

# VALENCES OF SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF DISPARITIES BETWEEN THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS

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**Abstract:** *This paper deals with aspects of disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of access to education. Based on a series of qualitative research activities, its purpose was to identify the differences between the needs of rural and urban students, the causes that led to their existence and measures to reduce them. The results can contribute to reducing existing gaps in the sustainable development of Romanian education.*

**Key words:** *social sustainability, rural area, educational system*

## 1. Introduction

According to the United Nations's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, one of the 17 goals adopted by the countries was based on education. Quality education is considered fundamental for sustainable development. Quality education is particularly lacking in rural areas due to poor infrastructure, lack of qualified teachers and poverty (United Nation, 2019).

Although the social aspect of sustainability appears in both the Brundtland definition and the 'triple bottom line' developed by John Elkington in 1997, the social role is rarely treated equal to the economic or environmental ones. Social sustainability is defined as an improvement in living conditions and a process within communities to achieve this (McKenzie, 2004; Boyer et al., 2016). Another definition emphasizes the protection of the population regardless of colour, origin, culture or economic-social status by promoting socially, economically and environmentally fair policies (Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017).

Access to quality education is a prerequisite for the sustainable development of any economy and therefore governments must act to reduce school dropouts and improve the education system, regardless of the rural or urban areas (Romanian Government, 2019). Reducing the educational gap between urban and rural areas is an effective way

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to increase social equality between the two environments, leading to a more balanced distribution of resources (Chakrabarti and Mehta, 2019).

Romania is among the countries where the disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of education are very high. Although reforms in education have taken place in recent years, they have had more of a positive effect on urban areas and less in rural areas (Mocanu and Zamfir, 2016). With almost half of the population in rural areas, 46.4%, Romania has a dropout rate of 26.6% in rural areas and 6.2% in urban areas, according to the World Bank Global Development Report. At the same time, over 80% of low-performing schools are in rural areas (Badea, 2018). In rural areas poverty and social exclusion are two times higher than that in urban areas, the modernization of the school network is very slow, pupils lack decent conditions for courses and teachers often lack qualifications (European Commission, 2019; Stanef and Manole, 2013).

In view of the considerations above, this study aims to determine the extent to which there are differences between the various types of needs of pupils in urban and rural areas and to identify measures that could contribute to mitigation, for a more efficient social sustainability in the Romanian educational system. In shaping the objectives of the research, the work started from the motivational theory of Alderfer (ERC theory). Alderfer includes in its approach three types of needs: existence, relatedness and growth needs. Existence needs refer to living without danger and in safety, relatedness needs refer to creating and maintaining relationships with others and the needs of growth cover the intrinsic desire for development (Turabik and Baskan, 2015).

## **2. Methodology**

The problem targeting in the research, the existence of disparities between the needs of rural and of urban pupils, has led to setting aims and objectives for the research. The main aim was to identify how and to what extent these disparities affect social sustainability in the Romanian educational system. The objectives of the research are: (O1) determining the categories of needs, looking from the perspective of the steps indicated by Alderfer's motivational pyramid model, for which the differences between urban and rural areas are the most obvious; (O2) determining how differences between the needs of urban and rural pupils affect the educational process; (O3) identifying the differences affecting social sustainability in the Romanian educational system.

The research methods used to achieve the proposed objectives were the observation method and the method of in-depth interviews conducted among specialists (teachers, practicing students, psychologists, etc.)

The direct observation method of marketing, consisted in the observation of the physical environment and the behavior of pupils in six schools in the Central Region, three in the urban area (Andrei Muresanu Brasov High School, Gymnasium No.3 Codlea, Ovidiu Densusianu Fagaras High School) and three rural schools (Voila High School, Lisa High School and Vulcan High School). Through observation sheets, customized to support the achievement of the research objectives, the researcher recorded, in actual time, the behavior of students (clothing, teaching materials, during classroom or extra

classroom activities and breaks, attitude and towards other colleagues) and elements of the physical environment (cleanliness, design and funding level of the schools). The observation method used is direct (implying a measurement of behaviour at the time when an event happened), personal (the researcher was responsible for the observation of the pupil's manifestation), visible and carried out in the natural environment of the manifestation of the analyzed behaviors, assuming that this type of observation accurately reflects the behavior, phenomenon or the investigated, structured situation (the aspects to be observed being established in advance and highlighted in the observation sheet). This observed reaction could be verbal or nonverbal. Observing the nonverbal communication was an important aspect since in market research, it is known that a large part of the meaning of a message is transmitted nonverbal. In order to not infringe ethical principles and to not prejudice the rights of the individual, matters relating to the personal data of the participants or intimate matters were not the subject of observation and the personal data of the participants were not disclosed, respecting the principle of confidentiality.

Another research method used to achieve the objectives was to conduct unstructured interviews with specialists and parents. Discussions were held with 16 people, teachers from the urban and rural areas, psychologists, trainers and parents of primary or secondary school pupils.

The limits of this research are first from the limitations of the method used for research: the behavior observed was for a limited amount of time, they could not perceive mental processes, such as attitudes, motivations, expectations or opinions of pupils, no explanation of the behaviors could be obtained and the expected actions or future intentions of the subjects could not be surmised. At the same time, to resolve the limitations of this research method, an alternative research method was used: unstructured individual interviews.

