrative point of view, the territory is divided into counties, cities, and rural communes.” Little did the first legislators know that this single provision would come to be regarded over the next 25 years as perhaps the most important challenge on the way to the territorial reform of modern Romania (Benedek 2004). In a nutshell, this provision expressly lists all of the administrative subdivisions of the territory – units which have directly elected bodies by the citizens and function based on the principles of decentralization, local autonomy and deconcentration of public services. Creating new subdivisions means that the Constitution needs to be changed, a rather difficult endeavor in a country where such a procedure needs to undergo a double scrutiny: the citizens’ approval through a national referendum, together with a favorable vote of 2/3 of all the members of the parliament.

Toward the end of the 1990s, it was becoming clear that the new social and economic realities were forcing both national decision-makers and the local authorities to find ways to make cooperation at the local level possible without, however, creating new administrative subdivisions due to the constitutional ban. In 1998, when Romania created the so-called economic-development regions, as a way to better manage the pre-accession funds coming from the European Union, it became obvious that new territorial units could be created only through the cooperation of the pre-existing ones, expressly mentioned in the Constitution (Benedek 2004; Constantin 2000). Of course, the new subdivisions would not have directly elected bodies; would lack the financial autonomy given by the ability to levy taxes; and would be able to perform only the duties delegated to them by the cooperating local authorities. Besides the regions, other cooperation arrangements developed over the years included: associations for intercommunity development, metropolitan areas (a special kind of association for intercommunity development), micro-regions, groups for local action within the framework of the Leader program for rural development, etc. Despite different names and applicable legal requirements varying from case to case, the associations for intercommunity development are all established based on the general provision from the Public Administration Law no. 215/2001, with all subsequent amendments, which states that two or more local authorities (meaning counties, cities and rural communes) can associate by means of forming associations for intercommunity development. These associations are legal persons, governed by private law, but having a special statute – the state acknowledges that they act in the interest of the public and thus grants them the status of entities performing in the interest of the general public.

These forms of cooperation have, of course, limitations – some are due to the way in which they are set up while others are more general, pertaining to the malfunctioning of the public sector in Romania. Among the former, authors include

lack of accountability and transparency due to the fact that they are not governed by directly elected bodies, difficult decision-making due to the fact that each decision needs to be approved by each of the legislative bodies of the partnering entities, limited financial resources, overlaps with other tiers of public administration, etc. (Pașcariu 2011a; Pașcariu 2011b). While these difficulties concern all types of cooperation, most of the existing literature is on the regions. The debate on the reform of the regions also brought to the fore aspects pertaining to the economic dimension of cooperation – how a certain type of regional arrangements can reduce social-economic disparities and increase territorial cohesion (Sandu 2011; Săgeată 2011).

This is the context in which in March 2008 the central government launched the policy regarding the growth poles in Romania, a policy with various implications, ranging from spatial/territorial planning and territorial cohesion to regional economic development and social inclusion. Through two government decisions¹, the central government designated seven national growth poles², one for each development region from Romania, with the exception of the capital city, and 13 centers for urban development, having regional importance. Through one of the Operational Programs³ financed from the EU structural funds, financing was set aside for these types of urban agglomerations (50 % of the total financing under the priority axis no. 1 of the program will go to the seven growth poles and 20 % to the centers for urban development), with the goal of enhancing the quality of life and creating jobs in cities through rehabilitation of urban infrastructure, improvement of services, including social services, as well as through the development of support systems for businesses and entrepreneurs. As part of the policy regarding the creation of the growth poles, the seven urban centers had to immediately create metropolitan areas together with their surrounding rural communities and to proceed toward the drafting of integrated plans for urban development.

Despite major implications for the administrative territorial structure of Romania, the somewhat technical character of the entire process of setting the growth poles generated almost no debates. Words such as polycentric development, regional economic clusters, spillover effects created an aura of mysticism around the entire process – it was as if nobody had the courage to ask how these growth poles and their metropolitan areas would differ from existing metropolitan areas and what their function would be; how these new metropolitan areas would fit in the discussion about a broader territorial reform, with a focus on creating administrative regions; and what this policy would mean with respect to the other forms of co-

1 Government Decision no. 998/2008, regarding the designation of the national growth poles in which to finance with priority investments from EU and national programs, published in the Official Journal of Romania no. 641 from 8 September 2008; Government Decision no. 1149, for amending GD no. 998/2008.

2 The seven cities/growth poles are: Brașov, Cluj-Napoca, Constanța, Craiova, Iași, Ploiești, Timișoara.

3 Regional Operational Program 2007–2013, one of the seven operational programs for Romania.

operation in place at the local level, partially overlapping from a spatial/territorial perspective over the boundaries of the newly created metropolitan areas.

The paper strives to discuss the role played by the newly created metropolitan areas around the seven growth poles from the perspective of the cooperation between the urban centers on the one hand and the neighboring rural communities on the other. It looks at the governance mechanisms in place at the level of the metropolitan areas and tries to assess if the cities and the neighboring communities are equal partners in these cooperation schemes. The paper also looks at one of the most important functions of these metropolitan areas – strategic planning in the form of drafting the integrated plans for urban development (IPUDs). We look at this function also from the perspective of the relations between the cities and their hinterlands. The paper has the following structure: section two briefly examines the concept of growth poles and their creation in Romania; section three looks at strategic planning as a tool for the implementation of the growth-pole policy; section four presents the methodology of the study; section five details the main findings of the research, while section six briefly presents the recommendations and the conclusions.

2. Growth poles – a fast-track experience for building metropolitan areas in Romania

The concept of growth poles is by no means a new one. The theory of growth poles is rather economic in nature, with implications for the spatial policy of a country. The implications for the territorial reform of Romania are indirectly linked with the growth poles through the metropolitan areas created around them (a prerequisite). This section first briefly explores the concept of growth poles in economic theory and then focuses on the case of our country.

