Designing a foresight exercise for the future of rural communities in Romania

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Abstract:
The paper aims to offer a good guideline for anyone that indends to do a futures or a foresight exercise for rural communities. The case presented is the one of the future of rural communities in Romania. The article begins with a brief presentation of the prevailing rural situation in Romania followed by a dialogue regarding suggestions for the possible objectives of a foresight exercise and the methods used (ex. visioning, alternative futures, scenarios).

Keywords: rural communities, foresight, future studies, Romania, methods, alternative futures, scenarios.

1. Introduction

This paper represents the follow-up activity of the working group session from the Mutual Learning Workshop "Integrating Future Methodologies" from the "Bucharest Dialogues" Series that took place on the 9th-11th of June 2010. The workshop was organized within the "Quality and Leadership for Romanian Higher Education" [1] implemented by the Executive Agency for Higher Education and Research Funding from Romania. The European Social Fund 2007-2013 finances the project. The aim of "Bucharest Dialogues" [2] is to offer the environment to discuss fundamentals of foresight between foresight practitioners, managers and policy-makers.

The participants of the working group were asked to offer suggestions for a foresight exercise for the future of rural communities in Romania based on guiding questions as: "What are the criteria we start from when we decide the methods?", "What are the methods chosen based on the criteria?", "How inclusive are the methods?", and "What are the outputs?". The aim of the article is to offer an orientation framework for a futures or a foresight exercise exploring possible futures for rural communities.

2.1. Romanian rural communities and the challenges of foresight (Mihaela Ghişa)

I begin with a brief description of the major transformations of Romanian rural communities, the elements that are disappearing and those we would rather preserve, what is being treasured and finally, what are the aspirations for the future.

With an area of 238 thousand km^2 and a population of 21.5 inhabitants, Romania is an important state in Eastern Europe and an important member of European Union. Romania has the ninth largest territory and the seventh largest population in EU. The rural areas (according to OECD definition) represent over 90%. Rural areas are spread on the Romanian territory, and offer favorable natural conditions for settlement around the Carpathians bordered by the Danube and the Black Sea.

The territory includes many types of inhabited rural areas: plains, hills, tablelands, mountain depressions, rural mountain regions, and delta. Forestry covers 26% of the areas comparative to 80% as it was in 19th century [3]. The rural areas play an important role due to the overall size and the economic, residential and touristic dimensions.

2.2. Rural life in Romania

O the 21.5 million inhabitants of Romania 9.7 million of them live in rural areas according to the last census from 2002. The commune is the lowest level of administrative subdivision in Romania. A commune can have several villages under its administrative umbrella. There are 2860 communes in Romania and 12956 villages according to the National Institute for Statistics in 2009 [4].

Rural communities are considered often the custodians of national values and traditions. Many Romanians see the countryside as a symbol for national identity and the beholder of Romanian traditions. Tradition manifests itself through religion, believes, customs, architecture and occupations (costumes, handcrafts, literature, music). Romania rural communities define themselves by the national identity, the ethnic origin, the local area they cover and the religion they have. Most of the rural communities are Orthodox. At the last census in 2002, 86.7 % declared themselves Orthodox and 4.7% Catholic. The rest declared themselves mostly as belonging to other types of Christian religions. Though rural communities define themselves by religion you can find several types of communities classified by religion in a commune or even in villages that gather around separate churches in the same administrative unit. Few conflicts among such communities have been registered. Another type of classification of Romanian rural communities can be done using the ethnic criteria. The majority of the inhabitants of the country are Romanians. There are also Romanians of Hungarian origin or other ethnic entities as the increasing Roma (gypsies) population, Germans, Ukrainians, Russians, Turks and other few ethnic groups.

The Romanian population in rural areas is not evenly distributed. One can find communes with less then 50 inhabitants per km^2 in the western part of the countries and mostly between 50 and 100 inhabitants per km^2 the south – eastern part of the country.

The communes and the villages can be described as areas with peasant's households much agricultural land and forests and few blocks of flats in the most developed communes. Based on National Institute of Statistics data, 98% of the persons in the countryside own their households. 42% of the houses they live in are made of a very fragile and cheap material: the adobe, 30% are made of brick, 11% of wood and only 18 of brick and concrete.

Basic living facilities in the rural dwellings are underequipped: the level in dwellings in the rural area is almost 6 times lower than in urban areas. For example the piped water in the dwellings exists in 15.1% cases, bathrooms exist only in 13.4% of the rural dwellings, central heating exists in only 2% and sewage disposal system in only 12.9% according to the last census made in 2002. Electricity can be found in over 90% of the rural areas. The exceptions are the areas with difficult access or special geographical conditions. Special policies support rural areas in developing more renewable energy resources as wind energy, solar energy, hydro-energy, and biomass-energy. Challenges for rural ecosystems might be extreme weather events as it was shown in the last decade (drought, flooding), soil erosion, soil desertification, deforesting

According to a World Bank study mentioned in the National Strategy plan for Rural Development [5] half of the communes have direct access to the road network, which means that current road network only caters for 3/5 of the total rural population. A quarter of these roads are not functional in case it rains or snows. Only 16% of the population from rural areas has a car. However the situation is starting to improve in the last years. Private passenger and fright transport do not operate in most rural areas and the railway network only covers few of the rural areas, mostly same areas as a century ago. Though Romanian rural areas have a rich network of rivers, the inland river transport is barely developed. The rural communities that use means of transportation on water are the ones near the Danube and the Danube Delta.

Though Romania is in world's top countries for high speed Internet, the broadband penetration is one of the weakest in Europe especially in rural areas. The broadband concentrates in urban areas generating a strong digital divide. However other types of Internet technologies can reach rural areas. 92% of the households have television sets in 2004. Satellite based television broadcasting is spread. Though fixed telephony is poorly penetrated mobile communication is also largely spread in rural areas.

The social dimension in Romania rural areas can be defined by key words as migration, ageing, poverty and poor education.

Inhabitants of rural areas are considered focused mostly on solving local social problems then on general reforms. We could consider some rural areas as closed social spaces made by elderly, low educated, poor population living in rural areas where there is a lack of resources and a low knowledge flow. Around 33% of the total adult population lives in such areas. The most treasured values are economic safety and equality. Only in the case of more developed rural areas people tend to think about changes and reforms [6].

