

MICROREGIONS AND THE ELIMINATION OF THE REGIONAL DISPARITIES

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ABSTRACT - The regional problem is always a present one and regional development that involves the elimination of regional disparities is present as a fashionable phrase, but also as an effective process within the territory of the eight regions of development. These have no juridical status but they work towards a regional development, through the elimination of the intra-regional disparities (among the counties that are part of a region) and the inter-regional ones.

The regions of development – formed out of counties – do not have administrative status, nor do they have legislative or executive bodies, but they coordinate projects for regional development. Following their example, the voluntary associations at inferior levels of the regions resulting in the so-called “microregions” are now more and more common.

The present study aims to analyze the way this new notion, “microregion”, is understood in Romania, by giving examples of such microregions and their scopes and it also wants to show how these benevolent associations at a microregional level serve the aim of eliminating the regional disparities – in fact, microregional disparities.

Keywords: microregion, regional disparities, planning

Microregion – definition, typology, objectives

In the scientific literature, the microregion is considered the fundamental cell for territorial planning, within which the systemic character manifests the most:

- area polarized by a city (nodal microregions);
- cluster for production;
- natural territorial geo-complex (homogeneous microregions).

The regional policy of the European Union considers the microregion as “a spatial development/statistical unit definable on the basis of the entire network of existing functional links between settlements - residential, transport and intermediate-level service provision”³.

Within the system of microregions, settlements are grouped around a center, thus emphasizing the functional character of the microregions.

In numerous documents of the European Union, the formation of the microregion appears as a need for the rural areas, as a useful tool to bring forth their development. A microregion is considered more powerful as it represents the association of several villages and thus its development can be more advanced than that of an isolated settlement.

We present below the definition proposed by E. Schmidt-Kallert⁴ that presents the microregion as “a distinct territorial unit with clearly marked boundaries below the regional level, but above the village level.

It can also be understood as a network of links and relations among actors as the Government (in the case that the microregion is institutionalized), the private sector and civil society within a state.

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³ *The roots of spatial development and planning in Hungary*, www.pict.hu/documents/docs/planning_in_hungary.pdf.

⁴ E. Schmidt-Kallert, 2005, *A Short Introduction to Micro-regional Planning*, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Sub-regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe, Budapest (p. 10).

Within the European Union, there is a different approach from country to country concerning the formation of the microregions. If some countries did not only accept the concept, but they also encouraged its territorial implementation from a legal point of view (France, Slovakia, Hungary), other countries seem to be indifferent to it (Lithuania), there are also examples of such voluntary territorial associations that are banned, as they are considered dangerous for the existing administrative units in those countries (Denmark).

Analyzing the Romanian cases, we can conclude that the microregions are formed as *voluntary associations of settlements (in general rural ones, sometimes grouped around a town) that aim at promoting policies of sustainable development and/or to solve local problems.*

Analyzing the numerous examples of microregional associations from Romania, we can divide them in two major groups:

1. Microregions that aim to foster a socio-economical development

They aim to ensure a local, sustainable socio-economical development through accessing funds by writing projects. The idea, the structure, and the way these microregions function came as a diffusion of the Hungarian microregion model – where there are also the so-called “SAPARD microregions” that are formed through the accession of funds through SAPARD programs and thus appeared a voluntary association among communes that aimed to achieve a local development of socio-economical infrastructure. The Hungarian lesson was well learned and implemented at the level of some microregional associations from counties like Harghita, Covasna, and Mureş.

Through the aim, they declared (socio-economic development), these microregions want to ensure a complex and integrated sustainable development through which the regional disparities and especially the microregional ones can be eliminated or, at least, ameliorated.

There are numerous examples of such microregions in Romania (*Figure 1.*), yet there is a major problem with them: they overlap. For example: Odorhei microregion overlaps totally or partially (some settlements are part of at least two microregions) with the following microregions: Felso-Homorodmente, Hegylja, Sovidek, Homorodul Mare and Regiovest-Szent Laszlo. Regiovest-Szent Laszlo overlaps Homorodul Mare microregion. Because of these overlapping, confusions might appear and some kinds of centrifugal forces, and the fact that some settlements are part of several microregional associations generates conflicts of interests, even though the cooperation is good and can facilitate the diffusion of this kind of example of microregional association and of the know-how.

A special case of microregional association having the aim to bring forth a socio-economical development in the area is **the metropolitan area**. According to the law, a metropolitan area represents an area around the great urban concentrations, confined through special studies, within which certain reciprocal relationships of influence are born among transport infrastructure, economy, social, cultural and buildings, respectively⁵. Law 351/2001 defines the metropolitan area as an area formed through association, on the basis of a voluntary partnership in order to ensure a balanced development of the territory, between Romanian cities (the capital and the cities that bear the I rank) and the urban and rural settlements around, at distances no more than 30 km, between which relations of cooperation on several levels developed⁶. The metropolitan areas function as independent territorial entities without juridical status⁷.

Law 286/2006, maintains the previous definitions, confers the metropolitan area a juridical status, part of the private law, and considers it a public utility⁸. The metropolitan areas – formed after the consent of the Local Councils of the administrative units that form them aim to develop the infrastructures and all other common endowments. The legislators and the executors of each administrative unit keep their local autonomy, according to the provisions of the law⁹.

⁵ Law no. 350/2001 concerning territorial planning and urbanism, Official Gazette, Part I, no. 373.

⁶ Law no.351/2001 concerning the approval of the Plan of National Territorial Planning - Section IV, Settlement network, Official Gazette, no. 408, Appendix 1.

⁷ Idem., Art. 7, line 2.