When it comes to strategies for regional development, there are two main models available at the international level (Christofakis and Papadaskalopoulos 2011, 6): the growth-poles and diffusion model, and the model of integrated-local endogenous development. The first perspective refers to the attraction of activities and the concentration of growth in poles, from where the diffusion of growth is expected to occur towards the surrounding region. The second model refers to the integrated spatial development, which is based on the utilization of the endogenous potential of the regions. By the early 1970s, growth-pole policies had transformed into “the dominant characteristic of operational regional planning in both developed and developing countries” (Richardson and Richardson 1974, 163). This model was predicated, based on the idea of the increase of the industrial product and the concentration of development in large urban centers (growth poles), which had the necessary prerequisites (i.e. infrastructure, external economies, labor force, market, etc.) for the attraction and operation of large industrial complexes-propulsive

industries (Christofakis and Papadaskalopoulos 2011, 6). The French geographer François Perroux was the first to define the concept of the growth pole. According to him, “growth does not appear everywhere at the same time; it becomes manifest at points or growth poles with variable intensity; it spreads through different channels, with variable terminal effects, on the entire economy” (Perroux 1955, 309). Although Perroux insisted that the growth pole is linked to an abstract economic space, Boudeville (1966) and Hirschman (1958), among others, in an effort to offer solutions for fighting regional disparities, connected the growth poles to specific geographic spaces/territories. Towards the end of the 1990s, Parr (1999, 1212) argued that the failures around the world in implementing growth-pole strategies were due to the fact that many decision-makers misunderstood Perroux’s original assertion that the growth pole in geographic space is not necessarily and in any given situation a projection of the growth pole in economic space. To the contrary, their purpose should be the foundation of their choice on empiric assertions and suppositions and by taking into consideration “the anticipated outcomes, in terms of inter-regional equity and balance”, and the existing constraints (Dranca 2013).

Despite numerous critiques⁴ and the emergence of the new paradigm of integrated local endogenous development starting with the early 1990s, the model of the growth poles continues to remain a valid option even today in the framework of the regional policies of some of the EU member states.

In Romania the growth-poles strategy needs to be understood in the context of a complex and challenging urban-rural relationship. According to a World Bank Report (2013a), Romania is one of the least urbanized countries in Europe – approximately 55 % to 60 % –, with an urban network formed of 320 urban centers. Though it fits with the general urbanization trends from South-Eastern Europe, this poses challenges for a cohesive territorial development. Despite the fact that both urban centers and rural areas have their specific problems, their future development is interlinked. Existing links between major cities and their hinterlands are not yet properly understood, thus making it even more difficult to implement proper strategies. Table 1 below presents some of the general challenges urban and rural areas are faced with, challenges that impact the functioning of the cooperation at the level of the metropolitan areas.

4 In less developed areas, conditions and quality of life had not improved as expected, while in large urban industrial complexes, the intensifying trends of population and activity accumulation caused severe saturation issues (Christofakis and Papadaskalopoulos 2011, 7).

Table 1
Challenges experience by the urban and rural areas from Romania

Reduced level of urbanization, despite a relatively balanced spatial distribution	Rural communes are too heterogeneous, in terms of both size and economic and administrative capacity; their number has increased over the years, in the absence of objective factors that could explain this trend
High level of urban hypertrophy – difference in the level of development between the capital city and the rest of the urban centers; same trend occurs at the county level, between the county seat and the rural communities	Existence of vast areas which are profoundly rural, where the role of the coordinating urban center is taken by rural communities
Lack of a well-established network of medium-sized cities	High heterogeneity from a social and economic point of view of the rural areas from different parts of the country; high population densities tend to be found around urban centers, while for the isolated communities the demographic trends are decreasing
Small and medium-sized cities are at risk of becoming ruralized, trend associated with the risk of a decrease of the quality of life for the population from these areas	Dependency on subsistence agriculture and a significant reduction of the number of employees
Uncontrolled urban sprawl outside the residential areas and an increase of the ratio of agricultural activities	Limited access to general interest services – roads, sewage, drinkable water, health services, etc.
Decline of the urban population in major cities, coupled with a reduction in the number of medium-sized cities, caused by a slow process of aging, population's migration from urban to rural and suburban areas	Rural areas in themselves are a source of social exclusion – over 71 % of the poor population from Romania lives in rural communities
Imbalances in the economy of cities due to industrial restructuring and the financial crisis from 2008	
Existence of environmental problems in the urban areas	

Source: compiled by the author, based on the National Strategy for Territorial Development (June 2014)

This is the context in which the Strategic Framework for the Territorial Development of Romania 2030 (ESPON 2013) calls for an integrated approach of the urban-rural relationship. It refers to the necessity to consolidate this relationship by approaching the development of rural areas not in contradiction with the cities but rather in correlation, with an accent on stimulating local partnerships and on integrated territorial planning. The main forms of urban-rural cooperation that

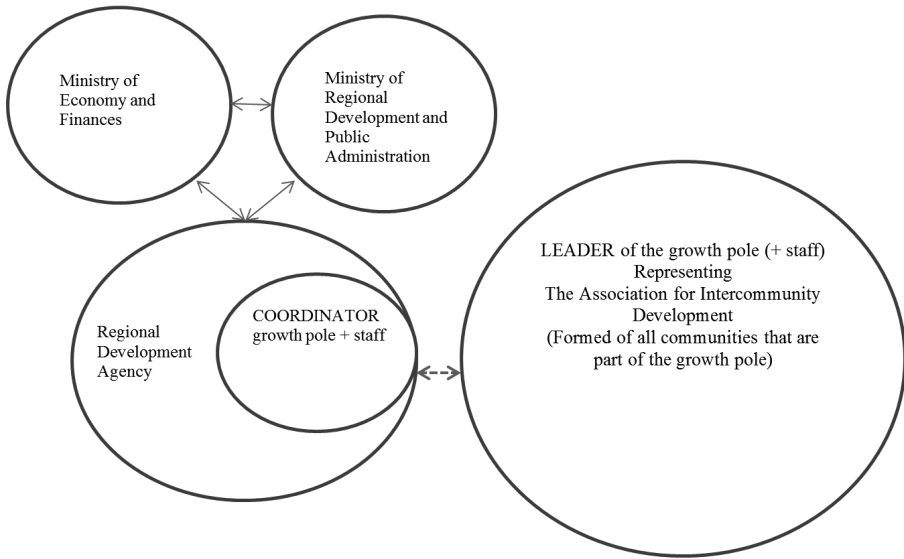
are proposed under the Strategic Framework are: metropolitan areas; urban systems/clusters; and axes/development corridors.