Health security has become an issue in Romanian rural areas. In the decades before 1989 health services were offered in all communes in rural areas but afterwards the services proved to be weaker, with few supplies, poorly managed medical centers in rural areas as well as unsatisfactory hospital conditions and fewer medical staff. Besides these issues most rural population is facing some serious threats as lack of health education, family planning, lack of information regarding basic health assurances. Due to the fact that the poorest population lives in rural areas, diseases related to lack of nutrition and hygienic conditions start to appear.

Migration phenomenon affects deeply health services in rural areas as more and more doctors and medical nurses leave to work abroad for much better salaries. In terms of social occupation the rural population can be divided in agricultural and non-

agricultural. The non-agricultural population mostly works in non-rural areas being involved in a continuous internal mobility. Such population along with the migrating population represents the main driving force for development in rural areas.

According to national Institute for Statistics the unemployment rate in rural areas is 15.4 for persons under 25 years and 4.0 for persons above 25 years old in 2009. Long-term unemployment in rural areas was registered 28.7 in rural areas out of the full unemployment. Jobs in the countryside are less and less attractive. During the communist regime a type of internal migration was caused by the job assignment procedures carried on the state institutions whereby newly graduated professionals would be send at to work in assigned hospitals, schools, farms or as veterinarians in specific rural areas as the first job. No commune was left behind. Many of these professionals decided to stay. This phenomenon does not happen now since professionals have a choice and Romanian rural areas have become less and less a valid option nowadays. As a consequence the type of commune that had a city hall, a school, a medical care cabinet, a pharmacy with professionals is being left behind generating a type of isolated commune forced to be on it's own.

In the recent decades the rural to urban social mobility has increased while the rural areas have undergone a process of ageing. International migration proved to have a serious impact on the life if rural communities. Romanians from rural areas migrate to different countries depending mostly on the routes chosen by other members of the family or the rural community. The preferred destinations are far off southwest Italy and Spain. As Romanian is a Latin language Spanish and Italian are easy to understand. Romanians also migrate towards neighboring western territories as Hungary (preferred for the Hungarian minority in Romania), Serbia or other former Yugoslavian countries, Germany (especially in the case of the old German rural communities) and to the southeast area in Turkey. From the non-European destinations Canada and USA are the preferred ones. We can say that migration became a type of life strategy for too many members of rural communities.

Temporary working abroad and full emigrations from Romania are two major economic issues in Romania. Migration increases every year. This affects the life of the communities and the life of families in rural areas. Many children are left behind with grandparents since one or both parents went to work abroad.

Regarding the internal migration according to the National Institute for statistics in 2009 6.0 % out of 1000 inhabitants moved from rural areas to urban areas and 10% from urban to rural.

Schools are wide spread in rural areas but the quality is decreasing due to the weak logistics and teachers. The decrease of school children and the lack of proper logistics force administrations to close schools. Analphabetism increases in time due to lack of motivation for study, school drop-out and the poor quality of education. The key challenges for the future will be to ensure the importance of vocational education and tertiary education for rural inhabitants, life long learning for farmers and other members of the community.

During communism most of the peasants were forced to give away their lands during the collectivization process. After 1989 the rightful owners got back their properties in the land restitution process. Many Romanians that own rural land have small farms or

take care of animals and their land. In fact 69% of rural population works in agriculture or related services [4]. Owners form large farm associations with a legal status (frequently farmer production co-operatives or units that emerged from the former state farms), family farm associations or just remaining private individual farmers. Producer groups are considered by EU as the main driver for the rural economy but they have not been proved so far as being a very successful solution.

The touristic potential of tourism in Romanian rural areas is very big. Be it of recreational and medical tourism, ecotourism, cultural and ethnographic tourism or wildlife tourism. The countryside is quite picturesque and non-polluted. The attractive rural landscape offers many recreation opportunities in quite accessible areas. However main weak points consist of the lack of necessary infrastructure to make the best of the touristic potential.

Romania's European Union accession in January 2007 is the most important driver of change for the rural economy due to the need of Romanian rural areas to be integrated into the European rural economy. Romanian rural economy needs to follow the European model of competitivity, market orientation, environment protection and increase of life standards. The main challenges are the developing rural areas and dealing with the impoverishment of rural life. Romania's rural areas can play an important role in the agri-food industry and the research and development sector for the knowledge bio-economy. The EU accession opened the floor for the necessary financial aid to solve the problems of rural areas but the procedures based on projects done by local entities prove to be too bureaucratic and unfriendly for them so the absorption of the funds is constantly very low.

2.3 Possible Challenges / Problem formulation

Romanian rural areas often are situated as one of the last in European classifications regarding standards of living, poverty, infrastructure, etc. Romania has not managed to use its human and material potential, as did other countries with less favorable conditions.

Rural communities in Romania are of many kinds. The villages have been classified by geography, population or economic development but these are not the only important variables. Rural communities in Romania have different cultural characteristics that define their development and potential for the future. Few studies have been done in this area most of them just case studies developed with the monographic method pioneered by one of the most appreciated Romanian sociologists – Dimitrie Gusti [7].

Several threats for the survival and development of rural communities are easy to identify today:

- Rural ageing becomes a fearful phenomenon in rural Romania. Most households lack youngsters due to internal and external migration.

- Number of education-years for children decreases because of school drop-out

- Lack of access for rural students to higher education services.

- Increased analphabetism especially in isolated areas

- Climate change and lack of proper infrastructure that leads to floods and drought.

2.4 Possible objectives and outputs for a foresight exercise

Forward thinking in such times of great uncertainty about future developments is essential. A foresight exercise will offer a complex and a clearer image or what the future of rural communities might be like. We need to determine which areas are vital for public policies and be more aware about future challenges.

