THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF LESS-FAVOURED AREAS: A STUDY OF THE ROMANIAN AND AUSTRIAN EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT – The objective of this paper is to contribute to the discussion of new policy options for less-favoured areas by presenting two case studies concerning rural communities from Romania and Austria and their pathways towards sustainable development in regions with so-called natural handicaps. First, we briefly introduced the less favoured areas in Romania and Austria, with their constraints and characteristics. Secondly, we focused on the local development strategies of two less-favoured communities from these countries. Finally, we drew conclusions, serving as policy recommendations for actions targeting the development of less-favoured rural areas.

Keywords: case studies, rural sustainable development, sustainable resource management, research project, success factors

INTRODUCTION

Many European remote regions, especially rural ones, are classified as less-favoured areas (LFAs) because they have a fragile natural resources base, poor market linkages, and institutional failures. The variety of biophysical and socio-economic constraints to agriculture development is forcing the engagement of rural livelihoods in different non-agricultural activities, in order to ensure their sustainability and to diversify and cope with risk. The practical relevance for this research is given by the undergoing discussion of the national and regional development priorities and investments for the 2014-2020 programming period and financial cycle of the European Union.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the discussion of new policy options for less-favoured areas by presenting two case studies concerning rural communities from Romania and Austria and their pathways toward sustainable development in regions with so-called natural handicaps.

The research framework was that of authors' individual research projects as well as a bilateral Romanian-Austrian research project enquiring about: factors of innovation and development and

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appropriate future development policies. First, we briefly introduced the less-favoured areas in Romania and Austria, with their constraints and characteristics. Secondly, we focused on the local development strategies of two less-favoured communities from these countries.

The problems of the rural areas in both countries rest on less investment, less subsidies, under-performing agriculture, and out-migration. In this context, we presented the case of Lemnia (hu. Lemhény), a commune in Covasna County, Romania, which demonstrated the possibilities that know-how transfer and personal relationships based on trust or friendship had for the development of rural less-favoured communities exploiting the local human and natural potential. Then, we presented the skiing resort Skiarena Nassfeld Hermagor and its region, in the Carnic Alps of Carinthia, in Austria. The Austrian case study was also the subject of a recent research project between Austria and Romania, where the authors of this presentation took part in.

In the end, we drew conclusions, serving as policy recommendations for actions targeting the development of less-favoured rural areas.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

LFAs are characterized by a diversity of biophysical conditions, farm resource endowments and social structures, especially in developing countries (Ruben and Pender, 2004; Kuyvenhoven, 2004). LFAs can be defined according to place and space specificities.

Place refers to climate and soil conditions that limit returns to agricultural production and make yields highly uncertain, such as: land tenure problems, increasing degradation problems due to poor management of soils prone to erosion, steep slopes or low rainfall.

Space refers mainly to distance to market and services, generating high transaction costs. In most cases, space is a barrier to migration for LFAs, since commuting to other (urban) regions would be costly and risky. Moreover, these regions are affected by poor physical infrastructure, imperfect and missing capital and most of them were neglected by researchers and public authorities (Kuyvenhoven, 2004; Tamme, 2004). Under such circumstances, *LFAs are considered poverty traps*, as the geographical factors have a significant effect on wealth and consumption (Ravallion and Jalan, 1996; Minot, 2000). On the other hand, communities located in LFAs generally have a specific social structure, with heterogeneity in farm resource endowments, ranging from landless farmers to better-equipped households (Jayne et al., 2003; Hazell et al., 2005).

The development concept of most countries emphasized for a long time the importance of investing in highly productive areas, such as urban growth poles, for the reason of generating quicker and greater returns to investment (Pender and Hazell, 2000). Establishing support for farming in LFAs in 1975 marked a major change in the nature of the Common Agricultural Policy by introducing regional categories. It also represented the initiation of direct annual payments to farmers, an approach, which was to expand greatly in the 1990s and thereafter. From the very beginning, *LFAs policy was conceived as a structural policy* aimed at the prevention of land abandonment, to preserve the farming population in these areas, and maintain cultural landscapes. The three types of LFAs (mountain areas, other LFAs and areas affected by specific handicaps) take account of the range of geographical differences in the production difficulties of EU agriculture. However, the additional subsidies offered by *the European Union failed to address the local barriers of each LFA*, by focusing mostly on national condition and priorities (Dax, 1998). Escaping from the downward spiral of poverty and resource degradation asks for the identification of additional suitable pathways enabling rural households to develop and diversify their activities (Pender et al., 2001; Pender, 2004).