The metropolitan areas around the seven national growth poles were established as associations for intercommunity development in the period between 2004 (Iași metropolitan area) and 2009 (Ploiești, Timișoara, and Craiova metropolitan areas). Some of these metropolitan areas had been established prior to the initiation of the polycentric development policy; however, no new structure needed to be put in place since the legal provisions applicable have remained the same. Metropolitan areas, irrespective of the policies that led to their establishment, are regulated under Law no. 286/2006 (for the amendment of the framework law on local public administration); Law no. 350/2001 on the structuring of the territory and urbanism, and Law no. 351/2001 on the plan for the structuring of the national territory. What is worth mentioning refers to the outer limits of the metropolitan areas – rural communities up to 30 km from the urban center can be included. This spatial limitation is seen as a critique in the context of the seven national growth poles because functional economic zones are usually bigger; larger metropolitan areas would allow the creation of stronger economies, a larger work-force pool and better incentives for investments (World Bank 2013b). Another critique regarding the formation of the metropolitan areas, at least in connection with the growth poles, refers to the voluntary character of the association. In practice, some metropolitan areas do not include all the communities which are part of the functional zones surrounding the growth poles (World Bank 2013b).

What is unique about the metropolitan areas around the seven growth poles concerns their governing structure (see Figure 1 below). At the central level, the Ministry of Economy and Finances and the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration offer guidance and interact with the growth-pole coordinator, which is the Regional Development Agency. This Agency is the executive body of the economic-development regions established back in 1998. The Agency further cooperates with the metropolitan area, more specifically with the association for intercommunity development.

Figure 1

The governing structure of metropolitan areas formed around the growth poles



Source: translation from World Bank (2013b)

3. Strategic planning in the framework of the metropolitan areas built around the growth poles

Some authors (Vrabete and Necşuliu 2008) distinguish between two types of tools used in the implementation of the policy for the structuring of the polycentric network: spatial and non-spatial ones. In the former category one can include investment programs, land-use planning and zoning, fees based on location, relocation of administrative agencies, setting up cooperation arrangements and partnerships, action plans at the territorial level, a system for monitoring development at the territorial level, etc. In the category of non-spatial tools the most significant ones concern the reform of the administration, budget redistribution, EU financing and, most importantly, strategic planning. Under strategic planning common activities and processes include the vision for spatial development, strategies for regional economic development, guidelines and development schemes in planning, vertical cooperation mechanisms, etc. These types of strategies are used together, thus leading to the creation of a toolkit available for political decision-makers and public administrators. Immediately after the creation of the metropolitan areas around the seven growth poles, all these newly created entities had to undergo a strategic-planning effort and to draft integrated plans for urban development (IPUDs). This section

explores the concept of strategic planning at the local level and tries to assess how these integrated plans are different from the typical local-development strategies developed by cities and rural communities.

Before 1989, planning was heavily influenced by the party ideology, sharing some common features with the other communist countries but having also some specific elements. Some planning features which can be derived from the communist ideology include: a rejection of market mechanisms, the elimination of differences between the urban and rural areas, a more balanced spatial distribution of industry and population across the entire territory, the planned integration of agriculture and industry etc. (Musil 2005). Immediately after the collapse of communism, macro-economic problems were regarded as being more important than local matters (Pichler-Milanović 2001). Any type of development was considered an indication of progress and well-being in the community. The mantra of those early years was “anything goes” as long as there is some economic development. In this context it is easy to understand that there was little room left for strategic planning. It was only after 2000, when local authorities and citizens started to question the wisdom of allowing this type of chaotic, haphazard development to take place. Local authorities were faced with the fact that their land-use plans were no longer accurate – they had been adopted in some cases under communism and no longer reflected the transformation in the spatial structure of the cities that took place in the years following the collapse of communism. Another challenge in the way of strategic planning at the local level has to do with the fact that the administrative system is rule-oriented. In this context, the land-use plans, which are mandatory and comprise clear legal provisions, tend to be considered to be at the core of guiding urban development. Master plans or other types of development strategies which are drafted “voluntarily” by local authorities tend to be regarded as being less important. This leads to compliance and enforcement problems.

The struggle in planning at the local level is to gradually move away from the land-use plans as the only tools for guiding local urban development toward a more holistic vision through integrated plans, reflecting their focus on a bigger scale, such as the metropolitan area) (Hințea 2007; Hințea et al. 2013). Table 2 below shows this shift.

This shift is in line with trends at the international level. Theorists have developed a series of definitions and models of strategic planning; in the following lines we will provide a strategic-planning model based on Bryson's (1995), Nutt and Backoff's (1992) works. The main steps in structuring a strategic-planning model are:

- Initiating the strategic-planning process;
- Undertaking an analysis of the community's history and its current situation;
- Clarifying the organization's missions and values;
- SWOT analysis;
- Identification of the strategic problems the community is faced with;

- Formulation of strategies to address the identified strategic problems;
- Analysis of existing alternatives/strategies;
- Implementation of the selected strategies;
- Result evaluation.

Table 2
Traditional versus strategic planning

Traditional planning (mostly land-use plans)	Strategic/comprehensive planning (local-development strategies and integrated plans)
Regulate land use	Are based on a long-term vision concerning development, shared by a variety of local stakeholders
Establish how land uses are distributed across the territory of the community	Comprehensive, including economic, environmental, and social dimensions of development
Drafted by multi-disciplinary teams of specialists	Prior to their drafting by specialists, the plans, the objectives and the programs are negotiated with the relevant stakeholders in the community
Implemented by the specialized services from within the local authorities	They are institutionalized (the unit for the implementation/management of the project) according to the combination of actors and responsibilities relevant in light of the goal of the project; they imply a rigorous planning effort of all types of resources involved (human, financial etc.)