So how should we address the problems of Romanian rural communities? We could be traditional and accept the actual rural way of life that's always threatened by economic changes. We could be idealists and believe that rural communities live in a pure green idyll and we should not interfere much. We could be pragmatics and reach for a better quality of life desired by the communities. Or we could be just some occasional eco-tourists that visit the countryside and enjoy a bit to stay with rural communities. These are few of the approaches that might come up during the debates and the analysis done within a foresight exercise.

How can a foresight exercise help? First of all you settle the rationale and the objectives of your foresight exercise as well as the future timeframe you address. However there are no recipes in foresight. It depends on the context, the problems you address the means that are allocated and what is advisable to do in that context.

3. Answering key questions in developing a foresight exercise (Fabienne Goux-Baudiment)

3.1 "What are the criteria we start from when we decide the methods?"

A usual non-exhaustive list of criteria [8] includes the following: main goals to reach (in-depth study, participatory experience, decision-makers' involvement, capacity building, etc.); mainly exploratory or normative (transformative) approach; time horizon (20 or 40 years ahead?); limits of the studied system; main scale of the study (local, national, regional, etc. or nested scales); length of the exercise (6, 12 or 18 months or more or less); level of participation (consultation, participation, concertation, or co-decision making); type of participation (large or restricted); nature of the participation (inhabitants, stakeholders, decision-makers, etc.) and logistical aspects (budget, human resources, project management, communication policy, etc.).

Most of the time, reading the terms of reference related to the proposed foresight exercise or discussing with the potential sponsor of such an exercise is the main source to determine the appropriate criteria in order to propose an adequate methodology. This very first step of a foresight exercise is identified in the French Prospective as the search of the finalities (usually intrinsic finalities): why does the decision-maker want to launch/implement/achieve such a foresight exercise? From the answer, most of the criteria can be deduced. When such information lacks, like here, we can only make alternative assumptions and deduce from them alternative answers to the main criteria in order to let the sponsor chose him/herself.

In the case studied here (rural development of Romania), we have considered the following answers.

What are the finalities of such an exercise? To meet the EU criteria through exploration and visioning, and to build a foresight capacity in Romania and to pave the way for further reforms.

Will it be mostly explorative or normative (transformative)? As a plain foresight exercise, it will begin with an exploratory approach and continue with a visioning process in order to contribute to decision-making at policy design level.

What is the most suitable horizon? In order to convince decision-makers and to be in line with other foresight exercises in EU, 2030 seems an acceptable horizon, although 2040 would have been more suitable due to the inherent time dynamics of the studied system. Most of the French planning time horizon requires a 20 years-ahead span for the foresight study (exploratory) and a 10 years-ahead span for the action plan. Elsewhere, the choice of the time horizon depends on the topic (for ex. space activities or energy policy require long term horizon), the finality (society visioning may require even longer time span, such as 50 years forward), the stakeholders (usually a shorter horizon) or the decision-makers (electoral life span).

What is the system to study (limits, scale)? From the general presentation of the situation in Romania related to rural areas, nested scales will be relevant to grasp some local specificities within a national reality with some outreaches at the EU and international level (migrations, competitiveness).

Will it be a participatory process, and if yes, to what extend? It will involve local stakeholders to increase the credibility of the outcomes and decision-makers to get them committed to the implementation / taking into account of the outcomes. Local stakeholders include decision-makers, experts, NGOs representatives, education representatives, communities, etc. They should also include "influent" participants such as opinion leaders, representatives of religions, etc.

What are the logistic features? A project management team will be appointed; the duration of the project could be 3 years although it is a very long duration that can be source of demotivation. 2 years would probably be enough to achieve good results.

3.2 "What are the methods chosen based on the criteria?"; "How inclusive are the methods?"; "What are the outputs?"

Most of foresight methodologies can be encompassed within an overarching meta-methodology, which is the following three-step process. So many methods are available in foresight that it seems counterproductive to defend one against another; altogether they represent the rich diversity of the field. Most of the time choosing a method or another is mainly influenced by the criteria mentioned above (budget, participation, dedicated means, duration, etc.).

The first step is UNDERSTANDING. The aim of this stage is to understand the system, its dynamics and its environment.

It begins with a systemic diagnosis that will allow describing the object (system), its environment (synchronic) and its evolution (diachronic). What are its main components? How do they interact? How has the system evolved during the last decades (or centuries according to the topic or purpose)? Many methods can contribute to this exploration of the system, such as the structural analysis and various types of mapping (e.g. engine/dependence graph [9]). Environmental scanning, trends spotting

or screening, search for breakthrough, ruptures and weak signals are part of the various ways to analyze the system's environment and the drivers of change that are impacting or could very likely impact it at short term. The elaboration and use of 'reading grids' are very helpful to discriminate information at this stage; along them, the classic STEEP or the LOINGER's '9 territorial dimensions' [10].

In French Prospective, the process continues with "Committed Future" (or programmed future) which is the identification of the "hits" already gone, such as under progress projects related to infrastructures, that will change something in the statement of the situation that the diagnosis did as based on the past and present.

Then, that is the analysis of the "Prevented Future". Let's imagine that you are following a road from A to B because you want to reach B. Suddenly your car faces a big fallen rock that prevent you to go further by blocking the road. The alternative strategies are 1) to make the rock disappear whatever the means (explosion, etc.), 2) to go out of the road around the rock or 3) to go back to find another road. This imaginary rock is called a "futures node" because it prevents you to follow evenly your road. Usually these futures nodes that you have to solve before being able to make your road towards your desirable future, are about education, food security, infrastructures, etc.

Finally, once this diagnosis has been stated in a comprehensive and dynamic way, several features of the system can be listed: its static features (strengths and weaknesses), its dynamic features (drivers (engines and breaks) and its future-carrying features (specificities and potentials).

During this entire step, both quantitative (statistics) and qualitative (interviews, workshops) data are analyzed.

The second step is about IMAGINING.

This stage aims to open the doors of the future by projecting mind forward; it is dedicated to an exploration of the futures. It usually includes two phases, one about possible futures (exploration) and the other about desirable futures (visioning).

From the previous step (Understanding), a picture of the future begins to appear. In unprepared minds, this picture is often led by emotions, especially fear, or by the inner worldview that may be fixist (deny of change) or dogmatic, etc. The point here is that we are not talking of an existing object of study but of the representations that mind forms about something that does not exist yet, the future. Therefore this is a highly subjective approach.

