

## AGRICULTURE BETWEEN IDENTITY AND VULNERABILITY. THE CASE OF ȚARA BEIUȘULUI (BEIUȘ LAND)

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**Abstract:** Most of the rural communities are dependant on the results of the agricultural activities. They have ensured the existence and survival of the rural activities, thus becoming in time, very deep identity elements. The present global economical context, based on efficiency, performance and competitiveness, has isolated the rural communities, by exposing them to external market. Moreover, a sustainable agriculture is a complex and difficult process, with a slow evolution. Under the recent circumstances, of appreciation of the local agricultural products, there appears some opportunities of (re)capitalization and „*reinvention*” of agriculture. The success of this new type of agriculture only depends on the ability of the local community to turn this un-exploited potential into a viable solution of local development. The present study focuses on the functional features of the agricultural activities in Beiuș Land, by underlining both the identity elements, which had been preserved over the years, and the vulnerable ones (sometimes induced but these very identity elements). The analysis objective is to identify those elements on which the agricultural development should rely, as a sustainable economical alternative of Beiuș area. The analyzed markers are: the agricultural exploitations features (number, size, juridical structure, functional profile) and the features of manpower in agriculture (number, structure on age groups, education level). The conclusions of this study indicate, on one hand, that vulnerability, with all its effects, the result of new social-economical circumstances can contribute to the degradation of the identity of this area and the loss of one of its identity components, respectively agriculture. On the other hand, the strong identity elements, properly capitalized in a development strategy of the authentic local products, can contribute to the establishment of a viable local productive system (based on ecological agriculture), as a foundation for agriculture as additional economic activity.

**Key words:** subsistence agriculture, agriculture exploitations, vulnerability, identity

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## INTRODUCTION

As Xenophon would put it, centuries ago, agriculture is the nurse of all crafts (Bulgaru, 1966). To this quality, the same agriculture is the one that had given man an identity, i.e. it had turned him from a simple harvester into a manufacturer of goods and even more. It even triggered his sedentariness and, implicitly, the establishment of human settlements, civilizations.

On a global level, the ensurance of food security is considered one of the sine qua non requirements for economic development. In Europe, this criterion has been acknowledged through the establishment of a joint European policy in agriculture and rural development. Thus, in order to take up this challenge, there are implemented spread programmes, on the long term, by mobilizing important funds and creating specialized institutional structures. Over decades, the joint agriculture policy had been the most important of the European policies, with almost half of the European budget. The results of this joint agriculture policy are clear: the unprecedented development of the European village and the ensurance of food security of the mainland.

After Romania had joined the European Union, between 2007-2013, it benefited from funds of over eight billion euros (plus the equivalent of two other billion of euros, representing the national co-finance), that should have been directed to rural areas and agriculture, in order to solve the multiple problems they had encountered (PNDR, 2008). The new European budget period, 2014-2020, gives more chance to regenerate traditional agriculture in rural areas, by the possibility to capitalize the niche agriculture, represented by ecological agriculture.

In the reality of the Romanian rural space, there is, however, a wide gap with regards to these global and European efforts. The opportunities that had arisen together with joining the European Union, had been almost uncaptialized, the reasons being multiple and complex. The most important reason, and most difficult, at the same time, is of structural nature, being in relation with the inaction of the entire Romanian rural space and its difficulty in finding its lost identity, as a result of the consecutive mutations over the last century. Over the last decades, the rural world had undergone major changes with rapid transformations in agriculture. The costs of production had increased, whilst the price of the primary agricultural products had decreased. The difficulties to adapt to the market economy, on one hand, and modernization, on the other hand, had led to the lay-off of a large part of the manpower, thus triggering social hardships. These changes over a relatively short time, had unbalanced the rural environment, its reaction being slow. Gradually, the gap between towns had increased, the rural areas facing serious economic problems (unemployment, lack of economic appeal), degradation of town and social infrastructure. Soon, many rural localities had faced a demographic decline, due to youth emigration, on one hand, and a severe demographic ageing process, on the other hand. The direct result was the depopulation of numerous rural localities, their future remaining uncertain. Generally, the profound negative effects on the Romanian village had also been the mutations in the urban areas, due to the policies of forced urbanization and industrialization, having being left without support after the fall of the communist regime, and also the results of forced collectivization.