Source: Translation by the author from MDPWH (2007)

This model outlined above defines a possible strategic-planning process applicable to a local community. However, it only provides a general framework, a set of diverse activities being necessary in order to implement each mentioned step. The public manager must understand that the application of strategic planning is a complicated process that requires resources, creativity and hard work. Therefore, we can consider planning to be a rational and structured process of building a community's strategy based on a relationship with the following factors (Hințea et al. 2013, 35–36):

- Environment;
- Strategic Planning;
- Internal Capacity;
- Implementation; and
- Evaluation.

The technical assistance and coordination received by the metropolitan areas from the central government (Ministry of Economy and Finances and Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration) and from the Agency for Re-

gional Development from each region during the drafting of the IPUDs sets them apart from other strategic efforts at the local level. The drafting of the IPUDs had taken place following a pilot scheme for an integrated plan, provided by the central administration in cooperation with foreign consultants. Also, the integrated plans comprise a distinct section regarding the implementation of the plan, with a focus on the proposed management structure, publicity and communication, and monitoring indicators based on objectives and projects.

4. Methodology

Main research objectives

The overall goal of the research is to investigate the role played by metropolitan areas in Romania, with a focus on how they are different from other forms of inter-municipal cooperation, and to assess if strategic planning represents indeed a main responsibility/function for the metropolitan areas. The research objectives and some main research questions are listed below:

- To better understand the motivations of local authorities for entering into different forms of cooperation at the local level: Which is the backdrop against which cooperation takes place? Are there any incentives (financial, political, others) for cooperation? Can cooperation help communities with solving certain problems (public transit, land-use planning/sprawl, waste management, etc.)? Is there a certain form of cooperation that is favored?
- To assess current experiences with strategic planning at the level of the seven metropolitan areas built around the designated national growth poles, with a focus on: a) the strategic-planning process: stages, stakeholders, level of involvement on behalf of the neighboring rural communities, institutional mechanisms developed during and after the process was completed, etc., b) the strategic plans generated, mainly the Integrated Plans for Urban Development (IPUDs) and the level of integration between the IPUDs and the local-development strategies of the communities forming the metropolitan areas;
- To determine if in the future (short term – 1 to 3 years – and medium term – until the end of the current programming cycle 2014–2020) the reform of the metropolitan government will become a priority for the political decision-makers and if strategic planning in the framework of metropolitan areas will gain more importance.

Research methods and instruments

The research is based on a qualitative methodology – interviews and content analysis. It is rather exploratory, hence the decision of the authors of the study to focus on qualitative methods. There is very little research to date in Romania on the

role/functions played by metropolitan areas in relation to strategic planning. The semi-structured interview guide comprises 15 questions divided among three main sections: role and forms of inter-municipal cooperation; strategic planning in the framework of metropolitan areas; and the future of metropolitan areas. The interviews were carried out in 2012 (December) and 2013 (January–May) and took place over the phone, face to face, or through email (interviewees responding in writing to the questions from the interview). Because of the different formats of the interviews, the quality of the information obtained is different from one case to the next. This is a limitation of the study that the authors fully acknowledge. In most cases, the format of the interview was dictated by the availability of the interviewees. In certain cases they were against face-to-face or phone interviews, agreeing to respond only in writing. The content analysis represents another part of this research, and it provides additional information on the process and the outcome of strategic planning in the framework of metropolitan areas in Romania (section two from the interview). The authors developed an analysis grid comprising 11 items and used it for analyzing several strategic-planning documents (see the next section). Each item described a situation which had to be assessed based on the strategic documents with “yes”, “partially” or “no”. Some of the items used refer to: whether the rural communities mention in their local-development strategies the IPUD; whether there is any connection between operational plans/programs at the metropolitan level and the ones from the local-development strategies of individual communities; whether the rural communities see as an advantage the proximity to a national growth pole, etc. Not all 11 items apply to all strategic documents analyzed, since these documents have different purposes, time-frames and territorial scope.

Sample

The research included the seven municipalities which in 2008 were designated as national growth poles together with the surrounding rural communities which were included into the metropolitan areas created around the seven national growth poles. For each of the seven metropolitan areas we included in the sample at least six rural communities. The rural communities were selected based on the distance from the urban center – three communities that are in close proximity (less than 5 km from the urban center), two that are at a medium distance from the city (between 5 and 15 km), and one that is close to the maximum distance limit/radius of 30 km set by law (alternatively, the outer boundary of the metropolitan area). In certain cases the selection was also guided by how the metropolitan areas themselves grouped the neighboring communities into rings based on the distance from the urban center. For each municipality we interviewed at least two individuals who had been involved in the establishment of the metropolitan area and/or have been working since 2008 in close connection with the metropolitan entity/planning. For the rural communities one person per community was selected for the interview (city manager, legal secretary, etc.). For this research we decided to focus only on the

seven metropolitan areas built around the national growth poles because in these cases the metropolitan areas had been in existence for a number of years, and the level of formalization (procedures and instructional entities/structures) is higher than in the case of other metropolitan areas. This allowed us to look at a variety of documents, regulations and procedures with much more ease.

In addition to the interviews, we also conducted a content analysis of the strategic documents available at the level of both the metropolitan areas, the seven growth poles and the rural communities clustered around the growth poles. We looked at the Integrated Plans for Urban Development (each growth pole had to develop them in 2009), the local-development strategies of the urban centers designated as national growth poles and, where available, the local-development strategies of the rural communities that are part of the metropolitan areas.