⁸ Ibidem., Art. 11, line 1.

⁹ Law no.351/2001, line. 2.

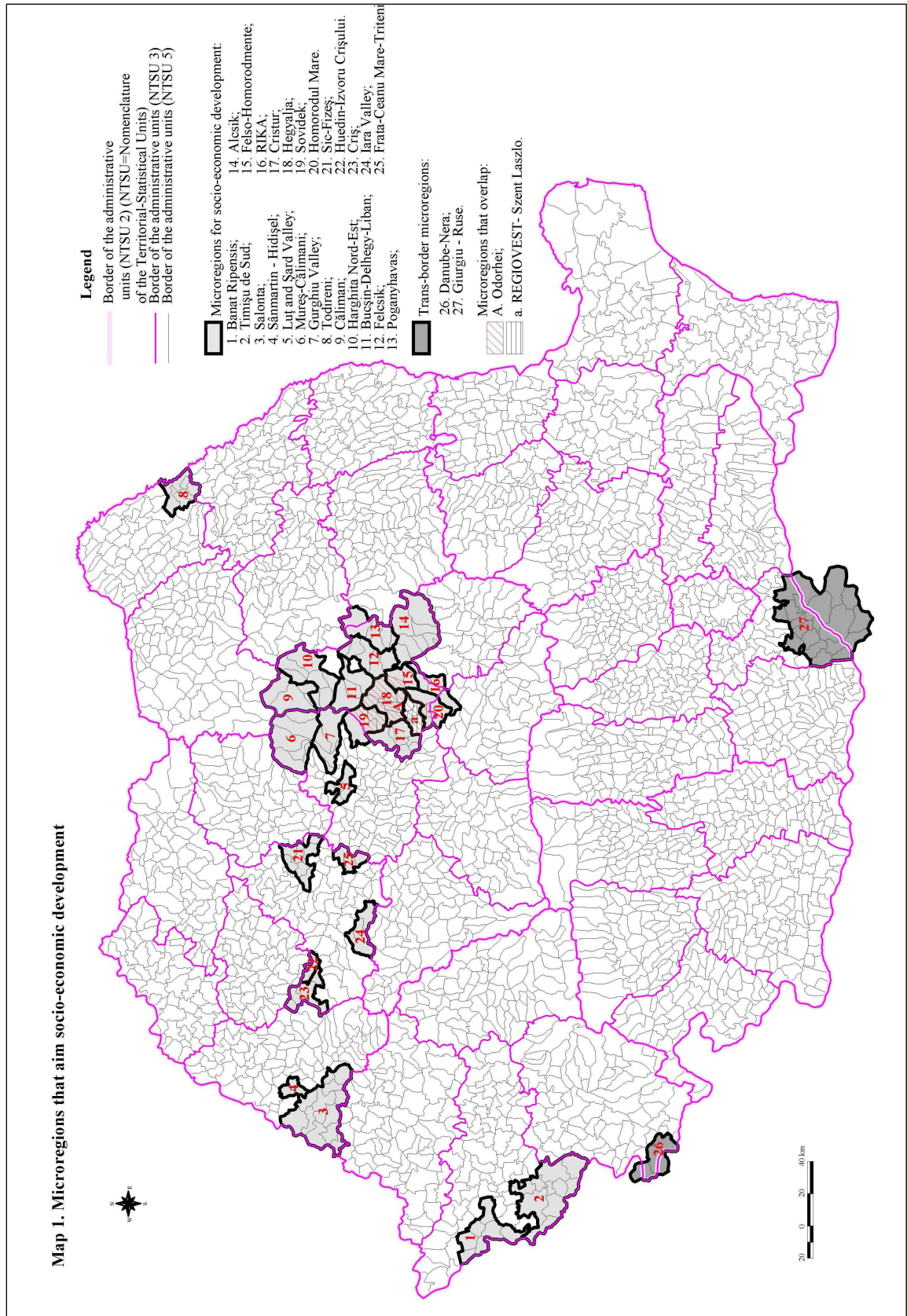


Figure 1. Microregions that aim socio-economic development.

METREX defines the metropolitan area as an urbanized area that sums up 500,000 inhabitants or more¹⁰.

Radu Săgeată enumerates the following examples of Romanian metropolitan areas: Oradea, Iași, Galați-Brăila, Constanța, Bucharest (*Figure 2*). The map takes into consideration two variants of metropolitan association, proposed by two geographers: Ioan Ianoș and Radu Săgeată, respectively. Ioan Ianoș envisaged a metropolitan area for Bucharest on Bucharest-Oltenița direction, while Radu Săgeată considers the area of polarization oriented towards Giurgiu. In reality, the voluntary association of the settlements in the metropolitan area of Bucharest is implemented only in the area Bucharest-Ilfov.

Out of the metropolitan areas enumerated, the following are really functioning at present: Oradea (the first to be established) and Iași.

Timișoara-Arad was established as a metropolitan area in 2006 and the following are to be established in the near future: Cluj, Bacău and Brașov.

According to the law previously stated, the capital and the municipalities that bear rank I are considered nuclei around which the metropolitan areas can be organized and associated. There are, though, proposals to concentrate new metropolitan areas around cities that bear rank II, such as Târgu Mureș and Sibiu etc.