The role of a trained futurist here is to be able 1) to make a difference between somehow 'proved' trends and unproved conventional wisdom, (e.g. demographic transition v. demographic explosion); 2) to help participants to be aware of their own bias, good or bad, in order to free their imagination; 3) to generate (or help to) as many alternatives as possible in order to pave the way a real examination of the possible futures.

Each of these goals can be reached through various methods, according to cultural background, number of participants, logistic, etc. The issue is not the method but the result. At the end of this phase, plausible, relevant and coherent alternative narratives related to possible futures at the time horizon considered should be available. They

must be based on different perspectives, such as continuation, rupture or transformation of the structural system that is studied.

—Scenarios (as described in most of the methods of scenario) are part of these narratives but not the only way to describe these futures; they offer a very structured method but usually lack of sophistication: their ultra-simplification makes them unable to cope with the complexity of the real world. A credible scenario should proceed from assumptions related to 10 or 12 structural components of the studied system or drivers of change. Ideally it proceeds from a threefold matrix approach (cross-impacts): 1) cross-impacts of the future evolution(s) of the individual main structural components of the system over each other; 2) cross-impacts of the drivers over each other; 3) cross-impact of the drivers over the main components. The usual risk is to offer only three scenarios: the trend scenario (more of the same or business as usual), the dystopic one (collapse) and the utopic one (growth). The problem is that they all evolve within the same referential, leaving no room for alternative referentials (repositories) such as an evolution based on no or weak growth. This mono-referential is the worse obstacle to a foresight thinking and exercise. This is the reason why many creative methods including the wild cards approach could be preferred to the scenario method.

The second phase of Imagining is Visioning. During this phase, which is expected to be the most participatory in a democracy, participants will build their vision of desirable futures. They can do so from pure imagination, or from a more constructed process based either on the desirable solutions to their 'futures nodes' or main issues, or on their expectations for the future of their children, etc.

There may be a very difficult time of discussion when these visions are conflictual. If a consensus is desirable, nevertheless it should not obliterate the dissensus but try to overarch them.

Once a clear vision of the desirable future has been reached and shared by most of the participants, it is time to move to the next step of the meta-methodology.

The third and final step is about PROPOSING.

A proposal is what is propounded for consideration or acceptance; it is also a scheme or design, which is something, elaborated in a sophisticated way so that to be able to convey complex, coherent information that will be useful to decision-making. This specific step is essential for an operational foresight [11].

During this step, the vision resulting from the visioning process will be used both as a goal to reach (backcasting approach) in order to generate an immediate action plan, and as an explicit guideline/course for the future decisions to make. Thus it will generate proposals for action.

Firstly, this vision will be described in terms of goals to reach at a specific date and according to specific criteria of evaluation/assessment, along a path from the future to the present called backcasting.

Secondly, futures nodes will be prioritized by order of importance or emergency and pragmatic solutions will be discussed and chosen. They will be integrated to the detailed Vision.

Thirdly, the main steps to reach the goals and solve the problems (Plan A) will be designed and articulated in one master plan/policy, along the trend scenario (business as usual: no major ruptures, continuation of the identified trends, and adaptation to changes). A Plan B will be drawn out in case some internal factors would cause the failure of Plan A, still along this trend scenario. Then alternative paths will be designed according to other hypothesis such as 1) high uncertainties (major changes in the general situation that could be expected like crisis, techno-breakthrough, demographic loop, etc.), and 2) transition (civilizational ruptures including collapse, singularity, etc.).

Last but not least, a final document will be produced, making clear the difference between the building blocks common to all scenarios (decisions that have absolutely to be made whatever the evolution of the situation), and alternative possible decisions among which the decision-makers will choose according to his/her own constraints.

Communication, popularization, visualization are important parts of this stage which aims to convince the decision-maker to shift from future thinking to future building.

3.2 The case of the future of rural communities in Romania

Let's apply the meta-methodology to the Romanian case study and see how it can unfold itself.

The first step is understanding Romanian rural communities

The finalities expressed by our Romanian colleague are the need to face major challenges such as food production, impoverishment and transformation of rural communities and to find a way to develop these rural areas on a participatory basis and normative (as transformative) approach.

Due to the complexity of the topic (rural communities), a systemic approach seems necessary. It should display the various components of rural communities, from economic to cultural to geographic aspects; the internal and external drivers of change that have impacted these components, are impacting and will likely impact them in the near future; and the relationships between these components and the drivers of change (cross-impact analysis).

> Understanding the dynamics of change during the last fifty years will allow a structure to appear from this system and show not only the undergoing changes ('heavy' trends, emerging trends, weak signals) but also the local potentials for change.

> To process this phase the first step could be a data analysis. The first draft would be reviewed by experts (academics, professionals). Then a synthesis would be made, supported by an informational base. A working group of the main stakeholders would then share this diagnosis, supplement it and finally approved it. If some territories required it, local studies can be led in specific areas.

The second step is about imagining the future of Romanian rural communities.

> From this starting point, the imagination work can begin: how unexpected phenomena and known trends (climate change, migrations, laicization of the society, increasing hybridization, urbanization, food crisis, knowledge-based society, etc.) can impact on this system during the next 20 years.

Then the visioning process may begin. Two scales could be involved: a national scale with working groups of national decision-makers describing what desirable future they envision for rural communities in Romania at 2030. And a local scale (where appropriate) where working groups of local stakeholders could first enunciate 1) what they like and dislike in the current situation 2) what they fear or hope for the future. Secondly they would identify and prioritize the futures nodes that prevent their territory to reach the desirable future they encompass, and suggest solutions to solve them. Finally they would 1) design a consensual basis of desirable future for their communities and 2) identify the dissensus and how they could be faced.

At the local scale, two sorts of rural areas could be distinguished: rural areas neighboring cities (non-rural areas) where inhabitants use to commute; and isolated rural areas that are sociologically different.

During this step, the issue of the values and finalities is critical. Do inhabitants really want to change or do the decision-makers want it instead of them? Are people's visions and government's visions reconcilable? Who states the priorities and on what criteria?