The heterogeneity and diversity of agro-ecological patterns amongst rural areas and households make one-size-fits-all strategies ineffective, as a far more targeted approach is required to exploit the comparative advantage of different resource management strategies for particular communities, enabling farmers to adjust their production systems and livelihoods, in other words to guarantee both welfare and sustainability at the local and regional levels (Kladnik and Ravbar, 2003; Nared, 2003; Ruben and Pender, 2004). Thus, it is necessary to determine the optimal combination of public and private investment oriented towards a sustainable development of rural communities.

In the context of the economic diversification principle, tourism has been presented to be a pivotal activity that can achieve the socio-economic revitalisation of less advanced regions (Ribeiro and Marques, 2002). In order to devise new development options for LFAs, a wider approach that looks beyond agriculture is crucial, and one that promotes geoconservation, too (Hose, 2011). Most of these areas have important limitations for agriculture productions that have to be tackled furthermore in the future, especially in the context of the world food security concerns. Nevertheless, in recent years the use of land to produce not only food, but also provide ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration or biodiversity conservation has gained in importance (Lipper et al., 2006).

LFAS IN ROMANIA AND AUSTRIA

LFAs in Romania

The delimitation of the LFAs in Romania was made in 2006 (Figure 1). The research analysis was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of experts from the European Institute of Romania (Rusu, 2006), at settlement level (NUTS 5), on a panel of 2,966 administrative units, out of which 2,698 were rural ones. The rural area covers 87% of the total surface of the country and only 45% of the total population, registering an average density of only 47 inhabitants/km². According to the OECD methodology, the rural area of Romania covers 94% of the total surface and 48% of the overall population, with the same density.

The indicators considered by their analysis fell into three categories:

- *the physical and natural dimension* (altitude, slope, average annual rainfall and temperature, land quality assessment, erosion rate, aridity index, degree of salinity, etc.);
- *the demographic and economic dimension* (total population, density, employment, share of employment in agriculture, etc.);
- *the technical dimension* (land structure, number of farms, average farm surface, number of animals by species, etc.).

These settlements have been grouped into three categories, in accordance with the Council Regulation (CE) no. 1698/2005, in line with the classification applied in all member states:

- *mountain areas* – characterized by a significant limitation of land use possibilities and an increase in the cost of land work, caused by high altitude (over 400-600 m) and slopes (over 15-20 degrees) that reduce the growing season of crops and involve the use of more expensive special equipment and machinery. In Romania, the mountain area covers a total surface of 70,101 km², with a population of around 2.4 mil. inhabitants and an average density of 34 inhabitants/km². The share of employment in agriculture is estimated at 40.2% of the total labour force. The density of animals/100 ha is below the national average. Moreover, the average size of farms is of only 3.4 ha, out of which only 20% is arable land;
- *areas with significant handicap* – areas with a bonitation of less than 50% of the national average. These areas cover 62,340 km² and register a population of 3.1 mil. inhabitants, with a density of 50 inhabitants/ km². The share of employment in agriculture is 59.2%, in the context in which 65.6% of the total surface is covered by arable land. These areas are characterized by a high risk of land erosion. The predominant economic model is based on small-size farms (a medium size of 3.2 ha) and extensive livestock.
- *areas with specific handicap* – areas with a significant level of deterioration of land productivity caused by phenomena of erosion, acidification, alkylation, excessive moisture, drought, salting, compaction, etc. They cover a total surface of 20,138 km² and host 0.8 mil. inhabitants, with an average density of 40 inhabitants/km². The medium farm size is 4.2 ha and the density of animals/ha is below the national average. Even so, the share of employment in agriculture remains very high (53.1%).

Overall, these three categories cover 63.9% of the total national surface and host about 30% of the total population.

The core of the LFAs scheme in the EU is to compensate farmers for income foregone and additional costs due to the disadvantage of the areas they cultivate compared to areas without natural or other specific constraints.

For the 2007-2013 programming period, the EU subsidies necessary for the support of LFAs in Romania enabled payments ranging from 25 €/ha to 250 €/ha/year. In Austria, the amounts are from 25 €/ha up to 450 €/ha/year.