By analyzing the Romanian examples of socio-economical development microregions and the special case of metropolitan areas – these too being oriented towards a complex socio-economic development of the rural-urban areas that associate on a voluntary basis – we can conclude that a merging of these two types of microregional associations, organized on two levels, would be an advisable solution: metropolitan areas and socio-economic microregions outside these areas. The liaison among these levels would be those nodal microregions organized around the urban settlements of rank II: Târgu Mureș microregion and Sibiu microregion. These three levels would cover the entire area of Romania, without overlapping, the major role in coordinating and assisting this type of associative collaboration would be held by the present Regional Development Agencies. Thus, a microregional level would be introduced and at this level the projects for development that need financing could be discussed first at these microregional levels, avoiding thus an overcrowding of the regional level. The French model can be a lesson, as these the associations among the communes (a level that is inferior to the regional one and to the county-departmental one) cover all the country.

In order to generate functional territorial systems, socio-economic microregions can overlap the present “**plan microregion**”, “**sectorial microregions**” (*Figure 3*) that represent microregional associations focused on the development and the extension at a microregional level of a certain type of infrastructure (sewerage system, drinking water system, irrigation system). Such microregions are a reality in Bihor county (microregions that cover all the county and have been created at the initiative of World Bank, thus facilitating through this association the obtainment of some funds for the development of the sewerage systems and the drinking water systems, respectively) and Bistrița county (microregions that cover the whole county organized at the Prefecture's initiative in order to facilitate the process of accessing funds that would help the county develop its gas and drinking water infrastructures).

2. Microregions that aim to develop only one direction of the society and economy

They can be:

- *Microregions that focus on promoting tourist activities.* In order to reach this aim, the microregional association facilitated and has as aim solving some problems related to the defective infrastructure that makes more difficult to run the tourist activities. (*Figure 4*).

- *Ecologic microregions that protect and preserve the environment.* They are among the first microregional associations within the Romanian territory, usually being initiated by environmentalist NGOs.

¹⁰ METREX - Le Réseau des Régions et des Aires Métropolitaines d'Europe. Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif (AISBL), Bologne, 26 mars 1999. Statuts, Article 4. www.eurometrex.org/Docs.

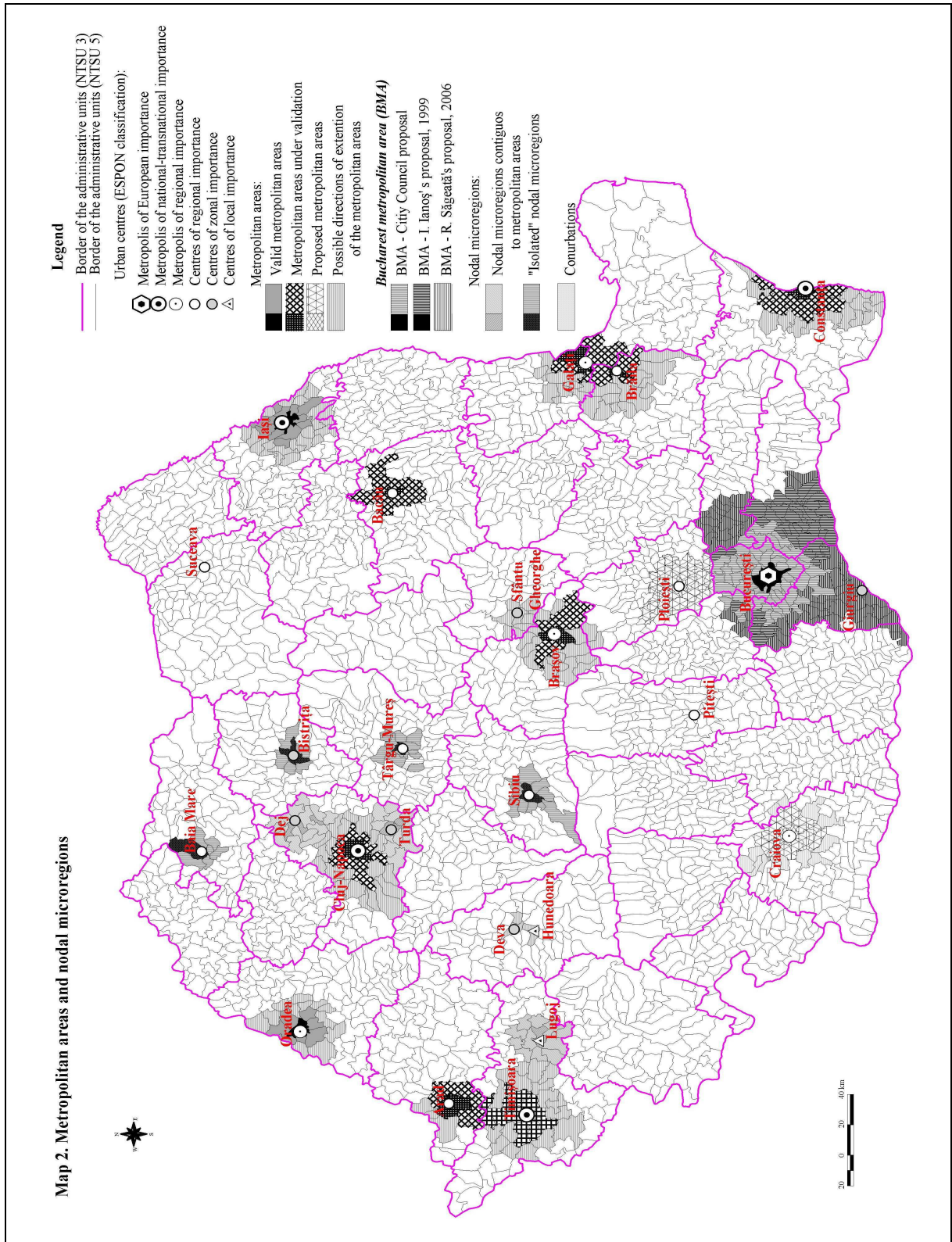


Figure 2. Metropolitan areas and nodal microregions.