### **3. Results**

The needs of the pupils included in the research were analyzed from two perspectives: their manifestation and degree of satisfaction. Several differences were identified between the needs of urban pupils and those from rural areas, as well as differences in the degree to which these needs were met through the competitiveness of families and of schools. Following the model of ERG theory proposed by Alderfer three groups of needs were analyzed for fulfilment: existence needs, relatedness needs and needs of growth. Needs such as access to food and clothing, to sanitized and heated spaces, to adequately equipped sanitary facilities, teaching materials, and equipment and to a non-stressful and safe environment have been analyzed from the category of existence needs. The second group of needs, the relatedness, was approached from the perspective of group affiliation, esteem and affection through interpersonal connections between pupils, between pupils and teaching staff and pupils and their parents. Finally, the needs for growth, encompassing the intrinsic desire for personal development, were analyzed from the perspective of the needs of self-esteem and self-confidence, stimulation, knowledge and expression, development and achievement.

There were no differences between pupils in the urban and rural areas regarding existence needs, but there were clear differences in their level of satisfaction for certain categories of other needs such as: access to food, clothing and teaching materials. According to reports by research specialists, a very small number of urban pupils come to school without having eaten properly at home and when this happens the causes are linked to lack of appetite or haste. Most urban pupils included in the research have daily food snacks from home and so food received at school through the “eating horn and milk” program or similar programs are treated with disinterest by most pupils and even refused or discarded by many of them. In rural areas, the situation is different. There are many pupils who arrive at school without having eaten anything at home and without having snacks from home. They appreciate and eat food received at school through the government programs or other projects. Some teaching staff participating in the research reported that they often brought food to school for pupils who did not have a snack from home to “eat something at the same time with their colleagues”. Also, some of the interviewed pupils said that in their class there were situations when the snack brought from home by a student was shared with others. As far as clothing is concerned, all urban pupils observed had suitable, clean and season-appropriate clothing, with most pupils wearing the school uniform. In the rural areas, although in small numbers, situations were encountered of pupils whose clothes were not as clean as they should be or had an unpleasant smell which led to rejection by other pupils. In such situations, the non-satisfaction of a basic need has direct consequences on how the needs of the other categories will be met. As regards to the physical environment in schools (cleaning, air conditioning) both urban and rural schools covered by the research are clean, adequately air-conditioned and equipped with sanitary facilities. No significant differences were found between the analyzed schools in terms of equipping the schools with teaching materials and computer equipment. However, the situation changes when the availability of personal educational supplies for pupils is analyzed, if a large number of rural children come from disadvantaged families because they produce a significant effect on this aspect.

The analysis of the needs of the second category, relatedness needs, focused on how to express the feeling of integration, of belonging. During the educational process pupils, both rural and urban, must feel comfortable with other children to combat feelings of isolation or rejection. No matter the background they come from, the pupils' adaptation to the demands of life in society, can be difficult if they are not supported to discover their interests and passions, formulate common goals and pursue their achievement. Therefore, situations must be created in the classroom to enable students to experience success and gain appreciation from other members of the group. In rural areas, compared to urban areas, pupils know each other well from outside of the school environment, which does not always have positive effects. For example, stigmatisation or isolation phenomena in the village community can also be extended in schools. During the research rare cases of stigmatization, isolation or self-isolation were found. In the urban areas, pupils with special educational needs (CES) included in the mass education system were affected by this phenomenon, while in the rural areas, pupils

that were the newcomers, didn't have time to get to know the rest of the class. Also, in the rural areas, situations were observed in which some pupils addressed each other by appealing to their ethnicity.

The analysis of how needs for growth and fulfilment manifest themselves has led to the conclusion that there are significant differences between the ideals and the expectancy out of life of rural pupils compared to urban pupils. For example, numerous urban pupils think, even from early ages, about the high school they will attend or even the university, nurturing the hope of obtaining a good or satisfying mark on the capacity exam, while most of the rural pupils are pessimistic about the mark they will get on the capacity exam and about succeeding in a high school. It can be concluded that the ideals of success in life of rural pupils are far below those of urban pupils by analyzing the pupils' expectations regarding the results they could achieve in school exams and the jobs they dream of having.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The results of the research show that in Romania the disparities between rural and urban areas exists, even if reforms were made in education (Mocanu and Zamfir, 2016; EC, 2019; Stanef and Manole, 2013). Poverty is the main cause of maintaining these disparities. Even though children from rural areas have the same existence needs as those in urban areas, they experience difficulties in access to food, clothing and teaching materials due to the low standard of living of their families. Also, regarding relatedness needs, in rural areas, because of the low level of education (also caused by poverty), stigmatisation or isolation phenomena can be extended in schools.

As can be seen from the literature children in rural areas have low school performance (Badea, 2018), and the results of the research highlighted that they have very different and less expectations regarding their future from those in urban areas.

The research results demonstrate once again the importance of a social aspect of sustainability. They highlighted the need to increase social equality between rural and urban areas, by facilitating access to a quality education of children in rural areas, so that they can develop as well as those in urban areas.

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