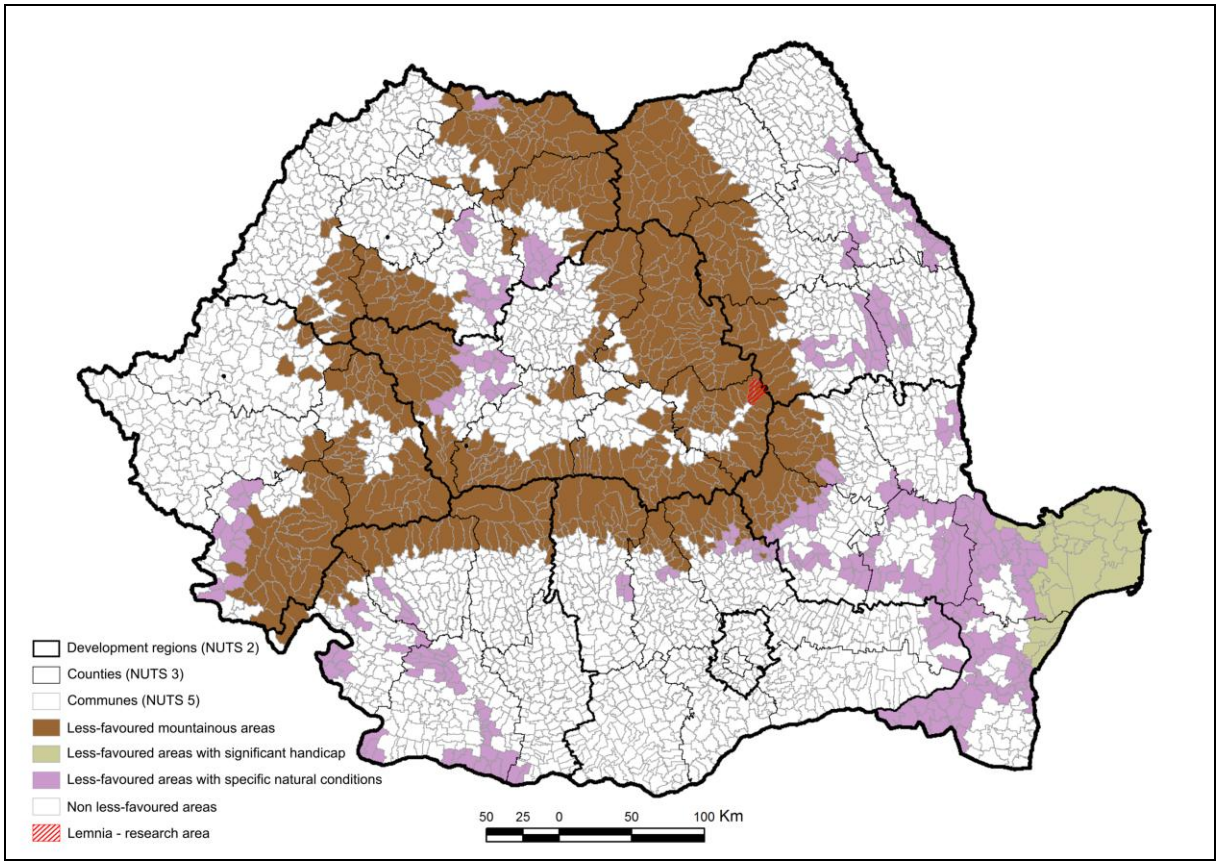

Figure 1. *LFAs in Romania*
Source: Annex 4. LFAs in the National Plan of Romania for Regional Development; with changes

LFAs in Austria

Approximately 81% of Austria's total area is LFAs, with mountain areas accounting for the largest share. The latter represent 70% of the Austrian area. A little more than 50% of the total agricultural area is located in mountain areas and about 7% each in other LFAs and in areas affected by specific handicaps (Figure 2). 36% of the Austrian population live in this area (one of the largest shares in the EU – Dax, 1998).

In Austria, delimitation of LFAs is based on municipalities (LAU2), only as an exception cadastral communities are used. The criteria for the "other than mountain areas" in the new period 2014-2020 focus on biophysical criteria such as climate, soil, and land. Criteria for the third category of "other areas affected by specific constraints" are conservation or improvement of the environment, maintaining the countryside, preserving the tourist potential or protecting the coastline.

Mountain areas and areas facing natural or other specific constraints have to be defined in accordance with objective criteria: sea level >= 700 m (community centre or average of the community area, except for some regions: 600 m); average slope >20% or in case both criteria coincide: sea level >=500m and average slope >=15%. Other than mountain areas (until 2017): farm yield index max. 30 (=70% of the average national level (except for the case with the share of grassland > 80%: farm yield index max. 35) or population density max. 55 persons/km² or yearly decline of population <-0.5%. Other areas affected by specific constraints: farm yield index max. 30

and permanent specific disadvantages like extremely hilly landscape, marshland, or regularly flooded land.