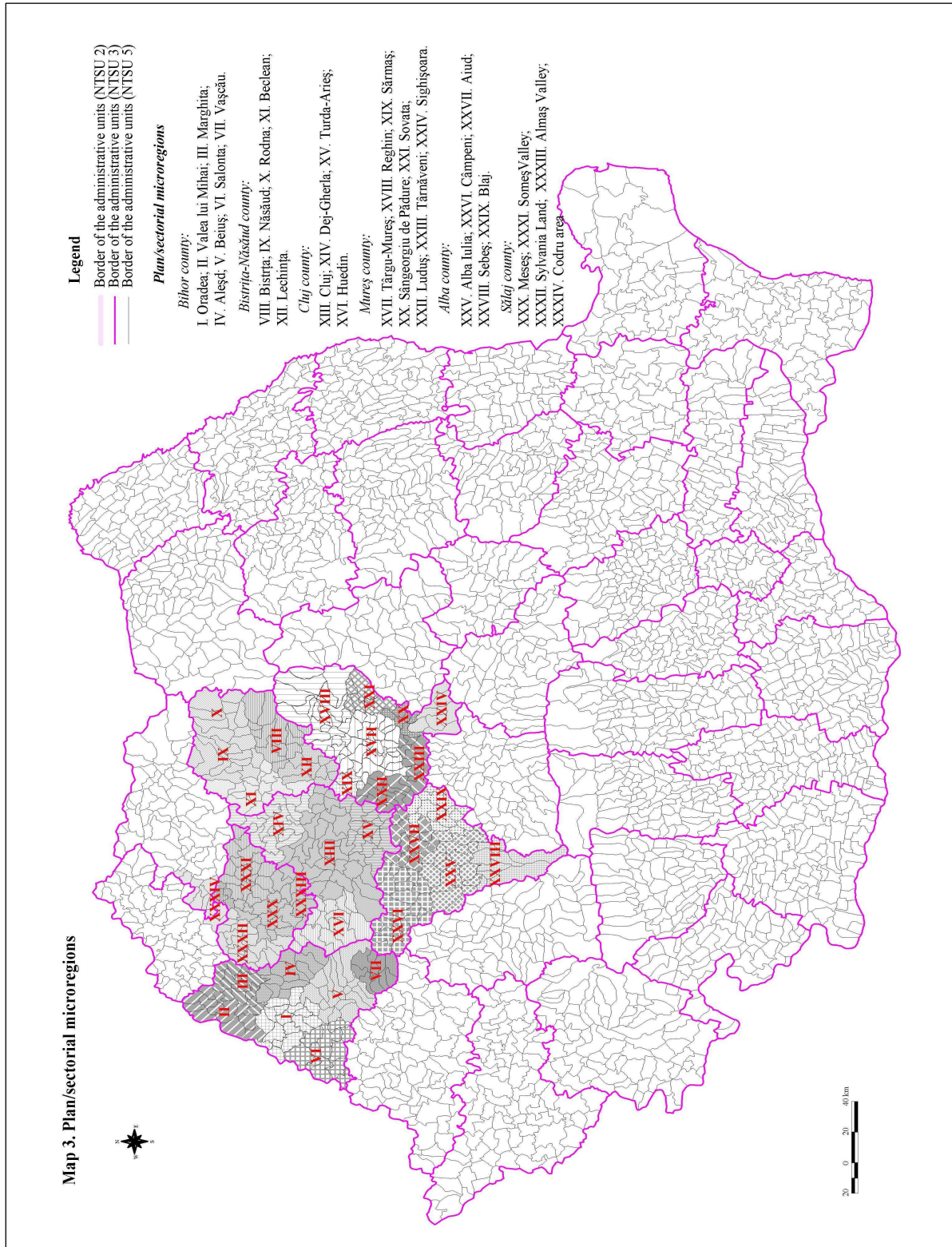


Figure 3. Plan/sectorial microregions.