The natural distinctiveness of Beiuș Land and its rural characteristic, were at the foundation of the agricultural activities development from old times. Ștefănescu (2001) considered that, even though agriculture in Beiuș Land is not evident compared with other Transylvanian mountainous regions, for the inhabitants of Beiuș Land it has always been „*the main reason to live*” (Ștefănescu, 2001, p.46). Here, agriculture transcends the notion of economic activity specific to the rural space, thus giving those who practice it a specific *modus vivendi*.

Although strongly anchored in reality and in the lifestyle of the rural communities, the agriculture of Beiuș region had evolved in time depending on the social-political and economic circumstances, recording periods of quantity and quality cumulation, mainly generated by demographic evolution, but also periods of downfall and involution, for the „*darker*” periods of history (Ștefănescu, 2001). Although, subjected to various „*experiments*” by the authorities, in this region, this activity had kept its self-sufficient feature, specific to territories with a strong coherence (Filimon, 2012), focused on the household supply with food.

Collectivization (not all settlements in Beiuș Land had been caught in this process, only those in the hearth of the depression, with more fertile land) had triggered changes in agriculture (new plant breeds, technology), but did not succeed to deeply modify this activity's part in the community life.

Even after 1989, the „*transient revitalization of the rural*” (Ștefănescu, 2012, p.73) marked by recovery of the land, agriculture did not succeed to establish itself as a viable economic activity. The reasons are numerous, related to the small allotments, external competition, a small demand for indigenous agricultural products, lack of entrepreneurial education of the rural population, state inaction and indifference etc. Unfortunately, neither the join to the European Union, nor the access to agricultural policies, which aim at supporting this activity promoted at European level, had managed to contribute to its removal from its position as the „*Cinderella*” of jobs.

## METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the present study is represented by the analysis of the agriculture practiced in Beiuș Land and its part in this economic system, in order to highlight the identity features and vulnerability, as elements which should be taken into account in the local development strategy of this area.

Starting from the previous studies (Filimon et al. 2010; Filimon et al. 2011; Filimon, 2012; Filimon et al. 2012) without insisting on the already mentioned aspects, this study is based on the analysis and exposition of a set of specific markers.

These markers are: agricultural exploitations and manpower. The agricultural exploitations have been analyzed through their size and structure from juridical and functional perspective. The analysis has been conducted in accordance with the requirements imposed by national and European agriculture policies, regarding the possibility to access funds for agriculture (Bulgaru, 1996).<sup>1</sup> The next analyzed marker has been the manpower, the one that gives consistency to agricultural activities. This has been analyzed through its cumulative assets, mass feature, but also through quality elements, respectively age and education level of the exploitation managers. These markers have been defined according to the methodology and terminology used in the agriculture census (RGA) in 2010. The analysis of these markers has highlighted the identity characteristic of agriculture, but also, its vulnerability (Sorocovschi, 2010).

The used statistics correspond to the data of the RGA from 2010,<sup>2</sup> but also to the information given by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development,<sup>3</sup> Department of Agriculture Bihor,<sup>4</sup> Agency of Payments and Intervention for Agriculture.<sup>5</sup>

## RESULTS: MARKER ANALYSIS

### Agriculture exploitations

Agriculture exploitations are defined as independent techno-economical units where the performed agricultural activities are the main or secondary activity.<sup>6</sup>

In order to highlight the identity features and the vulnerable elements, they have been analyzed through number, size, juridical status, exploitation type, use of machines.