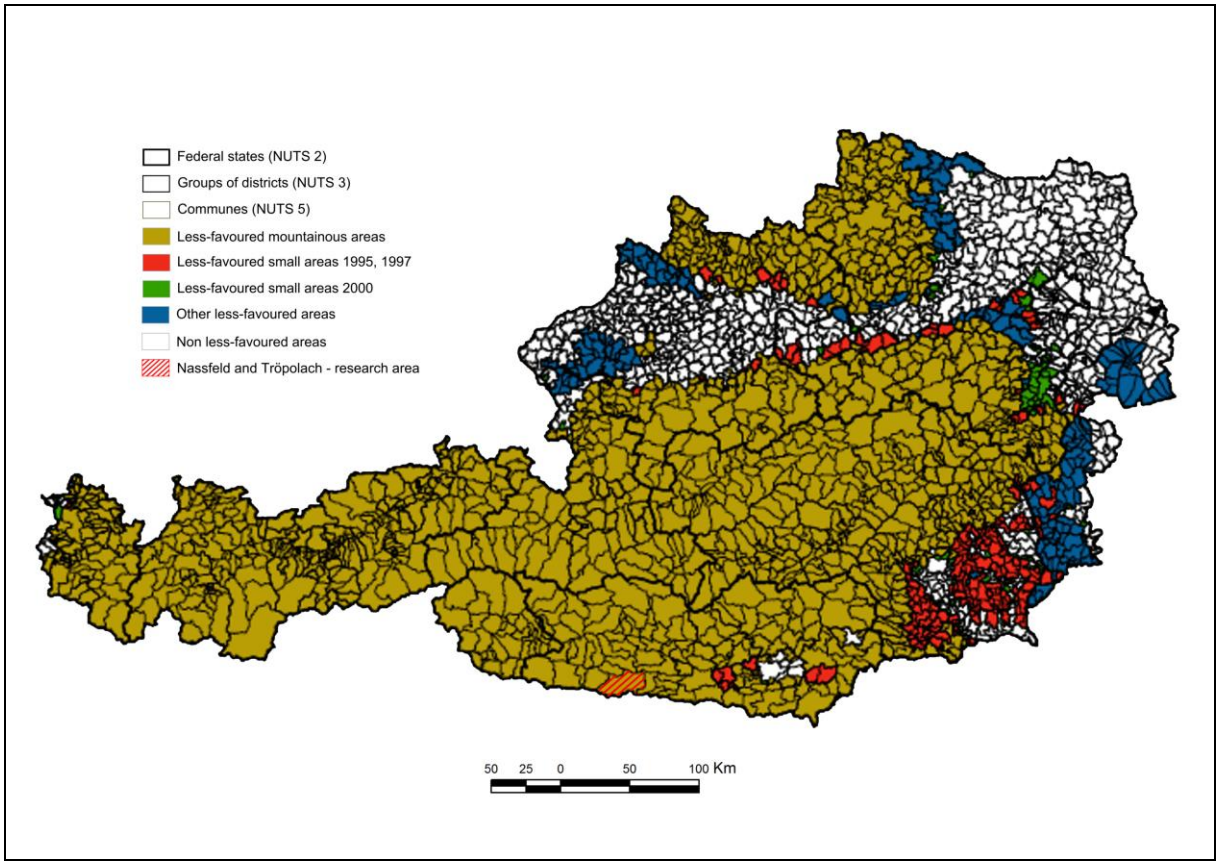

Figure 2. *LFAs in Austria*
Source: BMLFUW, Abt. IIB6, 2001 quoted by the Federal Institute for Less-favoured Mountainous Areas, Vienna, Austria; with changes

LFA payments in Austria started in 1972. The level of support depends on the type of farming, severity of constraints, and farm size. Payment structures favour smaller farms, which may help to prolong agricultural structures and traditional rural societies, but are not necessarily sufficient to ensure the long-term viability of diverse rural communities. Rural communities profit directly through the payments received by farmers and indirectly through the maintenance of open landscapes and the continuity of agricultural activity.