The third and final step is about proposing actions.

After a large participatory process, it is time to bring back all the material elaborated at different scales or places, and assemble it into a coherent vision of several detailed alternatives (including maps, budget, planning, etc.).

Then the process becomes participatory again and participants are asked to express their preferred future. When this one is selected, on a consensual basis, they are asked to describe the way they propose to contribute in its building up. A 10-year master plan can then be designed (final outcome), along with a comprehensive policy of communication to inform the inhabitants, stakeholders, and decision-makers.

This step is often skipped when decision-makers want to get their hands free: it is indeed risky to ask people their desires and not fulfill them, whatever the reason. This is the reason this step must be thoroughly thought about at the very beginning of the exercise to avoid announcement effects.

In addition, a SIP (future-oriented system of information) should also be implemented in order to store the collected data in an organized way allowing their yearly update (continuous foresight), as well as an assessment process to follow the implementation of the project.

4. A futures process for rural Romanian communities (Jim Dator)

My approach to doing and applying futures studies, and thus the theories and methods that I would recommend for futures studies applied to rural communities in Romania, are very similar to what Fabienne Goux-Baudiment has just described. Thus, I will here do no more than elaborate on some of the topics Dr. Goux-Baudiment discusses, and add some specific methods that I feel should be considered, including one that I believe to be absolutely essential for a successful futures exercise.

Steps in a futures process. [12]

Step 1. There can be no doubt, as Dr. Goux-Baudiment makes clear, that the first thing a futurist needs to do is be certain she understands who her client is, and what her client wants her to do. It is sometimes the case that the person one initially assumes to be the client is in fact not, thus getting the project off on the wrong foot to begin with. That is an utterly practical but extremely important issue that must be clearly determined.

Step 2. Next, though Dr. Goux-Baudiment does not mention this, I firmly contend that before anyone can proceed to study any social phenomenon or entity, she must have a clear and guiding theory of social stability and change. That theory then enables the futurist to know what data to collect and use, and what data can be safely ignored within the context of the specific project. In the Romanian case, that means the futurist needs to collect data on a specific number of factors, often called "driving forces", that have been important in shaping the past and present of the entity, and thus can be assumed, according to the guiding theory, to be of importance in shaping the future.

While certain driving forces are probably generic to all social situations, others are clearly unique, or at least especially important, in some but not other situations. The list of driving forces thus can only be determined after discussion with the client and serious research into the past of the entity--in this case, rural Romanian communities. Once determined, the driving forces are analyzed over time from the past to the present, and are projected by some conventional forecasting technique into the future on the typical (but often erroneous) assumption that "trends will continue." Some of the driving forces and trends will be conflicting or contradictory, but they nonetheless, individually and interactively, may give a picture of one plausible alternative future. They also make clear what trends seem unsustainable as projected, immediately alerting one to possible instances of change.

Step 3. The next thing to do is to collect and analyze existing futures research, forecasts, plans, movies, stories, or other sources from Romania and elsewhere that illuminate the future of rural Romanian communities. It is quite important to know what has been done in various forms before not only in order not to reinvent a well-worn wheel but also to see how the new research might build upon, correct, or supplement what has gone before. Too much futures research is done in ignorance of the work of others, which should, at the very least, make one consider the future fate of one's own work. Every new piece of futures research is, or should be, an opportunity to learn from what has been done before, and thus continuously to improve the art of conjecture.

Step 4. Once the historical and present contours of rural Romanian communities are understood and extrapolated, and related futures research analyzed, it is time to apply those techniques that the futurist feels from experience to be particularly useful in any circumstance. If, as I believe, we live in a world where the futures is likely to be highly discontinuous from the past, then I am eager to know and use methods that enable us to forecast the cause and consequences of the discontinuities. That leads me to focus on three methods particularly:

    A. Technological forecasting

    B. Emerging issues analysis

C. Age-cohort analysis

Since my theory of social change gives strong emphasis to the role of new and diffused technologies as agents of social and environmental change [12,13], I need to consider how the diffusion of technologies used elsewhere, but not yet in rural Romania, might change the behavior of people there, and thus challenge older beliefs, values, and institutions. I also need to look for new technologies that are not yet developed and/or diffused that might encourage new behaviors and beliefs. The details of that process are too long to discuss here, but it should be understood that I use "technology" in a way that is broader, deeper, and more precise than the conventional meaning of the term It is important to look into the impact of new technologies in different contexts, anticipate unexpected effects, identify action to counteract negative effects and support potential positive effects.

Emerging issues analysis [12,14] is a technique for looking for things at their earliest possible emergence that may eventually become trends, and then problem/opportunities at a later time. Identifying emerging issues--a technique that takes some time to learn how to use effectively--gives decision makers a chance to shape their emergence and growth more appropriately.

Age-cohort analysis [16,17] helps us understand how generations, reared on one set of experiences, technologies, behaviors, and beliefs, replace or are challenged by other generations reared on a different set of experience, technologies, behaviors and beliefs. As one generation replaces another, society changes. Age-cohort analysis thus provides a broader longitudinal framework for understanding past, present, and future social change and continuity.

Step 5. All of the material gathered so far, primarily by the futurist and her team, is now woven together by them into at least four alternative future images or scenarios. In many ways, this is the most crucial step in the entire futures process. It is very important that everyone come to understand the openness, fluidity, possible nature of the futures--what Bertrand de Jouvenel called *futuribles*. There is no single future that can be predicted, but rather a range of alternative futures that must be forecasted before beginning to envision and moving towards preferred futures.

Research over the years makes it crystal clear to me that there are always before us specific versions of four generic alternative futures that can be labeled most succinctly *grow, collapse, sustain, transform* [18]. If participants in a futures process do not have the opportunity to "experience" in some vivid, deep, engaging way specific versions of each of the four generic alternative futures, then their naïve vision of the future will be based largely on solving current problems or redressing past grievances, and have very little to do with the many new challenges and opportunities actually lying ahead, often just over the horizon.