#### *Exploitation number and size*

The number is the direct result of the features of the natural environment (degree of relief fragmentation, declivity, direction etc.), size of territorial-administrative unit, property type, existing agriculture policies etc.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.madr.ro](http://www.madr.ro)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/RGA2010/index.html>

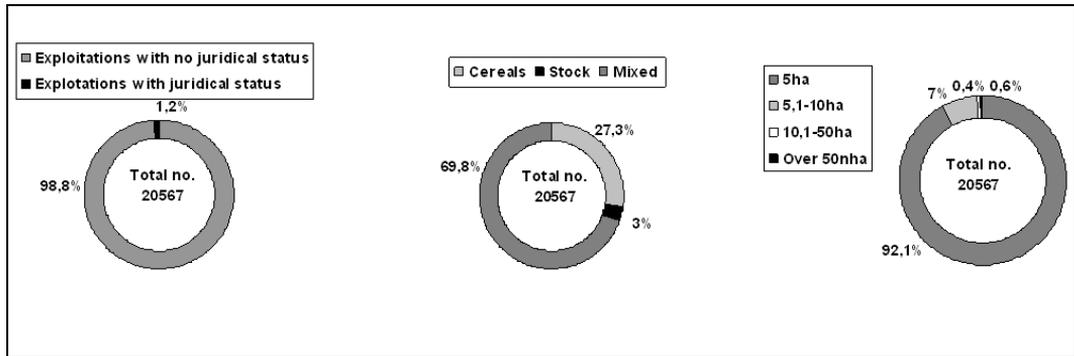
<sup>3</sup> [www.madr.ro](http://www.madr.ro)

<sup>4</sup> [www.directiaagricolabihor.ro](http://www.directiaagricolabihor.ro)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.apia.org.ro/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/RGA2010/index.html>

According to RGA 2010, in Bihor county there were a total of 114.409 agriculture exploitations. Beiuș Land, with 20.567, has 18% of the total number of exploitations in Bihor county (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Number of agriculture exploitation, size (ha), structure from juridical and functional perspective (%) (Data source: RGA, 2010)

On a territorial level, as regards the distribution of agriculture exploitation within administrative units, the minimum is recorded in the town of Ștei (147 exploitations), and the maximum (1512) in Buntești. If we take into account only the communes, this difference is largely diminished, the minimum being recorded in Căbești (631 exploitations). We can conclude that the distribution of agriculture exploitations within the administrative units is directly influenced by the size of the administrative unit itself (surface, number of localities, demographic size). With surfaces of the administrative units compared with those of the component communes and some villages, the towns of Beiuș Land are found in this classification, but with small rates, the town status being somehow important in the type of activity conducted by the inhabitants.

As regards the *average size of agriculture exploitations*, the average rate of an exploitation is 4.4 ha. With this rate, the average size of the exploitations in Beiuș Land is within the recorded average of Bihor county (a little over 4.05 ha). In the territorial-administrative units the rates are relatively equal, with the exception of the commune of Budureasa, where the average size of exploitation is 17.9 ha (on a larger administrative surface) and the towns of Beiuș and Ștei, exactly the opposite, with an average size of exploitation of 1.7 ha.

Specific to Beiuș area are the agriculture exploitations of up to 5 ha (figure 1), with 18.940, representing 92.1 % of the total amount of exploitations. The small size agriculture exploitations, ranging between 5.1-10 ha, have only 7%, and the larger exploitations (with 10-50 ha) have 1%. As regards the possibilities to access European funds, respectively stipulations 112, 123, 211, 212,<sup>7</sup> an important part of the exploitations (those with a size up to 1 ha, which have 24.5 % of the total amount), are non-eligible.

Another identity feature of agriculture in Beiuș area is given by the juridical status of agriculture exploitations. As seen in figure 1, almost all these exploitations are *without juridical status* (98.8%). This aspect highlights the subsistence feature of agriculture in this region and the rudimentary farming, with archaic accents, but also the relation of the inhabitant of Beiuș Land with his land, passed on from generation to generation.