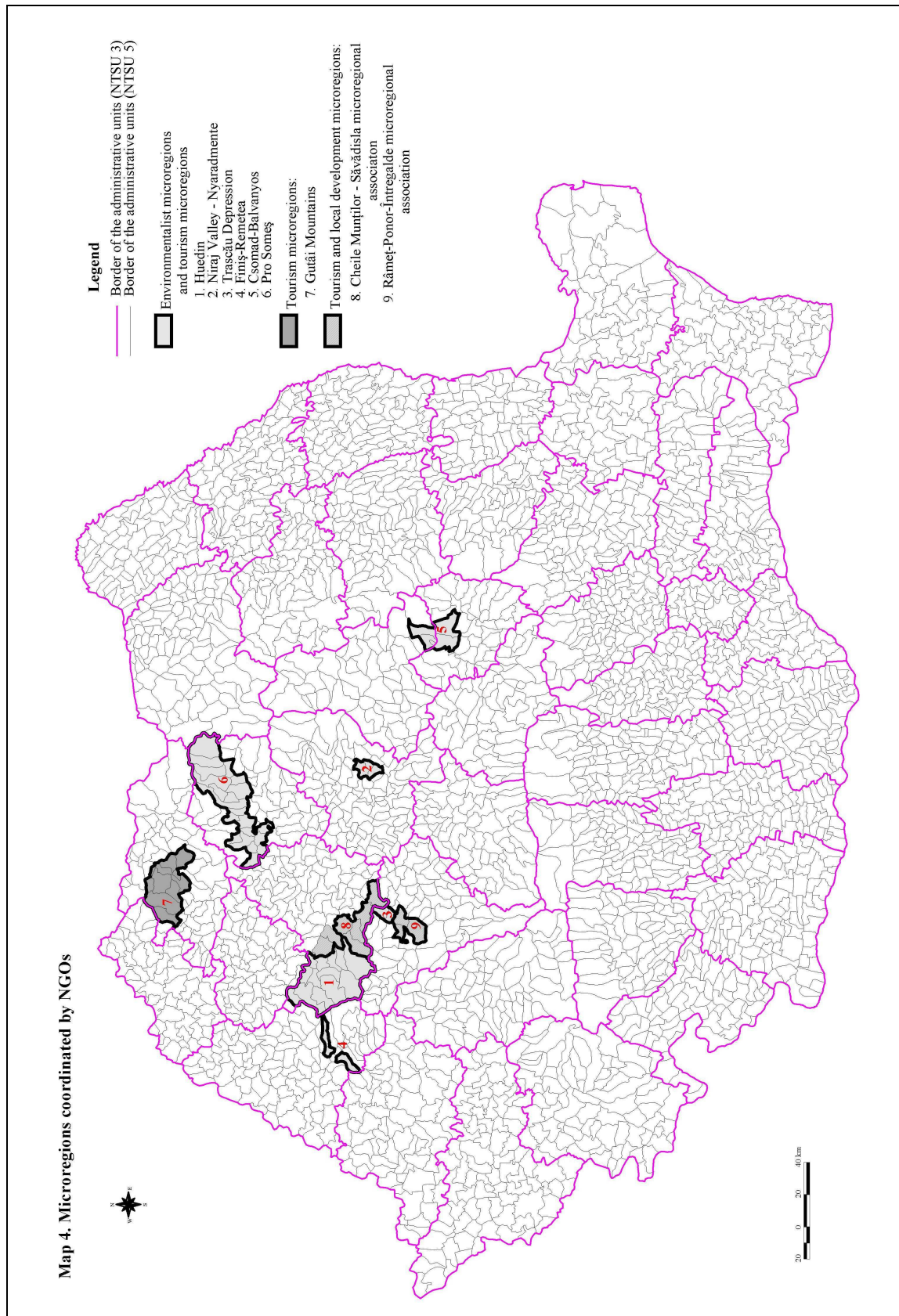


Figure 4. *Microregions coordinated by NGOs.*

Even though they did not have prominent results, their presence is positive: they succeeded in registering some progress in public awareness on the need of environmental preservation. These microregions can be considered initiators of such inter-communal association with a certain aim, by succeeding in introducing in the Romanian society new concepts as: "sustainable development", "environmental preservation", "inter-communal association", "cooperation private-public", "accessing funds" etc. that were already implemented in Europe. (Figure 4).

- *microregions focused on protecting natural patrimony* (Figure 5). Out of all types of protected areas decreed by the Romanian law, **natural parks** distinguish themselves by the fact that they also include settlements in their areas and thus allow economic activities to be carried on. Thus, a solution would be the association of the communes that border the natural park in order to facilitate a better conservation of the natural area, but also a valorizing of the economic possibilities induced by this provision of the law, through an ecologic tourism, through traditional objects and food that can be transformed into local brands. There are already eight natural parks in Romania, yet there are also other proposals for new natural parks. Two microregional associations from such natural parks stand out by aiming to set up some strategies for the conservation of the protected areas, namely The Association of the Microregion of the Maramureş Mountains, which overlaps the Maramureşului Mountains Natural Park, and EcoNaTur Association which overlaps Lunca Turului Natural Park. A special status is allocated to the microregional association established within the Danube Delta Biosphere Reservation.

Natura 2000 project created for the conservation of the natural areas on the European continent stipulates the attribution of at least 15% out of the national area for this scope. Even though the project does not clearly specify the association of the communes that are situated on those areas that end up to be protected, the financing programs ("Life" and FEADR) that come with the project encourage such associations.

- *microregions that aim to preserve and promote cultural patrimony* ("lands", "pays")

"The lands" represent very well defined regional areas within the Romanian territory, their functionality being proved in time. They represent in fact the most characteristic middle-sized functional territorial structures. They represent areas, which their inhabitants relate to, ethnographical mental spaces, and lived spaces which are extended at an intermediate size, but precisely because all of these reasons they can support an inter-communal cooperation¹¹ (Figure 6). The lesson of establishing microregions to overlap the historical "lands" could be learned from France, where the inter-communal cooperation among the communities of communes and the setting up of the "pays" has been institutionalized. These represent homogeneous geographic spaces, as far as economic, demographical, social aspects, or those related to history and culture are concerned. These spaces result after the association of the fundamental administrative units in order to put into practice common projects for development. French pays are sustained by the homogeneity of the usage of the land that is used in agricultural, zoo-technical scopes or for obtaining wine¹².

All these types of microregional associations have certain common characteristics:

- their association is not necessarily motivated or aimed at accessing European structural funds;
- usually, the NGOs are the ones that promote and support these types of association (environmental NGOs, cultural NGOs etc.);
- within these types of associations, educating the population in a certain extent was a success, so they became more aware of the problems of their communities and got involved more, while another success was a more direct cooperation between public and private.

As these types of microregional associations play all on one card, even though they succeed in developing that social or economic direction, they cannot bring in major contributions to the elimination of the regional disparities. Rural population is confronted with a multitude of problems and by trying to solve just one of them, by trying to follow just one direction is not enough as it does not offer a complex and complete solution. This one-direction approach perceives rural population just from one angle: of the tourist activities, of protecting the environment, of cultural promotion, etc. not in a holistic manner.

¹¹ R. Săgeată, book cited, p. 146.