5. Main findings

The first section of the interview was meant to gather some general observations and opinions regarding cooperation at the local level. All interviewees were asked to discuss three aspects that they think best characterize the context in which local public administration from Romania operates and which could be relevant from the perspective of cooperation at the local level. Though the interviewees addressed a variety of factors, we could still identify several common ones once we divided the interviewees in two groups: the ones from the urban centers and the ones from the rural communities. For the former group the three most cited factors (in descending order, based on the number of individuals who mentioned them) include: limited understanding of the new trends in local economic development and limited experience in dealing and/or partnering with foreign and local investors, specialized NGOs, grass-root organizations, etc.; not enough financial resources; over-dependence on European money for financing infrastructure projects, which means less attention to priorities for which such financing is not available; and increased expectations of the residents regarding high quality public services, opportunities for leisure and entertainment, and preoccupation for a healthy life style (pedestrian areas and bike lanes, green space, less pollution, etc.), which forces local governments to reinvent themselves. In general, the representatives of the municipalities were complaining about the fast adaptation efforts they need to undergo in order to stay in line with the new challenges their cities are confronted with. Given the fact that these cities are the most important ones in the country, it is clear that the challenges they face are unique and quite dynamic. For the latter group the three most cited factors include: lack of financial resources (including the possibility to co-finance European projects) and dependence on transfers from other tiers of government; lack of infrastructure and a relatively low quality of life, which makes it difficult to attract residents from the city and investors; and poor relation with the city/municipality; no cooperation, oftentimes rural communities being treated as

junior partners. The overall theme of their discourse was the inability of the rural communities to capitalize on the advantages brought by the close proximity to an important urban center. With the exception of suburban communities close to the city, the rest of them complained about how the lack of infrastructure and amenities limits the attractiveness of these communities for investors and residents alike. Perhaps this also explains the reticence of these communities toward cooperation (see below) since it was difficult for them to see the city as the generator of a spill-over effect in terms of welfare and development opportunities. It is interesting to note that with the exception of financial resources, the two groups of communities, at least at the level of perception, experience very different challenges. Some, if not all, of these challenges could be addressed, at least based on the existing literature, through cooperation. However, the two groups rather prefer to focus on their differences as opposed to working together.

We were also interested in finding out if there are certain types of incentives which stimulate cooperation. Despite a lack of tradition in this area, in the last few years we witnessed an increase in the number of associations for intercommunity development, a growing interest for metropolitan areas, as well as for other forms of association/cooperation at the local level (micro-regions in certain parts of the country, for example). All the interviewees argued that in most cases cooperation initiatives have occurred under the influence of financing opportunities coming from the European Union. The two most cited examples were the creation of the national growth poles (in connection with the Regional Operational Program, Priority Axis 1 – Support for the Sustainable Development of Cities) and the Groups for Local Action under the LEADER program. While these financial opportunities are recent (after 2007, following our accession into the EU), some interviewees argued that even in the early years of cooperation at the local level, the influence of external actors was extremely important. For example, several of the interviewees talked about the creation of micro-regions especially in the Hungarian counties from Romania in the early 2000s, a practice that was supported through the expertise of foreign advisers. The same applies for the first associations for intercommunity development, created as a result of knowledge transfer from foreign experts or as a direct result of exposure of local decision-makers to best practices from countries where inter-communality is valued. One of the interviewees labeled these early cooperation efforts as “experiments” and stated that a significant number of those created before 2007 have either disappeared over time or are currently inactive.

One of the key questions of the research deals with whether or not various forms of inter-municipal cooperation can help local authorities in dealing with issues at the local level. Almost all interviewees pointed out public transportation, waste management and water and sewage as potential areas where cooperation can lead to increased efficiency in the provision of public services/public utilities. They pointed out that citizens are no longer interested in which organization is providing public services as long as they are satisfied with their quality and price. The

representatives of several rural communities acknowledged that this cooperation is the only way in which rural residents can enjoy certain public services which could not be otherwise provided. With the exception of public-services provision, cooperation is seen as useful by the representatives of urban centers rather than the ones pertaining to the rural communities. The former argued that the process of local economic development can no longer be envisioned without cooperating with the neighboring communities. Several cities are running out of land (or suitable land) for large future investments and need to work closely with the adjacent communities for identifying such locations. Several interviewees also talked about the negative impact on the city budget of the commuting residents to the suburban communities who use the services provided by the city but at the same time also take advantage of the lower taxes and lower real estate prices from the neighboring rural communities. The interdependencies created between the city and the suburban communities need to be acknowledged by both parts, and joint solutions need to be identified. Curiously enough, despite the aspects described previously, both urban and rural communities were hesitant to name land-use planning as one of the areas where cooperation can occur.

Several of the interviewees clearly stated that inter-municipal cooperation is acceptable and even useful as long as it produces clear and immediate advantages/benefits for all parties involved. In this respect, joint provision of public services fits these requirements well. On the other hand, they stated that there is a lack of trust among the partners forming the associative structures at the local level and that this lack of trust sometimes stops broader projects from taking place because not all parties can identify the advantages/benefits to be derived from the cooperation. Surprisingly, the most reticent interviewees were those coming from small rural communities, farther away from the city, who at least in theory should be grabbing any chance they have of taking part in joint projects at the metropolitan level.

Almost all of the interviewees stated that the associations for intercommunity development are the preferred form of cooperation at the local level. Basically, in the framework of these associations, all the pre-existing elected bodies of the local government can come together and work on various projects and/or provide public services/public-utilities services. Several of the interviewees made an interesting observation regarding the distinction between metropolitan areas and the associations for intercommunity development. They noted that most of the metropolitan areas in Romania are quite large, including all communities situated up to 30 km from the urban center (maximum distance set by the law). Despite the fact that it is not mandatory to include all communities up to 30 km from the urban center, the general consensus among decision-makers and consultants was to create large metropolitan areas and then to see, depending on the specific project involved, which communities would be interested. What is happening currently is that, on top of the metropolitan area, the municipality and the neighboring villages are creating multiple single-purpose associations for intercommunity development which include a

varying number of the members of the metropolitan areas. Thus, in the case of public transit, the association is usually formed of the city and the neighboring communities where a lot of commuting takes place back and forth. In the case of waste management, the association tends to be even bigger than the territorial boundaries of the metropolitan area, sometimes including an entire county. Law no. 51/2006 (which regulates the provision of public-utilities services by the associations for intercommunity development, together with the possibility to jointly develop the infrastructure needed for the provision of these services) was considered by most interviewees to be a crucial point in the proliferation of these associations.