The juridical status of the exploitations is also doubled by the land ownership, 99.2% of the agriculture lands being privately owned and only 0.8% are leased, as free, concessioned and other cases. This situation derives from the „*awareness of a sacred duty to your forefathers...*” (Filimon, 2012, p. 252).

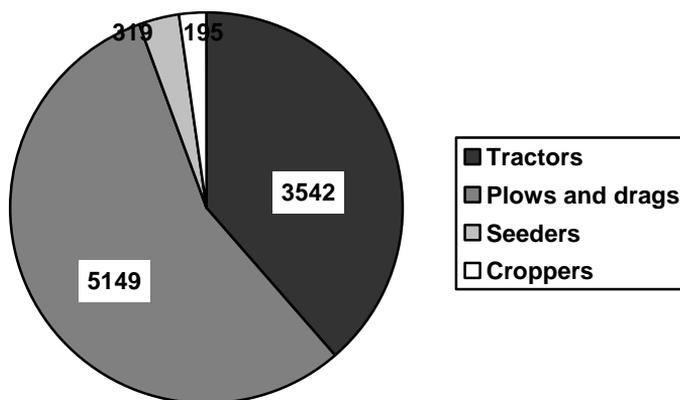
<sup>7</sup> <http://www.apia.org.ro/>, <http://www.madr.ro>

The *functional profile of agriculture exploitations*, defined according to RGA <sup>8</sup> highlights the perpetuation in time of the pattern of productive agricultural system established in Beiuș Land. This is represented by the stock farming subordination to plants cultivation (Ștefănescu, 2001), even when stock farming has more favourable circumstances (less fertile land, extended areas of grazing and hay land in the hilly and mountainous areas) (Filimon Luminița, 2012).

The distribution of agriculture exploitations in functional categories (cereals, stock and mixed) (figure 1), highlights the high share of mixed exploitations (68.9%). The other two types complete the mixed exploitations, the cereals farming (27.3%) being superior in number to stock farming (3%). For that matter, cereals, particularly wheat, has always been „*an obsession of the rural world in Beiuș Land, ..., because it is always too scarce*” (Ștefănescu, 2012, p.54). This obsession for cereals, and wheat in particular, is still present in Beiuș Land. Wheat farming is specific to the subsistence agriculture in this region, still cultivated, in spite of all poor results, especially in comparison with other type of farming (Filimon, Luminița, 2012). This region proves once more that, in rural areas with a strong originality and distinctiveness feature, the cultures are not strictly influenced by natural conditions. There are cases where the main part in plant farming is played by family option. Thus, in contrast with wheat is potato farming, although being elementary in alimentation, is not as important for the inhabitants. Without trying to conduct a detailed analysis of the culture types, we can strongly assert (also based on RGA 2010) that, presently, the main culture plants in this area are maize and wheat, followed by potato.

The same conservatism is specific when it comes to stock farming, them being bred in every household, for the needs of the house inhabitants and less for its capitalization. For example, we mention that the number of bovines for an exploitation is 1, the same for ovines and caprines. For these reasons, in many cases the access to agriculture help promoted through various stipulations place these exploitations on non-eligible postions. <sup>9</sup>

The *degree of endowment with agriculture tools* highlights the financial potential of the farmers, and of the rural area, generally. At the same time, it represents a marker of dualism (represented by the combination between new technology with the old one ancestral one), still present in agriculture.