I have learned over the years that clients often strongly resist this approach. They want the futurist instead to identify the "real" future. Or, at best, they may content themselves with so-called "alternative futures" that actually are only variations around a single future--usually "high", "medium" and "low" of some version of *grow*. *Grow* is always one alternative, but it is by no means the "default", "normal", or "most likely" future any more, as perhaps it was in the past.

Yet *grow* is so firmly and deeply implanted in us by 150 years of formal education, developmental policies, economic theories, and media hype that it is almost impossible for most people easily to consider, much less to embrace, other alternatives, and thus they envision and plan for a kind of *grow* future that cannot be achieved, thus failing to take advantage of the challenges and opportunities that do exist in other alternatives.

And yet all societies and institutions come into existence for some reason, reach maturity, become fragile and obsolete, and fade away. Communities and institutions are coming and going all around us at unprecedented speed. It is imperative then to consider what a "collapse" future might mean for one's rural community -or all rural communities- or what general social collapse might mean for the future of one's rural community (with robust re-growth, vigor, and centrality being one possible consequence for rural communities of general social collapse: their traditional ways of living and doing might become highly functional once again.

In order to prevent collapse and/or to heal the social and environmental wounds caused by endless "growth" and "development", more people are calling for "discipline" and "sustainability" arguing that once a certain standard of wealth is maintained, and fairly distributed, enough is enough and more growth is cancerous and destructive, especially if the population of the community and/or nation is stable or declining.

However, there are many futurists who consider all three of these futures to be unlikely, unimaginative, and timid. They see society in all sectors transforming into variations of communities beyond mere economic growth or sustainability. The exact contours of a transformed society are beyond prediction, but the factors leading to it are clear, and to focus on continued economic growth, to cower in fear of collapse, or to retreat into mere sustainability is to miss an unprecedented opportunity for transformation.

While it is the duty of the futurist to construct the alternative futures out of the prior historical and contemporary research and the output of the various futures methods (such as the three previously mentioned), it is then up to the client, and the other people who the client chooses to involve in the futures process, to "experience" representations of the four alternative futures in some way. This can be no more than having people read alternative futures scenarios and discuss what their life and work might be if "the future" were to be as the scenario describes it. Alternatively, and better, people might be physically and emotionally surrounded by environments constructed to represent each of the four futures, interacting with artifacts and people from the future for an extended period of time, and then reflecting together on the experience.

The main point of experiencing and reflecting on some or all four alternative futures before engaging in envisioning preferred futures is to challenge the "crackpot realism" that restrains most imaginations now. Most of us are so firmly entrenched in the "reality" of the present that we can not see how very remarkable our present lives are from the point of view either of the pasts or the futures. The four generic alternative futures process is intended to enable us to loosen the restricting bonds of the present by experiencing and thriving in very different alternative futures.

In the case of a Romanian rural futures project, I would strongly urge that as many of the people actually living in or in some manner responsible for the rural communities

first participate in an alternative futures exercise, as described, and then in a futures visioning process for their community.

Step 6. Thus, the sixth step in the futures process is a futures visioning workshop [19]. It is extremely important to resist the temptation of skipping the alternative futures portion and directly asking people to imagine their preferred future. Humans are certainly capable of saying what they want in their future when asked. However, since futures studies is not a part of most people's formal education yet, most people are poorly prepared to articulate a vision that is not, as I said above, a reaction to whatever the problems of the day are and/or to settle some past grievance. Thus, their vision may be vivid and clear, but profoundly unhelpful in actually preparing them and their community for the novelties and continuities of the futures.

It is like asking people to run a marathon without preparing appropriately for it: they may run, and they may cross the finish line, but their times and subsequent health are likely to be far worse than they would be if they had trained properly beforehand for the race.

Step 7. It is then up to the futurist, working with the client, to flesh out one or more preferred futures from the output of the futures visioning workshop so that it then can be incorporated into something actionable--most typically a strategic plan of some type that establishes general goals according to the vision. The plan then (perhaps through more detailed functional plans), assigns specific tasks to specific people, with specific amounts of money, and with target and review dates, for each of the steps involved in each task and goal.

Step 8. Very importantly, a futures research unit needs to be created, staffed, and funded to oversee the ongoing activities of step seven; to update the vision/plan with regular scans and in-house re-evaluations; and importantly to plan for and repeat the entire futures process at some appropriate date in the future. This also is a crucial step frequently overlooked which, if ignored, can make the entire futures process a more or less interesting but useless exercise.

In conclusion, I think it is clear that the process I propose is very similar to what Fabienne Goux-Baudiment proposes as well, and might thus give the organizers some reason for confidence in following our suggestions.

5. Challenges facing rural communities in Romania (Sam Cole)

I follow Dator in commending Goux-Baudiment's compendium of Foresight methodological opportunities and Dator's clarification and elaboration. I would like to draw together both contributions by exemplifying some of the questions and suggestions in Ghisa's introduction to her overview of the issues confronting rural communities in Romania. I adopt primarily the perspective of a futurist who has used various methods in policy development. Although the basic methodological ingredients of Futures and Foresight studies over the post-war era remain intact, there have been many refinements and there are continuing debates within the foresight community, and also between FS and Futures, Prospective and TA, and so on [20] These different

perspectives arise because researchers have tried to develop methods that work for them and address the issues and temperament of their societies, etc. The debate is healthy, but this does mean that it is not sensible for outsiders to overly prescribe what others should do. Thus, I suggest that as far as possible any Romanian futures project adapts and evolves methods suited to its own purposes and competences (rather than adopt an off-the-shelf set of methods). I would also suggest that the same rubric applies to any development projects recommended to be implemented in rural areas.

5.1 Scenarios

With Goux-Baudiment and Dator, I certainly recommend using some kind of scenario methods. For me, the art of scenario building is to construct a coherent set of plausible future histories from which lessons might be learned and specific policies and proposals evaluated [21]. In contrast to a "one-off" project to prepare a plan for a given individual community, this more "global" futures exercise seeks to understand how communities and institutions might evolve, organize, and communicate, in order to better advance their collective and individual goals. Given this ambitious scope, of Ghisa's options for the orientation of the rural project, the *pragmatic* option to "reach for a better quality of life desired by the communities" is to be preferred. The futures project and any proposals that emerge should be well-focused and well-conceived. Certainly one should avoid an all-embracing bells-and-whistles foresight exercise. There is also a question of time-frame: while a foresight project over the suggested two to three years may provide a framework for rural development, the process of implementation is likely to take much longer. There is a conflict between what Ghisa describes as a fragile and quite rapidly deteriorating situation that requires fairly urgent attention, and these might be prioritized within the on-the-ground fulfillment of any longer-term implemented strategy.