The second section of the interview addresses the issue of strategic planning in the framework of the metropolitan areas built around the seven national growth poles. Strategic planning, as already explained in section three of the paper, is usually considered a non-spatial instrument used in the implementation of the policy targeting the establishment of the polycentric network in Romania.

Most of the interviewees describe the process of drafting the IPUDs in close connection (and sometimes without a clear distinction) with the establishment of the metropolitan areas/growth poles. The seven national growth poles designed as such by law had to establish an association for intercommunity development and to decide which rural communities, besides the urban center, to include in the association (also called metropolitan area). In certain cities the process of establishing a metropolitan area was already under implementation in 2008, while in other cities the creation of the metropolitan areas at that time was still in the early stages. As pointed out by the interviewees, the law on the designation of the national growth poles acted as a trigger or catalyzer – over a very short period of time both the city and the rural communities were forced to leave their disagreements aside and form the association. Not all interviewees agree that this was a good thing – the disagreements did not go away by any means, the level of distrust among the partners is still high, and some of the unsolved problems from the beginning still have an impact on the functioning of the association (for, e.g., the city is perceived as the leading partner in the association, while the rural communities have very little to say when it comes to policies and strategies).

One of the key questions of the research was if the strategic-planning process followed the usual steps and which were the most important stakeholders involved during each step. It is quite difficult based on the description of the interviewees to assess whether or not all the steps of the strategic-planning process have been followed. This is due to the fact that the interviewees have been involved only in certain stages of the process. The initialization of the process was clearly placed outside the local communities, with the ministries and the Regional Development Agencies acting as the catalyzers of the process. The preliminary analysis was the part where the local authorities contributed the most. From the interviews the two stakeholders mentioned often with regard to their involvement in the preliminary analysis are

the working groups on economic problems/development and the county council. The mentioning of the county council seemed quite surprising, given the fact that it is not part of the metropolitan areas per se. The most surprising responses were obtained regarding the vision for the metropolitan areas. At least according to the interviewees, the debates on this aspect had not been extremely complex. In many cases the vision of the metropolitan areas seems to go hand in hand with the vision for the urban center. The interviewees did not consider it an essential element of the strategic-planning process but rather something that evolved naturally, without too much debate. The SWOT analysis, the identification of the strategic problems and the drafting of strategies/operational plans were all described as rather technical. What some of the interviewees mentioned was the fact that despite a tremendous work load, there was some enthusiasm as well with regard to these plans. They were referring to the fact that some of the projects proposed at the level of the growth pole would get almost automatic financing, thus reducing the uncertainty with regard to the available funding for the local projects.

The interviewees expressed criticism regarding at least two of the stages of the strategic-planning process following the drafting of the integrated plans. With regard to implementation, the interviewees from the rural areas complained that nobody was interested in the fact that in most cases they did not have the resources to participate in the EU-financed projects listed in the plan. From their perspective the proposed projects were not realistic/feasible enough. The interviewees also argued that the evaluation of the implementation process was not properly conducted. Some of them acknowledged the existence of assessments made by the ministries and/or foreign consultants but with very little input from the local level. The main complaint seems to be related to the low level of economic benefits generated for the rural communities.

Public participation was one of the key aspects related to the strategic-planning process that we were interested in. We asked the interviewees to offer their opinion on the level of public participation. Several of the interviewees told us that the public was consulted mostly with regard to the proposed projects to be financed at the level of each of the metropolitan areas. Most of these projects were to be financed from European funds but also from other sources. The representatives of the urban municipalities remembered that in most cities these public meetings had gathered a rather significant number of residents, who were especially interested about infrastructure projects. The type of participation described fits with the lower end of the continuum regarding the level of involvement of the public in the decision-making process – the citizens were mostly informed about the proposed projects, without having a real opportunity to propose new projects. On the other hand, the interviewees from the rural communities argued that the rural residents did not take part in such meetings and that in the most cases the meetings were held in the city or in other rural communities very close to the city center. It is important to note that some interviewees pointed out that the central government/consultants

had emphasized the importance of organizing these public meetings in order to comply with the legal requirements.

With respect to the strategic plans existing at the local level and at the level of the associative structures investigated (metropolitan areas formed around the seven growth poles), the interviews were supplemented with a content analysis of these plans which was made based on the analysis grid described in the methodology sections.

The seven IPUDs (timeframe 2009–2015) are very similar with respect to their structure. They are divided into 5 main sections (general description of the growth pole; the development strategy for the growth pole; spatial profile and areas for intervention; action plan; and the implementation management of the IPUD), and the type of information provided is rather similar. What differs from one plan to the other is the depth of the analysis and the quality and format of the statistical data presented (they range in length from roughly 300 to 600 pages). During the drafting of the plan all the local authorities involved had benefited from a lot of technical expertise, know-how transfer and training from the central government, which explains why these plans follow a similar format. Some of the interviewees argued that given the short time local authorities had in 2008 and 2009 to prepare the IPUDs, without the formats given to them by the central government, this task would have been impossible. At least three or four representatives of the urban centers openly admitted that their institutions did not have the capacity to draft such plans without external expertise at that time (and most likely still do not have it even today). On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that these integrated plans were not an end in themselves but rather means to facilitate further attraction and implementation of EU-financed projects. Therefore, the central government needed to make sure that these plans had all the information needed down the road.

When analyzing the local-development strategies of the cities and rural communities forming the metropolitan areas we discovered that: numerous strategies are missing (not just for the rural communities but also for the cities) or were not made public while others are outdated; it is quite common for the strategies pertaining to the rural communities from a certain geographical area to be drafted by the same consultants, therefore they are very similar with regard not only to structure but also to content; local authorities have a tendency to hide poorly drafted strategies from the general public – usually on the website there is only a notice stating that the strategy was adopted through a decision of the Local Council, without having the entire strategy online.