**Figure 2.** Beiuș Land. Number of farm implements  
(Data source: RGA, 2010)

The low degree of use of farm implements is also the result of „*their disintegration*”, of a large number of owners and reduced financial potential. Also, in many cases, the size and natural features of the land makes impossible the use of technology.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/RGA2010/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.apia.org.ro/>

The degree of use of farm implements (figure 2) is modest, corresponding to the type of practiced agriculture (subsistence). In many cases, the land owners rely on the use of cattle for some agricultural activities, because of the quality factor. This situation is frequently found in potato harvesting, land preparation and for some cultures (potato, maize), some culture sustenance activities (maize), when cattle traction is preferred to the use of tractors. In such cases manifests itself the solidarity specific to the rural Beiuș area, respectively the „*appeal to the others*” (Ștefănescu, 2012, p. 297), as put by a refined connoisseur of this area (although he was not from here).

In conclusion, we can assert that through their features, the agriculture exploitations in Beiuș Land do not meet the requirements of the present market, but are mainly ensuring the household alimentation. Although there are possibilities to develop some agriculture activities financed by national and European programmes which target the rural area development (promotion of agriculture activities, of ecological agriculture), unfortunately, the tough criteria of accessing these funds do not help most of these exploitations. It is the case of stipulations no. 211 and 212 which target the disadvantaged and significantly disadvantaged mountainous areas, which subsumes most of the territorial-administrative units from Beiuș Land. Only nine such exploitations benefit from these funds.<sup>10</sup>

### **Manpower in agriculture**

The term used for manpower is corresponding to that used by RGA, which defines it as the persons who have worked in agriculture, regardless of the juridical status of the exploitation, being excluded the persons who have worked temporarily or have been employed by third parties.<sup>11</sup>

The manpower involved in agriculture activities within Beiuș Land highlights *the mass feature of this activity and the dominant rural aspect of this particular region*, to these type of activities taking an active part almost all working population. According to RGA 2010, a total of 42.053 people performed agriculture activities, which represents 53.7 % of the population in Beiuș Land. Compared to the number of already existing exploitations in this region, to each such exploitation corresponds an average of two persons, which shows that almost every family performs agriculture activities.

Evidently, we should mark that not all these people perform a constant agriculture activity, most of them performing another type of activities. This is well highlighted by the *time spent for these agriculture activities* by these people. Thus, in Beiuș Land, we have rates of up to 25% from the annual work unit (AWU). According to RGA, 1 AWU is equal to 245 workdays.<sup>12</sup> In this region, the time spent in agriculture activities is 61 workdays. There are, thus, 27.664 such persons, respectively 65.8% of manpower. Their number decreases proportionally to the time spent in agriculture activities, only 0.6 % of the manpower spending a maximum time in such activities.

#### *Age and gender structure of manpower*

If the gender structure of manpower involved in agriculture is not a defining element, the male population is predominant, the age group structure is the marker which defines agriculture as an economic activity, through performance.

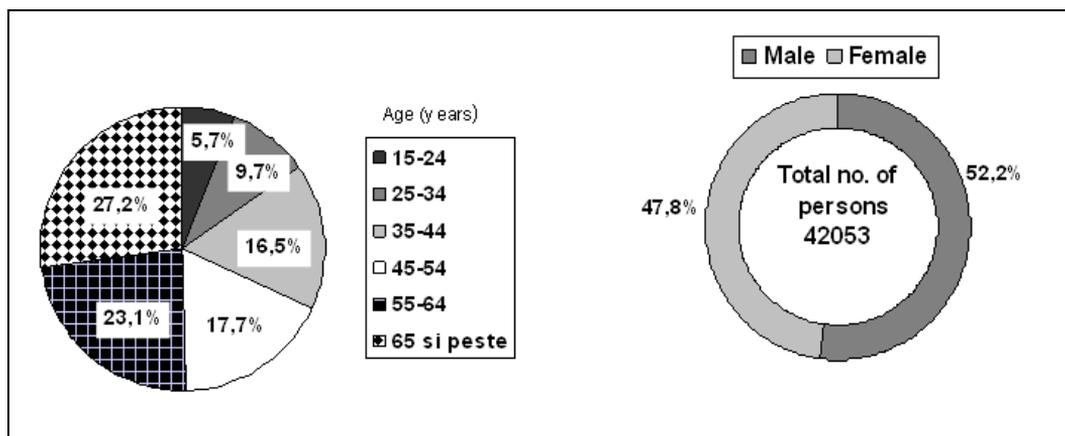
The manpower gender structure in agriculture in Beiuș Land highlights the higher rate of male population, but without large gaps between the two genders. A high rate of male population as manpower is found in Pocola (54,7%), Lunca (54%), followed by some communes in the mountainous area: Roșia, Uileacu de Beiuș, Șoimi etc.