METHODOLOGY

We collected both quantitative (official statistical data) and qualitative information during 2014 and 2015 research field trips in the two study areas. We employed quantitative and qualitative methodology (interviews, focus-group discussions, and participative observation) to target information from stakeholders, from representatives of the public administration, of local and regional institutions, and from locals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our case studies are classified as LFAs. They used different strategies in overcoming their constraints. Lemnia adopted a development strategy oriented towards innovations and diversity in agriculture and processing industries, also with the support of Swiss and German know-how transfer and mainly financial support. The development strategy of Nassfeld is based upon favourable natural

premises for winter sports and upon experience in managing a ski resort dating back to the mid 20th century.

Case study on Lemnia Commune (Romania)

Lemnia (over 3,000 inhabitants) is listed as a LFA in the mountains. The private farmers and the small-scale enterprises, specialized in the processing of agricultural crops and goods, disappeared in the second half of the 20th century. After the failure of the socialist system, people had to restore the former well-established private enterprises. Many young people went for a couple of years to West European countries, collected know-how, capital, work experience, and returned to the village to start new enterprises.

Table 1. *SWOT analysis of development in Lemnia*

Strengths - inhabitants are open and willing to cooperate in development projects (Florea, 2008); - new ventures and viability of business based on local potential and resources, on expertise, experience and foresight; - successful private ventures established upon Swiss and German experience, fundraising abroad (initial internship, then repeated seasonal employment) and know-how transfer of modern agricultural technology; - personal relationships turned into official cooperation and partnership with a Swiss community (e.g. foreign farmers advanced the starting capital for several ventures); - market-oriented competitive agriculture (e.g. capitalised vast grasslands and pastures – since 2010, a workgroup is responsible for sustainable management of local pasture fields, it keeps up the extensive, natural grazed livestock farming); - a few companies with positive perspectives in developing and diversifying employment and income endeavour to improve the economic situation: the vertically integrated production-processing-marketing system relies on six profiles (agriculture, meat processing, grocery network, logging, construction, and bakery) and is to be expanded with further developments and ventures (mineral water bottling; two pig farms set up in 2015 with EU funding), as well as professional training programs upgrading the local human resources and capacities; - slaughterhouse – county's only Euro-compliant, licensed slaughterhouse and a meat processing plant; - a logistic enterprise, providing foreign and domestic freight transports; - endeavour to improve the social features of the community (e.g. Gerontology and Rehabilitation Centre and active civil society represented by a youth organization); - export oriented agricultural production; - programs for the social integration of the Roma and other vulnerable groups; - clean and mostly pollution-free streams; - wet, swampy areas in the agriculture circuit by installing willow (*Salix viminalis* – biomass plant).
Weaknesses - difficulties in marketing for small-scale farmers; - scant cultural life and deficit in community mobilisation; - shortage of valuable human resources; - difficulties in integrating the Roma population; - lack of capital; - extreme fragmentation of agricultural land, unclear property rights; - poor business oriented infrastructure; - no tourism infrastructure; - no encouragement for entrepreneurship;

Opportunities
- eco- or traditional agriculture, agro-tourism, wood processing;
- cultural heritage (e.g. ecclesiastic and mundane built heritage, myths and legends – Urbanc, 2008) considered as a resource for sustainable rural development (Bole et al., 2013; Hribar and Lozej, 2013).
- more livestock breeding;
- grants directed to rural or agriculture development;
- extant support of HNV farming through agro-environment payments (by the Romanian government);
- social and solidarity economy practices for the small-scale, semi-subsistence producers through a system of direct marketing (weekly distribution of traditional and ecological products to the consumers' home);
- the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Fund provides funding for SMEs (sustainable agriculture in mountainous areas, rural development programs, High Nature Value Farming, health and tourism services, investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy sources, export-oriented agricultural production);
- sustainable agriculture;
- untapped resources (tourism; forest fruits collection, processing and marketing; fish breeding; willow as renewable energy plant);
- cooperation with Swiss NGOs.

Threats
- continuous migration towards the cities and Western Europe;
- lack of cooperation between stakeholders and public administration;
- low level of capital accumulation possibility;
- ever changing political and economic environment as a brake to development investments;
- locals' negative perception of Roma integration process;
- lack of organised markets for local products;
- foreign investors could create unfavourable competition for the local farmers.

The above-mentioned development difficulties are valid for the largest part of the rural area in Romania. Improvement has a positive impact not only on the target community, but also on the surrounding communes. Beside the new ventures, very important is also the modernisation and constant improvement of the existing facilities to steadily provide high quality products and maintain competitiveness. The development of the village depends primarily on the well-functioning of economic and community life, while underlining economic growth through the activation of local potential.