¹² Idem, p. 145.

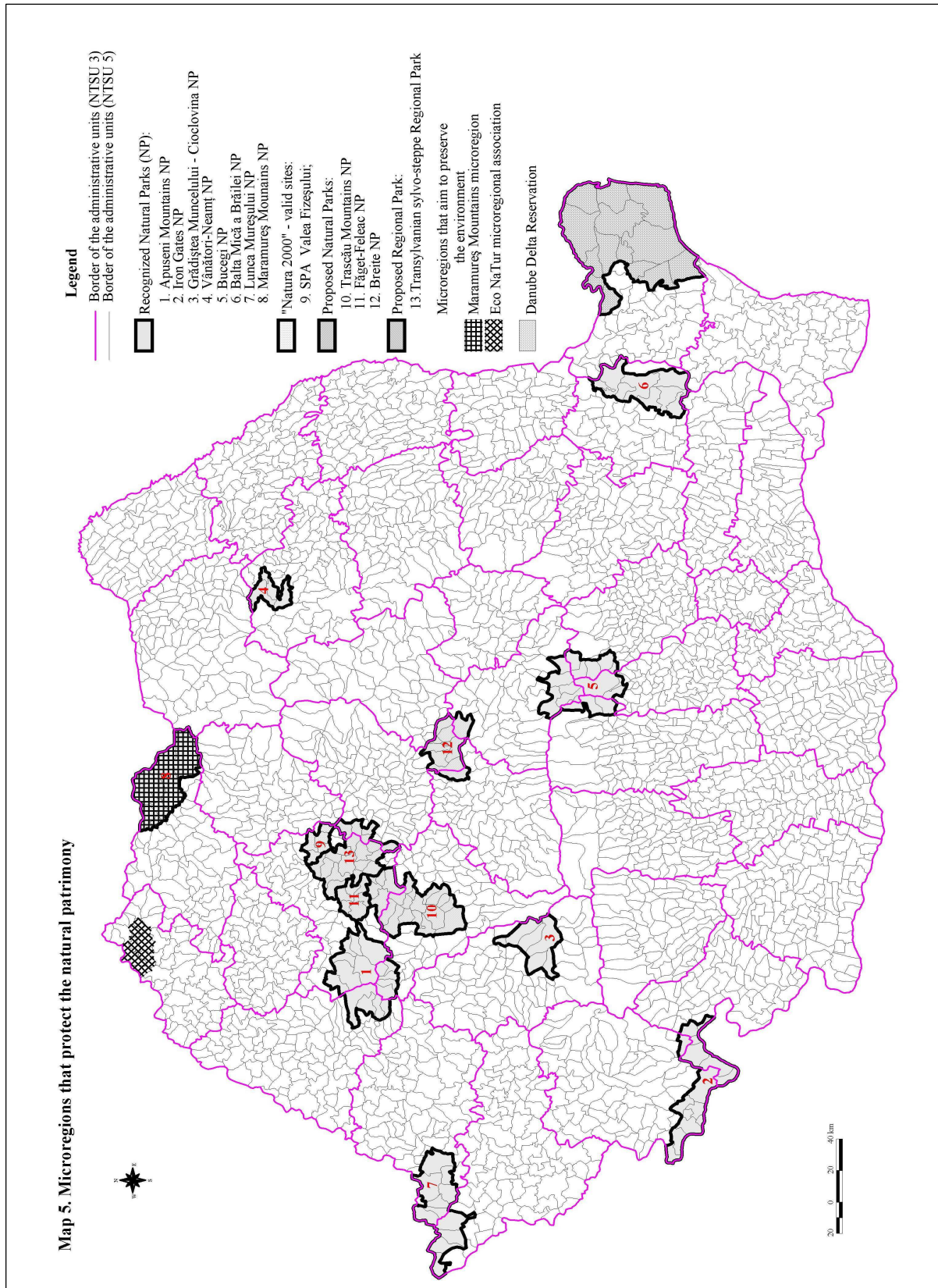


Figure 5. Microregions that protect the natural patrimony.