*Age of manpower* highlights the fact that this activity is mainly performed by the elderly, thus accentuating the dilution, in time, of the relation between the peasant from Beiu and his land, as a result of collectivization and later, of globalization (Filimon, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> [www.madr.ro](http://www.madr.ro)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.insse.ro>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.insse.ro>



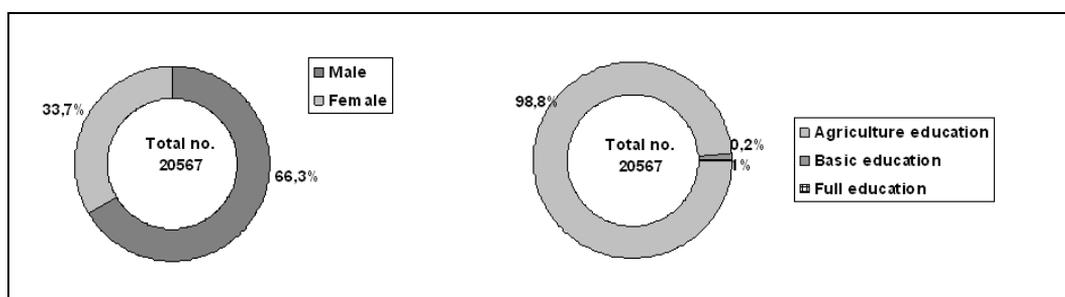
**Figure 3.** Gender and age group structure of manpower in agriculture  
(Data source: RGA, 2010)

Distribution of manpower age groups highlights the high rate of population over 55 years old in the total of manpower (figure 3) and the low rate of the younger population. This can only be explained by the fact that the older population, mainly the retired persons, have more time for agriculture activities. By having a certain material security, the retired persons perform agriculture activities in order to ensure the family needs, out of habitualness, education and respect for community.

For the younger persons (15-24 years old), the performance of agriculture activities is less appealing and mainly triggered by subjective factors and less for economical reasons.

*The exploitation manager*, or its owner, is defined as being the one who is juridically and economically responsible and takes all the economic risks which might derive from this activity.<sup>13</sup> Behind this definition, in the rural area, we found nine other than the head of household.

In Beiuș Land there are 20,567 managers (heads) of exploitations. Their gender structure highlights the male predominance, 66,7% of them being males (figure 4). In none of the administrative units is recorded a female majority, but the percentage of 33% of the female population highlights the fact that their part in agriculture activities is not at all insignificant.



**Figure 4.** Beiuș Land. Structure on gender and education level of the heads of agriculture exploitations (Data source: RGA, 2010)

More importantly from economical point of view is the education level of the exploitation managers. The degree of education, as defined by RGA, is distributed on three levels. The first one, defined as basic agriculture education, is synonymous with the education received within the family, respectively the expertise cumulated in time, with no formal education whatsoever. The

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.insse.ro>

second level, corresponding to the basic education, implies graduation from an industrial school or agriculture school. The full education is the higher level and implies graduation from college or specialized faculty.<sup>14</sup>

The analysis of the education level of the exploitation managers (figure 4) in Beiuș Land, based on agriculture distinctiveness, highlights the fact that, with few exceptions, is based on own experience, failures or success, the acquired knowledge from the forefathers, be it „*stolen*”, heard of or experienced in time. The cumulated experience during centuries of „*agriculture practice*” is perceived as the minimum knowledge necessary to obtain the needed products, the subsequent failures happening as a result of unhappy turn of events, natural ones, most of the time. Unfortunately, this knowledge is not enough to access funds from the national and European programmes of agriculture financing. For example, we can mention the situation in 2011 when, for stipulation no. 123 (the young farmers' establishment), in Beiuș Land had been registered 23 projects out of which only nine were approved (according to [www.apdrp.ro](http://www.apdrp.ro)).