When analyzing the local-development strategies of the communities forming the metropolitan areas, we were mostly interested in assessing whether there was any correlation between the integrated plans on the one hand and the local-development strategies on the other. In order for the IPUDs to be an effective planning instrument, their provisions need to be reflected to a certain extent at the level of

the local-development strategies. Otherwise, each community has a planning document isolated from the broader context. Our conclusions after assessing the available strategies include:

- All strategies refer to a broader strategic-planning framework (European, national, county), without, however, including any references to IPUDs. While this is somewhat understandable in the case of strategies adopted prior to early 2009, some of the more recent strategies also lack a reference to the metropolitan context. The seven cities sometimes include links to the IPUD and post them on the website without, however, clearly referring to and discussing the metropolitan context.
- Almost all of the rural communities place their future socio-economic development in close connection with and under the guidance of the county level. This can be explained by the fact that for most rural communities, and especially the poor ones, the county level acts as a coordinator, supporter and sometimes source of financial transfers. County Councils are often described in the strategies as a possible partner, alongside NGOs. Very often the urban centers are not mentioned as potential partners. In some strategies cooperation in the framework of associations for intercommunity development is described as important, but again generally there is no reference to the associations organized at the metropolitan level.
- In almost all strategies the proximity to an important urban center is listed within the SWOT analysis as a strong point. However, in general there are no data presented to support the way in which the community benefits from the city's proximity. Very often, this seems more of a cliché than a documented statement.
- There is very little correlation between the policies, programs and plans from the local-development strategies and the IPUDs. Though at least the programs and plans are often presented in detail, very few of them are synchronized with the projects planned at the levels of the metropolitan areas. Though this is normal in areas where there is no overlap/interconnection, there are areas for which some correlation may help.

The third section of the interview guide included questions regarding the future of metropolitan government and of strategic planning in the framework of metropolitan areas. During the pilot interviews conducted in the early stages of the design of the methodology, we came to the conclusion that more questions needed to be added to this section than we had originally thought. This is due to the fact that most interviewees pointed out that the future of the metropolitan areas needed to be assessed in the broader context of the administrative territorial reform and more specifically in close connection with the design of a new regional model of organization.

Most of the interviewees look at the metropolitan areas from a dual perspective: On the one hand, metropolitan areas are associated with the national growth poles, with polycentric development and the attraction of European Structural Funds; on the other hand, and more closely linked with the daily realities of the local public administration (especially in the rural communities), the metropolitan areas offer a framework for the joint delivery of certain public services and public utilities. This dichotomous perception of metropolitan areas is closely linked with the interviewees' opinion about their future. Most of the people we spoke with agree that from the perspective of the attraction of European funds, metropolitan areas will maintain their relevance over the next programming cycle 2014–2020. Interestingly enough, the functions performed by the metropolitan areas in relation to their status of national growth poles are seen as removed from the local context and driven by the expertise and knowledge of the public servants and advisers (both national and foreign) from the central level. With regard to the metropolitan areas as a framework for the provision of joint public services for a broader area/community, the interviewees almost unanimously stated that they did not anticipate any changes in the near future.

Given the recent reform attempts by the national government concerning decentralization and the creation of a new regional model, we were interested to find out how the interviewees perceived the role of the metropolitan areas among the other tiers of the local and the regional governments. Surprisingly, most of them stated that regions were of paramount importance and that their reorganization should be the top priority of the national governments and politicians alike. Among their arguments, most of them concerned efficiency rather than an enhancement of local democracy: better planning and attraction of European money; reduced costs with the functioning of local administration (presuming that the county level would disappear); less corruption, etc. While in the case of regions most of the interviewees agreed that they needed to be transformed into elected bodies, the situation was rather different when it came to the metropolitan areas. Especially the representatives of the rural communities argued that there was no need for elected metropolitan government and that the existing structures were enough for allowing the provision of certain public services and the implementation of common projects. Some openly admitted that they feared the creation of metropolitan government because this would limit the bargaining powers of local communities and they would no longer have a say in the decision-making process. When asked if certain cities (for example the national growth poles) should be given the chance to decide if they wanted to establish an elected metropolitan government, most of the interviewees disagreed, stating that this would make local administration too complicated.

Some of the interviewees compared the designation of the national growth poles with the process of choosing the capital (seat) for the future regions. Almost all of them looked at this process as being driven by the ambitions of various politicians and not grounded at all in social and economic realities. They agreed that

in the case of the national growth poles things were clearer with respect to certain cities but still debatable with regard to other cities. Their opinion was that the political influence was, also in this case, stronger than any impact studies and socio-economic indicators. This was one reason in their opinion for being less interested in the functioning of the metropolitan areas in connection to the activity of the national growth poles and for distrusting initiatives and proposals coming from the central government.

We were interested in finding out what would be one thing our interviewees would change about the structure and/or functioning of the metropolitan areas in the future. A stark difference could be observed in this case between the public servants from the urban centers and the ones from the rural community. The former argued that in their opinion the territory of the metropolitan area should be divided into several rings based on the distance from the urban center and on the interdependencies that exist between the city and the rural communities. This way you could avoid having too many rural communities inside the metropolitan area that are not really connected to the city. Another change suggested by the interviewees was to ban the rural communities which leave the metropolitan area from re-entering it, at least for a certain number of years. Several public servants stated that very often the rural communities were "blackmailing" the city in order for them not to leave the metropolitan area or they changed their mind several times over the course of a couple of years. The latter strongly believed that their interests were oftentimes overlooked by the city and that there was no real interest of the city in a more balanced development of the rural communities. They argued in favor of more money for infrastructure projects and in certain cases for a better communication between the metropolitan structure and the county council, which was described as a true promoter of the economic development interests of the rural communities (at least by some interviewees).

One key interest in our research is strategic planning in the framework of metropolitan areas. The interviewees were first asked if, according to their opinion, this represented an important function/responsibility. With few exceptions, we had to clarify for each interviewee what we meant by strategic planning. It was not that they were unfamiliar with the concept but rather that they did not think that strategic planning is something that needs to be done as a continuous function. Most of them regarded the integrated plans as a one-time event.