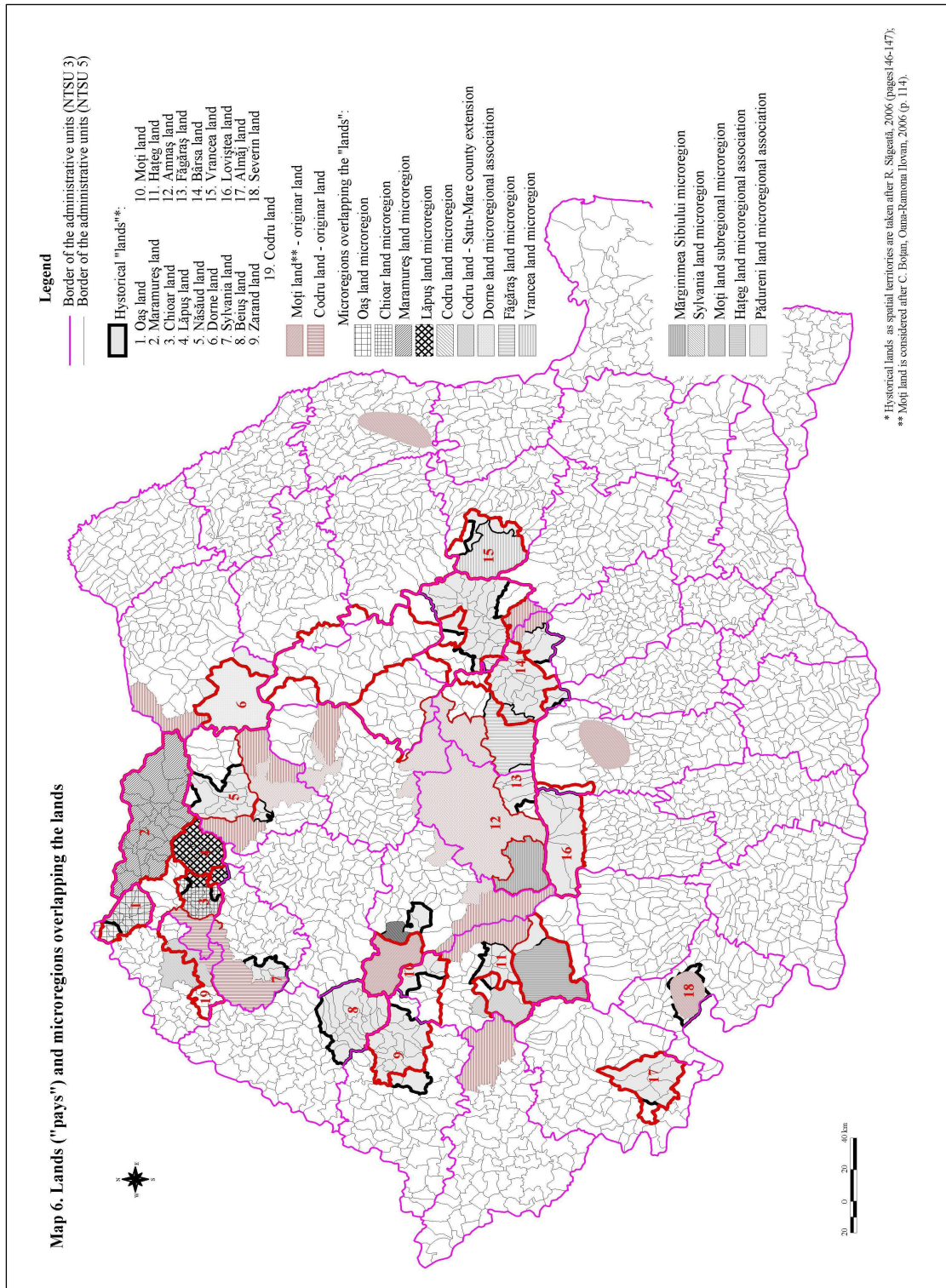


Figure 6. Lands ("pays") and microregions overlapping the lands.

That is why a multi-directional, pluri-sectorial, complex and integrated approach of the rural communities is needed as these rural settlements integrate in an associative structure of the type of the microregions and the plan of their development must emphasize this holistic character.

A special case of cooperation that does not extend all over the country is that concerning the trans-border cooperation and the establishing, at a territorial level, of some **trans-border microregions** (*Figure 1*). This type of association of some Romanian territories with others situated over the border can aim at achieving a cooperation that ensures a complex development or can only follow one direction of development: organizing cultural events, solving ethnic problems, accessing funds in order to develop some portions of common infrastructure etc. This type of trans-border twinning can be extended to other Romanian areas that are situated at the border, especially because of Romanian's integration into the European Union, which will generate a different identification of the concept of border.

The two dominant types of inter-communal association present in Romania and presented above can be categorized depending on *the initiators* of the establishing of such microregions in:

- microregions initiated by NGOs (for example environmentalist NGOs initiated the creation of Huedin microregion, Niraj microregion, Csomad-Balvanyos microregion);
- microregions that were established at the initiative of businessmen (for example managers in tourism have initiated the creation of Gutâi Mountains microregion);
- microregions created at the initiative of local authorities (for examples mayors were the ones that initiated the establishing of the microregions: Timișu de Sud, Harghita Nord-Est, Ciucul de Jos);
- microregions created at the initiative of local authorities, but having the support of upper administrative structures (for example the trans-border microregions: Dunăre-Nera);
- microregions that were proposed by international structures (sectorial microregions from Bihor county established at the initiative of World Bank).

Territorial extension is another criterion that distinguishes:

- rural microregions that are non-contiguous, formed out of two administrative units (Finiș-Remetea microregion);
- rural contiguous microregions formed out of segments of some administrative units (Trascăului Depression microregion, formed out of the commune Remetea and two villages that are part of another commune – Livezile);
- microregions formed out of contiguous administrative units that are from the same county (Timișu de Sud, Harghita Nord-Est, Cheile Munților, etc.);
- microregions formed out of contiguous administrative units that are from different counties (Csomad- Balvanyos);
- trans-border contiguous microregions (Dunăre-Nera).

Analyzing the *level of development*, we can distinguish several types of microregions:

- dynamic – characterized through a dynamic development, for example the areas around trans-national metropolitan areas (Oradea, Bucharest etc.);
- developed – areas around cities that induce a regional development, for example: Târgu Mureș, Bistrița;
- developing – rural microregions: Harghita Nord-Est; Sovidek, Maramureș Land;
- stand-by microregions – for example: Huedin, Salonta microregions;
- underdeveloped areas – they are not included in such microregional associations because of a self-isolation, so there are no examples of this kind.

Microregions and the process of eliminating regional disparities

Microregional planning “attempts to coordinate the planning activities of all the numerous actors within a limited territorial unit”¹³. It is focused on developing infrastructure, improving social, cultural, economic life, developing the residential system, protecting and preserving the environment, but first of all, microregional planning is focused on the people. The most important aspect is that microregional planning and inter-communal association of different administrative units aims at obtaining results that are to be general, collective and not individual ones. Microregional planning must be:

- bottom-up;
- participatory (the actors involved must really be involved);
- action-oriented, the course of actions must be oriented from planning towards implementation;
- specific, different algorithms of development must be implemented for different microregions as the problems might be different from one microregion to another, even though the aim for all microregions is sustainable development;
- part of a program of development that is recognized, promoted and implemented at a national level;
- oriented towards a sustainable development;
- focused on local potential that is to be capitalized at maximum;
- correlated with the management of implementation of all the plan of development within the microregion¹⁴.