By following this analysis, one can clearly see the identity characteristic of agriculture activity in this region. This activity is performed by third age persons, in small exploitations, with minimum use of technology, without targeting any performance. The reason behind this type of agriculture lies in the affiliation to this community of Beiuș Land and the specific rural and conservative lifestyle.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, from the analysis of the two components necessary in agriculture, the exploitations and manpower in agriculture, outline several identity elements, unitary present in Beiuș Land. The most visible identity element is given by the fact that agriculture is still strongly anchored in the old agriculture practices, inherited from the forefathers. Presently, in this region, agriculture is a „*modus vivendi*” and not an economic activity, agriculture activities being the ones „*to give social value to man*” (Ștefănescu, 2012, p.11).

Small size exploitations, with no juridical status, and privately owned lands indicate a deep attachment to the inherited „*land*”. Association is not considered a solution, out of reticence (it might refer to the former communist associations – CAP), out of experience, lack of entrepreneurial education of the locals and, last, but not least, lack of examples of „*good practices*”. Thus, in Beiuș Land, agriculture is a family activity, performed within and for the family, the product capitalization being only occasionally. Another identity element is represented by the fact that in all agriculture activities is involved the entire working community and the major part played by the head of household (he takes the agriculture responsibilities). The identity mark is also given by the fact that, for most of the exploitation managers, „*life experience*” and practical heritage replace formal education.

Still, these identity elements in agriculture in Beiuș Land are the ones which give it some vulnerability features, others being influenced by exterior. The identity elements which make the agriculture in this area vulnerable are: size and juridical status of agriculture exploitations (most of them are not eligible for the agriculture policies promoted both nationally and in Europe); lack of association (it triggers the low degree of technology use, low production and, implicitly, the impossibility to reach competitiveness or, at least, economic productivity); high rate of manpower ageing and the lack of interest from younger generations towards agriculture activities, which are not seen as possible generators of wealth (it can trigger abandonment of land and some agriculture practices, with a negative effect on the community); the scarce education of the heads of exploitations and their age (it triggers the disinterest for the new and reticence about the opportunities given by the European Union, clearly illustrated by the low amount of projects financed through operational programmes for agriculture). Taking into account the already existing potential, only thus can be explained the lack of any ecological agriculture exploitation,

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.insse.ro>

lack of cultures demanded by the market, such as blueberries, raspberries, hazelnuts or the preference for commercial stock farming.

It is possible that the key identity element of the agriculture identity and vulnerability in Beiu Land is just the position of the community towards agriculture, respectively its perception as a „*modus vivendi*” and not as an economic activity. In such case, the open question is *For how long will this be an agriculture „between breads”?*. Or a question more directed towards practicability *What is the position of agriculture within a local development strategy of Beiuș Land based on identity?*. By trying to answer this question, we consider that, the economic capitalization of the „*primitive*” agriculture features, but in many cases also „*ecological*”, after the pattern of local productive system (even as a support for responsible tourism) represents a chance for the authentic rural communities to assert themselves locally and regionally. The establishment of a local production network, where products and local services should be capitalized on regional market under a brand (liability of quality, authenticity and tradition) can boost the local economic life and, implicitly, on the long run, increase the chances for this community, by improving the competitiveness of the rural authentic space, deeply devaluated at present. The identity elements of agriculture in Beiuș Land contain certain favourable circumstances for its transformation from a subsistence activity into an economic alternative, integrated within a local productive system based on distinctiveness and authenticity.

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