Dator observes that most futures scenarios comprise specific variants of four generic alternative futures that can be labeled as "grow", "collapse", "sustain", and "transform." While this may well be the case, it is nonetheless useful in these specific situations to develop scenarios that are as relevant and instructive as possible to the conditions and institutions at hand. Without preempting such choice, it is useful to provide an illustration. Any discussion of rural development is ultimately part of the wider discussion of the future of human settlements, which is in turn includes a discussion of globalization and sustainability. Here one might argue that rural Romania is trapped between its short-run and relatively urgent crises, and the process of restructuring within the Romania, the EU, and the world. There is rather little that communities within rural Romania can do alone to affect the larger geography, except in the wisdom of "think globally, act locally" or in some way become a model for rural development everywhere. Of course, ideally, both should be incorporated into the projects thinking.

So, where to pitch the scenarios? In the case of rural Romania, this might arguably be at the level of short-run, rather than immediate, or even urgent. To address these, hopefully there are existing "solutions" that might be adapted from one community to the next (as illustrated later). Or, a scenario might be at the level of settlement patterns in general. For example, some 40 years ago, Toffler posited what has become an iconic future based on the notion of the "electronic cottage." While it is clear that this has not been the dominant trend it is evident that the possibilities are increasingly apparent. The more dominant trend, and hence the scenario that preoccupies the literature and

policy debate, is that of the "mega-city." Some literature argues that even the mega-cities of China are economically sub-optimal in terms of size. The out-migration from rural areas in Romania and worldwide is consistent with this scenario. A third scenario hinted at by Ghisa is that rural Romania might orient itself towards a tourism destination, in effect to become a playground for city-dwellers and other visitors. This builds on the fact that domestic and international tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries in which, Ghisa indicates, both demand and supply are potentially abundant. In fact these three spatial-institutional levels for scenario analysis are not inconsistent since one could paint a variety of composite and contrasting images, each of which might meet the objectives for rural development based on these portraits, and be instructive for the project.

At a local level, the best that might be expected is that any local strategy be sufficiently robust to absorb even unexpected changes in the wider environment – economic, political, and environmental. In terms of the earlier levels of scenarios, rural Romania must seek to address the local short-run contingencies [22] while seeking to ensure that the solutions are sustainable in the face of relatively heavy momentum in terms of demographic and economic national and international restructuring, and a variety of potential ecological and other challenges. While any specific future is unpredictable, scenarios built around a variety of plausible contingences do help to design sustainable strategies. Moreover, scenarios organized as just described also map well onto the institutional structure of governance (viewed as a nested hierarchy) and help us better understand how each facilitates, and could better facilitate, the desired changes at the local level.

Ghisa observes that there is a continuing debate over the European hierarchical institutional model. On the one hand Risse observes that citizen's identification with and attachment to Europe has grown in recent years, while exclusive loyalties to the nation-state are in decline [23] In contrast, McGinnis [24] sees the EU as an example of polycentric governance in danger of going off course and losing the balance needed for its continued development. Küpper [25]suggests that rural partnerships designed to facilitate regional cooperation run the risk of becoming grant coalitions cooperating only to get the money from superordinate levels for their local uncoordinated projects. Küpper believes also that new rural governance structures and efforts for network-building are overly expensive and time-consuming. Florian [26] sees present systems adding to the population's lack of trust in the central power entities, which generates apathy in the civil society elements with the tendency to fragment and weaken the emerging small community networks he sees as clearly in flux. While the EU has made "dramatic advances" in opening up markets and in deepening ties among the peoples of Europe, it has failed to well articulate a vision of the essential roles that local, regional, and national diversity will continue to play within the European project. Clearly the European institutional framework will evolve further due to economic and other pressures from above and below, and it is possible that (as indicated earlier) a successful outcome to the rural Romania project could have some influence of the direction of institutional change. Again, it may be that the present project can further clarify and help resolve some of the inherent issues.

5.2 Informing Case Studies

Just as the statistical trends and impacts (such as those cited by Ghisa) present an overview of the overall situation and provide data with which to assess the future size

and scope and potential resource commitments, examples and anecdotes from particular local case studies provide information and data on how local systems function. Inherent within these trends and impacts are glimpses of possible "models" for the future that might be integrated into a general strategy. In other words, we learn from individual community-level experiences for the construction of a generalizable set of principles [27]. Whether (or not) these initiatives have themselves been successful, they can offer valuable lessons for how (or how not) to conduct rural development. Sandi [28] has pointed to the ethical dilemmas in prioritizing development projects for deprived communities.

There are some issues (such as poverty, aging, and out-migration) that are characteristic of rural societies worldwide, and even though there appears to be relatively limited literature on this topic in Romania, most nations are grappling with similar problems. There are consequently a good many accumulated lessons to be learned both with specific initiatives, technologies, and ways of proceeding; and, as Dator points out, there is much to be gained from understanding and adapting (adopting?) solutions that others have devised. This is one of the primary sources of creativity and innovation. There are several studies that reinforce Ghisa's analysis and explore ways of advancing desirable tendencies and mitigating adverse features.

For example, one study for rural Romania that explores opportunities to reduce disparities between rural and urban areas suggests these can be reduced to an "acceptable level" by government policies to stimulate private investment by improving public infrastructure and through a better allocation of resources for education and health [29]. In another initiative in Romania (a USAID-funded project) has assisted local governments to develop better services through the Community Mediation and Security Centers (CMSC) training local residents to become facilitators and volunteers in social and community services, such as conflict mediation, informal classes for youth, and creating a local volunteer system. There are other problems that may be best addressed by collaborative public-private initiatives. One example of this is the Romanian Social Development Fund [30] which finances projects and provides technical assistance and advice in order to address and resolve joint problems. A related project supported by the World Bank (The Knowledge Economy Project) is designed to support "knowledge disadvantaged communities" in Romania.