*Typical phases of the planning process*¹⁵:

- analysis phase;
- scenario writing;
- elaboration of development strategy/sector strategy;
- elaboration of project profiles.

Implementation and permanent monitoring phase are completed by continuant evaluation. Feed-back among different stages of the microregional planning is crucial.

In contrast with the praxis of development in some European countries, in which microregions are considered fundamental units of territorial development, Romanian microregions are not integrated into the structures of territorial planning. The result is a relative chaos and a disaccord among different initiatives that come from the local level – from the microregional associations and certain determinism when the initiatives come from the centre.

The drawing up of the present zonal territorial plans is defective, as it includes various levels of approaching territorial planning and because there is no rigorous methodology to delineate those areas that have a lower rank as the county, territorially speaking, and represent functional geographic territorial systems.

All these have generated an exacerbation of the territorial disparities in development and not their elimination.

Another problem is represented by the fact that the multitude of areas that have acute economic, social, ecologic, and demographic problems are still not part of any kind of microregional associations that aim to foster a sustainable development.

Lately, the Romanian authorities have started to be interested in “an inter-communitarian association” (Law 286/2006), but there is no firm position nor a clear provision which to institutionalize a coherent and complex program for microregional planning, just an approval of the association of administrative units that will be able to access funds and that can have a juridical status.

¹³ E. Schmidt-Kallert, book cited, pp. 11-12.

¹⁴ Idem., pp. 13-14.

¹⁵ Ibidem., p. 17.

MICROREGIONS AND THE ELIMINATION OF THE REGIONAL DISPARITIES

The plans for national and regional development, as they are drawn up at a national level, include only projects for a general development and not for isolated cases – as microregional planning is considered. The political includes in a more general frame the objectives of local development. Yet, the programs aiming to foster sustainable development at a microregional level, even though not in a formal, official way, come to strengthen national and regional programs for development, as their results can be reflected at a regional and even national level. One example would be the following: a maternity home was built in a commune as a part of the program for rural sustainable development initiated at a microregional level. This can be reflected at national and regional levels in the fact that the health infrastructure was improved. Even though the microregional associations do not represent an authority arising out of local initiatives, they must be encouraged and supported.

Considering the results these microregional associations have, some of them established even in 2001, we can say that after analyzing the examples from Romanian, we cannot state that there are exceptional results, though some positive local effects can be seen:

- centers for tourist information established;
- setting up some rubbish bins;
- setting up panels for tourist information;
- a better communication and cooperation between the civil society and the local authorities through periodic meetings that are meant to bring up the local problems and to find out solutions for them.

In order to give other examples of local results of the microregional associations, we consider, in the following, some parts from a document drawn up by the President of the County Council from Harghita county - Zsombori Vilmos in his “The development process of the microregional associations in Harghita county”

“Results:

- 15 microregional associations;
- 15 headquarters of the microregional associations endowed at modern standard;
- good managers as employees there;
- over 200 projects – total value – 10.6 billion lei – (*these projects have an important multiplier effect – over 5*).

The most important results of the microregional associations during 2001-2002 were:

- 24 environmental projects won;
- 6 forest retrocession projects;
- 32 cultural and folk projects;
- 21 projects for local small enterprises;
- 26 projects for the youth;
- 15 strategies for development.

Most important results of the microregional associations during 2001-2002. Examples:

- Alcsik microregion - 25 projects – 10 projects won – total value 1.4 billion lei
- Harghita Nord-Est microregion – 8 projects won – total value 270 million lei
- Felcsik microregion - 23 projects – 9 projects won – total value 495 million lei
- Felsőhomoródmente microregion - 6 projects won – total value 140 million lei
- RIKA microregion – 8 projects won – total value 116 million lei
- REGIOVEST microregion - 14 projects won – total value 188 million lei
- Sóvidék microregion - 8 projects won – total value 785 million lei¹⁶.

We must highlight the fact that these microregional associations in Harghita county are in a certain extent supported by the local authorities, thus their strategies of development are integrated into the sustainable development plan of the county.

Rural development, through microregional association, has to be pluri-sectorial and holistic. A microregion is a complex and complete structure and faces varied problems, thus in planning its

¹⁶ Vilmos Zsombori, *Procesul de dezvoltare a asociațiilor microregionale în județul Harghita*, www.cchr.ro/ci/microreg.ppt

sustainable development a holistic approach must be chosen¹⁷. This is the major aim of the inter-communal association that aims a socio-economic development, so a complex development which to cover more fields within the social and the economic.

Unfortunately, until now, the results of the establishment of such microregional associations are rather local and do not bring a major contribution to the elimination of the regional disparities. The concept - still cloudy - is sometimes applied chaotically. There are areas that need to be integrated in such inter-communal associations, but are not.

As a result of our research, by analyzing Romanian microregional associations, as compared to the situation from other European countries, our conclusions support the extension of such practices (employing inter-communal associations as an approach to foster sustainable rural development) and their functional combination with metropolitan areas. Yet, the territorial development and territorial planning must be first sustained by a clarification of the concepts and of the praxis at a microregional level and also by a proper legal framework.

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¹⁷ E. Schmidt-Kallert, book cited, p. 9.

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