Case study on Skiarena Nassfeld Hermagor (Austria)

It lies in the administrative district Hermagor. It is the smallest district by area from the 10 districts of Carinthia, with a peripheral geographical position, having 18,766 inhabitants in 2012.

In Nassfeld, development started in 1959 with the first hotel and ski lift (Figure 3). There were also a few private guesthouses. Most people in the area worked as farmers or metalworkers. In 1983, the metal factory closed and people became unemployed. A new economic path into the tourism industry developed taking advantage of "windows of locational opportunity" (Stroper and Walker, 1989, quoted by Bathelt, 1991).

Nowadays, the largest skiing area in Carinthia, the Skiarena Nassfeld Hermagor, is a top spot of winter tourism in Austria and a privately owned skiing resort, with a shareholding structure. The communes of the region are also involved via a share in the company. 460 ha between the valley (600 m) and the top (2,000 m sea level) are in use with tourism infrastructure (100 km of slope, 30 lift

facilities, hotels, restaurants, shops, etc.). This area is a LFA (Figure 2), still underdeveloped and characterized by strong out-migration.

Table 2. *SWOT analysis of development in Nassfeld and its region (Hermagor)*

Strengths - support from public administration; - over 80% of the total area is used for agriculture and forestry; - it could be considered a landscape hotspot (Ciglič and Perko, 2013); - continuous investment in tourism (in 2000, they opened the "Millenium Express", a gondola lift over 6 km long – connecting Tröpolach village with the ski area – Figure 4); - construction boom (economic agglomeration effect) due to extra income from tourism; - commercial success with spill over effects (wealth, income and jobs) for nearby communes, also fostering regional development (according to the export basis theory – Maier et al., 2012) (the long-term unemployment rate tends towards 0); - local people can benefit from infrastructure (high quality of life); - dense network of voluntary associations in villages with community building functions.
Weaknesses - strong "brain drain"; - few inhabitants; - peripheral position; - low income in the region Hermagor, with only 87.2 % of the Carinthian average, while the price level is about 98.8 % of the Carinthian average (Internet); - the weak economic performance of the border regions Carnia and the Canal Valley (it. Valcanale) (the Italian border region is economically weaker than its Carinthian counterpart and therefore the potential for cooperation is rather limited – only a handful of projects); - poor road connection; - in the regional hotel and gastronomy branch most of the employees are from abroad; - the tourism sector is only a low-pay sector and there are mostly seasonal jobs; - high power and water consumption; - over 700,000 visitors come for skiing annually – an enormous congestion for the environment; - pressure of tourism on the local population (Mörth, 1997).
Opportunities - cooperation through INTERREG, LEADER, Smart-Borders; - a new gondola lift to Italy and the appearance of a big tourism cluster.
Threats - building a transport tunnel and Gail Valley would receive a lot of transit (Kanitscheider, 2011); - one enterprise can create dependency, which may block finding other possibilities in development (Zametter, 2004); - massive intervention in environment and regional culture (Zametter, 2004).

The focus of regional tourism development is the Skiarena Nassfeld Hermagor. This case study proves that winter tourism is a possibility to generate wealth, income, and jobs for less developed rural areas. To practice winter sports also requires regional goods and services, and this is essential for the development of the larger region. The key factors for this kind of development are continuous work and investment in the ski resort. Still, this focus involves some problems (e.g. the dependency of the commercial success entirely on the ski resort because a lot of regional income and jobs depend on one enterprise; high resource commitment on one sector; not all regional communities

benefit in the same degree because, at a longer distance from the skiing area, the spill over effects decrease).

Figure 3. *The first ski lift and hotel in Nassfeld*
Source: Gailtaler Zeitbilder Association

Figure 4. *Tröpolach in 1982*
Source: Photo provided by Christine Markert from Tröpolach

CONCLUSION

A series of success factors enabled the development of the two analysed rural communities and of their neighbourhood: a bottom-up approach to development, promotion of leadership and entrepreneurship (competitive human resource), experience and networking within the commune and abroad. Economic growth through activating local potential has a positive impact both on the target commune and on the surrounding communes. Moreover, a "multi-pillar approach" has strategic importance in the market economy (the case of Lemnia), while the support of public administration is crucial for enterprises and other economic and social initiatives (the case of Nassfeld and its region).

Future policies should focus on infrastructure development, experience exchange, education and training, culture, and on social cohesion.

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