We were also interested in finding out if the interviewees saw other planning exercises as necessary, besides the adoption of an integrated plan for the development of the metropolitan area. One example we discussed with all the interviewees regarded public transportation. At the level of all seven metropolitan areas there was some form of public transportation that extended beyond the city limits and into the hinterlands. Therefore, we thought it would be a good example to get them thinking about the way in which strategic planning or a strategic plan could help

them better manage public transit. Especially the representatives of the rural communities questioned the utility of such an effort and argued that in their opinion oftentimes plans and strategies were rarely used. They argued in favor of more meetings between the city representatives and the representatives of the rural communities where they could discuss the problems the latter face. Also, these meetings would be a great opportunity for the rural residents to see that something was done for them. The researchers conducting the interviews suggested other areas that could benefit from a joint planning effort. Land-use planning is one field where more integrated planning is needed, given the fact that all of the seven cities are sprawling toward the neighboring rural communities, and there are mutual interdependencies due to this process. Almost all interviewees argued that such things should be handled locally, without the interference from other communities. Some of the interviewees stated that it was very hard to enter into agreements with the neighboring communities because there was a high chance that these agreements would be violated if the political leadership changed or if any of the parties to the agreement had a change of heart.

6. Discussion

Early in 2013, it seemed that this year would be the cornerstone in the process of territorial reorganization of Romania. The reform of the regional model was presented by politicians and the media as a project that was nearly accomplished, the only missing detail being a commonly agreed model to replace the old one. In addition, decentralization was supposed to be further deepened by a massive transfer of competences and assets from the ministries to the county councils. For reasons that are outside the scope of this paper, none of these two projects were completed.⁵ The immediate implication is that on the short and probably medium term the cooperation at the local level will remain governed by the same legal provisions that are currently in place. Thus, it is important to understand what works and what does not and what can be improved without a change of the constitution.

Cooperation at the local level is currently gaining momentum in the context in which limited financial resources and high expectations from the citizens are forcing local authorities to become more efficient. The associations for intercommunity development are currently used as vehicles for the provision of public services and public-utilities services. Very little consideration is given, however, to how strategic planning can maximize the advantages of cooperation in the medium and long term. The urban centers and their surrounding communities enter into cooperation agreements in order to solve current pressing problems (i.e. public transportation at

⁵ The reform of the regional model was abandoned due to a lack of political support; a new law on decentralization had been adopted by the Parliament, but it was declared as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court later on.

the metropolitan level), without having a clear vision and mission for the cooperation and clearly spelled out strategic and operations plans.

With regard to the growth poles, local authorities and citizens alike may benefit from a better understanding of what they really are and do. The empirical research showed that they are perceived as a tool for attracting European funds. Almost none of the interviewees discussed the fact that cities are the essential engines for the economic development of a country and that significant economic benefits result from urban agglomeration and polarization. This knowledge gap leads to one significant component of the growth-pole strategy, namely how to define the boundaries of the metropolitan areas surrounding the growth poles. Because of a poor understanding of the role of the growth poles, most of the interviewees regard them as too large. Their assessment is based on the understanding of metropolitan areas as a framework for joint provision of public services. The economic theory and the international practice in this field argue, however, that the metropolitan areas around the seven growth poles should be larger than they currently are (30 km radius from the urban center). At the very least, more studies should be conducted in the future in order to identify functional criteria for determining the outer boundaries of these metropolitan areas.

The empirical research showed a genuine dissatisfaction of the rural communities with respect to their access to projects and financing from EU funds (lack of involvement in the decision-making process was less obvious). What the metropolitan areas currently lack are truly integrated projects. The second generation of integrated plans should include: investments for the neighboring rural communities and not only for the urban centers; investments which are really synergetic; coordination and spatial planning (World Bank 2013b).

Another aspect that should be reconsidered for the future of the metropolitan areas around the seven growth poles concerns their governing structure. There are two different governing structures: one corresponding to the metropolitan area (the structure of the association for intercommunity development) and the other applicable to the level of the growth pole (including the ministries, the Regional Development Agencies, and the Association, as well as the relations existing among them). With regard to the association, the main complaint coming from the rural communities concerns the dominance of the urban centers within the framework of the associations. Independent metropolitan agencies or similar entities which represent the interests of the entire area rather than the interest of the cooperating entities could be a better solution (World Bank 2013b). Reimagining the governing structure of the growth poles possesses even more problems. Most of the interviewees perceive the two ministries involved as external consultants, offering technical advice. At least three interviewees stated that the central government plays a monitoring and control role since all important aspects need to be approved by them (for example the final version of the IPUDs). If the ministries were mentioned quite

often, the Agencies for Regional Development seem to be completely missing from the narratives of the interviewees. Also, very few, if any, information was offered with regard to the associative structures that the growth poles/metropolitan areas can form. There is a federation of the metropolitan areas, but none of the respondents knew about its existence or function.

Strategic planning is currently regarded as a minor function within the framework of the metropolitan areas. Most of the interviewees see it as an “exercise” which needs to be undertaken (required by law or as a condition for external funding) in order to produce a plan. Strategic spatial planning will remain an important priority at the metropolitan level, but cities and their surrounding communities need to see it as an activity centered on the specificity of each pole. Even if all the growth poles will be working with standardized formats for the plan, the strategic-planning process needs to genuinely reflect the local characteristics. The seven growth poles are different and the strategies and priorities to be implemented should be tailored to the contextual factors.

7. Instead of conclusions

The territorial reform remains an objective for the Romanian government. However, if the focus continues to be strictly on the regional level, numerous opportunities could be lost. An integrated territorial reform should look at the implications of creating new administrative units and/or cooperation mechanisms on local economic development. The territorial reform should be understood as having broad implications ranging from spatial planning to economic development. The growth-pole strategy will continue during the 2014–2020 programming cycle. It is not yet clear how much financing will be automatically available to the growth poles and if their number will remain the same. Once the current IPUDs expires in 2015, it will be interesting to see if the new plans will be drafted in a different manner.

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