Ghisa observes both that most Romanians look to rural areas as the touchstone of their cultural heritage and that the Romanian countryside has much to offer in this regard [31]. Thus, the foundations in terms of both demand and supply are there, and the opportunities are likely to increase as Romania becomes more involved in the EU economy. That said, the experience of rural tourism in general has been mixed and shows the need to balance residents' needs and those of visitors and the tourist industry. The irony here is that outsiders are the best judges of what makes a place attractive to visitors and who have the financial and marketing capacity to exploit it. Consequently the general pattern has shown that most of the benefits accrue to "outsiders" and that jobs to nationals tend to be seasonal.

There are nonetheless many opportunities, even when there are issues of small scale, remoteness, and a lack of financial resources or local planning capability. Clusters of communities must be encouraged to collaborate on projects that demand some economies of scale by establishing mutual trust in each other, themselves, and outside advisors. As an illustration of small scale, one project sought over several years to

encourage a number of small villages along a highway in rural NYS to collaborate on tourism projects. This project was undertaken by students from a regional university working with local community leaders that established a partnership eligible for State and other grants; together they devised and implemented several tourism projects. Possibly the most interesting and successful part of the project was a 30 mile long "garage sale" linking small communities along the highway; this brought to light traditional artifacts and other bric-a-brac that had accumulated over many years in barns, fields and farms; these and local organic farm produce was sold to traffic passing through. This building on a national tradition brings income directly to local households, provides cheap goods for impoverished local families, and also introduces visitors and potential new residents into these communities. Beginning with such relatively small but successful collaborative endeavors can help to raise local awareness, self confidence, and control, and avoid some of the negative consequences of overly-rapid engagement in tourism.

Although the example above was a "low-tech" exercise based on a popular American pastime of "garage and boot sales, the successful implementation embodied ideas from theoretical economics (agglomeration and scale) and marketing, the emergent problems of traffic management, and the practice in bargaining skills to ensure that locals get the best price for their antiques. These American rural communities illustrate less desirable features of overly market-driven development that the Romanian project might seek to avoid, e.g. their "home rule" style of governance coupled to the generic challenges of rural communities means that they have little public income or planning capability, and no means to implement more elaborate development projects. One possible solution to this is a high-tech "planning bus" staffed by AmeriCorp workers (a kind of early career service corresponding to that formerly adopted in Romania), graduate students, and volunteers, that visits villages for one or two days monthly to address their planning and information needs.

Dator expresses the need to consider how the diffusion of technologies used elsewhere, but not yet in rural Romania, might change the behavior of people there. Ironically, the suggestion above arises in part from work undertaken at an institute for rural technology (CTARA) at an Indian University (IIT Bombay). Graduates of the institute who have had successful private sector careers have initiated a series of "Village Knowledge Centers" in the spirit "of giving back to society" in which each alumni adopts one village. The goal is to bring about social transformation leveraging technology and to spread computer-based literacy programs that meet the needs and aspirations of the rural people, and to provide government-to-citizen and business-to-citizen services. Developing this program again involves many technical challenges that the alumni have the wherewithal to overcome. Such programs offer the hope that more rural working lives could be modeled on Toffler's electronic cottage, and hence meet a common cry from rural communities to provide local "jobs for their children so they don't have to move away."

5.3 Clients

Apart from their inherent logic, futures and foresight studies must be able to articulate a message that is persuasive. If the only clients were senior officials and policy makers, then it might be appropriate to adopt fairly sophisticated methods that would carry approval in the EU, as well as Romania. However, for a worthwhile futures study of the kind envisaged by Goux-Baudiment and Dator more must be achieved. As Plato

wrote in the Republic some two-thousand years ago, "would that we could create a myth that would carry conviction to the whole community." [32] This obviously has to include both the immediate clients (policy-makers) and the ultimate beneficiaries – rural communities across Romania. In this exercise, a touchstone for Goux-Baudiment is whether peoples' visions and governments' visions are reconcilable, who states the priorities and so on? To address such concerns, Dator urges that as many residents as possible should participate first in an alternative futures exercise, and then in a futures visioning process for their community. He insists that a community-level preferred vision be incorporated into an overarching strategy that establishes general goals.

An example from Aruba (a Dutch Caribbean island) illustrates the kind of attention that may be needed to carry the message of foresight proposals to the community. The goal was to establish a framework for sustainable tourism and deepen the benefits across the wider community [33]. The scheme adopted parallels that indicated by Goux-Baudiment and Dator. The first stage consisted of assembling data, previous plans and consultants' reports, and most importantly, the gathering of ideas from individuals, communities, entrepreneurs, around the island. In the second stage, these inputs were worked into a strategic document debated by policy-makers involving economic, demographic, land-use and revenue analysis over a two-generation horizon. The aim was a) to convince policy makers and the industry that the strategy was viable from a macro perspective, b) to leave open options for islanders to control their way of life, and c) to ensure that individuals from each community could see themselves and their ideas embodied in the proposals. In the third stage, and most important stage, the Minister of Tourism personally attended focus groups in all thirty barios (districts) around the island, where the framework was critiqued, revised, and haggled over, some proposals abandoned and new ideas promoted. This in turn led to final proposals, some of which are already implemented and others revised or rejected. In this exercise the commitment and involvement of the Minister and his senior officials was paramount, as was that of local individuals and ultimately their communities.

6. Conclusions

Romanian rural communities face difficult challenges regarding resources, agriculture, rural development, education and values. It's clear that in designing a foresight or a future exercise for rural communities there are many options. There is not a universal recipe but several alternatives to consider. It is clear that any exercise needs to start from a high contextualization of specific rural communities and followed by well-adapted steps and methods considering the aims of the exercise and the challenges specific rural communities face. Developers of such an exercise might themselves face challenges during the process as well as promoting the outcomes at policy maker level. Even so such an exercise represents an important mutual learning process that can lead to many initiatives for the Romanian rural communities.

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