



Rural Development and High Nature Value Farmland in Romania

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Project main partners:

Agridea Switzerland, Adept Foundation, WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme Romania, ProPark Foundation for Protected Areas Romania

Project local partners:

Zarand Association, Milvus Group, Pogány-havas Association, Agapis Foundation for Education and Local Development, Apavie Association

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Foreword

High Nature Value (HNV) farmlands are individual farms or farmed landscapes comprised of many farms, where farming is carried out in balance with nature, which is beneficial to both farm sustainability and ecological conservation. In the last 10 years, HNV farmlands have become acknowledged as very valuable for European society. In recognition of their value, since 2007 EU Member States have been obliged to measure the extent of HNV farmlands and to prevent their loss.

Romania is home to the most extensive and best-preserved HNV farmlands in Europe. This is an asset of great importance, from an environmental, cultural, social and economic point of view. It is in Romania's national interest, as well as its obligation within the EU, to maintain and further support these HNV farmed landscapes, thus tapping into the social and economic benefits they can deliver, but also as a means to build resilience to ever-greater climate challenges.

HNV farming offers a series of economic possibilities for the development of regions, through employment and economic growth. However, to achieve this, there's a need to nurture new skills and to bring innovation and diversification to these regions. These areas are not suited to intensification; the social and environmental cost would be high, with little increase in production on the long term. But just maintaining the status quo would trap people in poverty. Maintenance of HNV farmed landscapes requires continued management by the farming communities who created them, and this will not be achieved by preventing change, but by combining innovation with tradition.

This is what the project *Rural Development and High Nature Value Farmland in Romania* is all about: preserving and boosting the social, economic and environmental values of Europe's most important HNV farmed landscapes, by bringing an innovative approach which can increase prosperity while protecting the sustainable use of natural resources.

We believe that this project has brought constructive, practical ideas and knowledge to the challenges faced by Romania's rural communities and precious farmlands.

Rural Development and High Nature Value Farmland in Romania is a joint project carried out in cooperation between Agridea (Switzerland) and 3 Romanian NGOs: Fundația ADEPT Transilvania, WWF-Romania and ProPark Foundation. These lead partners teamed up with NGOs in 6 HNV areas around Romania - *local partners* - with whom the main team worked closely to design and implement project ideas along 3 main pillars: policy, training and marketing.

What are

High Nature Value Farmlands

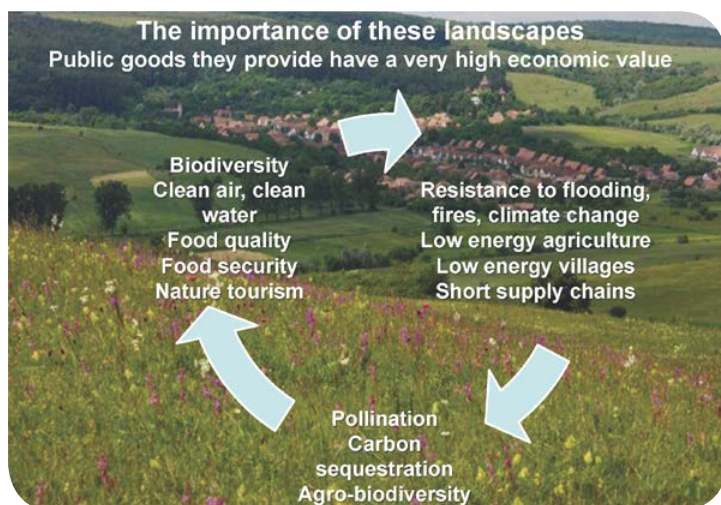
and why are they important?

HNV farmlands are areas where traditional farming is the main economic activity and at the same time a key factor in nature conservation. They are associated with natural and semi-natural vegetation, usually permanent grasslands which may never have been ploughed. These are generally very species-rich and integrated into a large-scale continuous mosaic landscape that includes natural structural features such as field margins, hedgerows and tree lines, stone walls, patches of woodland or scrub, small rivers and patches of arable land and orchards. These *mosaic* landscapes are very nature-friendly, and are also very productive. Smaller farms in Romania produce twice as much (measured in economic output) per hectare as larger farms (Eurostat, 2011).

Some of Europe's most important HNV farmed landscapes are found in Romania. They occupy at least 30% of the total agricultural area, amounting to about 5 million hectares. They are mostly found in smaller holding sizes in hilly areas within the Carpathian arc, especially in Transylvania, Maramures and in the southern Carpathian slopes of Oltenia.

These landscapes have been created by traditional farming practices. They deliver many public benefits – *goods and services* – including valuable cultural landscapes, high quality water and food, quality of life, recreation opportunities, carbon sequestration, flood control. They benefit the wider society, beyond the communities that live in HNV areas.

HNV farmlands are also worthy of support for their economic and agricultural productivity which secure the livelihoods of many farming communities in Romania. Support given to HNV farmlands contributes to the prosperity of local communities, by providing opportunities for market diversification such as the development of rural tourism and businesses based on high quality and healthy products.



Benefits from HNV Farmlands

- » **High employment and rural vitality:** small-scale farming communities provide considerable and varied local employment. The four poorest areas in Romania are found precisely in the areas with the largest most industrialised farms (Otiman, 2013).
- » **Food production:** smaller farms in Romania produce twice as much per hectare as larger farms (measured as difference between value of agricultural outputs and cost of inputs, Eurostat 2011). They have a significant role in providing food to localities and wider families.
- » **Food security for the future:** HNV farming provides sustainable land use, including healthy bee populations for pollination. HNV mosaic farmed landscapes are more flexible in their farming activities, more adaptable to climate change and environmental challenges.
- » **Diversified, nutritious and tasty food**
- » A rich pool of **agriculture and gastronomy-related traditions and customs**
- » **Clean air and water, and flood prevention:** HNV mosaic landscapes reduce floods and improve water quality, by absorbing, filtering and slowly releasing/dispersing water.
- » **Healthy soils which store vast quantities of carbon.** Coupled with the low energy use of traditional agriculture, and short food supply chains, these landscapes and systems reduce CO² emissions and mitigate climate change.
- » Healthy populations of **natural predators for natural pest control**
- » **Agro-biodiversity:** protecting traditional farm animal breeds and plant varieties enable improved production under varying conditions, and provide resilience to climate change.
- » **Havens for Europe's threatened wild plants and animals:** the semi-natural meadows and pastures, and mosaic landscape created by fragmented ownership and land management are very biodiversity-friendly.

These landscapes are an intricate mosaic pattern of habitats, including forest, scrub, grasslands, arable and many wildlife-friendly connecting features such as hedges, avenues and isolated trees. The large scale and connectivity of these landscapes allows fauna – small birds such as shrikes, woodlarks or woodpeckers, larger raptors such as lesser spotted eagles, small mammals such as dormice, larger mammals such as wolves and bears – to travel and maintain genetically-varied, viable populations.

Threats to

High Nature Value Farmlands

In spite of their many values, these landscapes are threatened by social and economic factors.

Although more productive than larger-scale farms, the small-scale farming systems do not benefit from economies of scale, which assist larger farms; larger farms can also gain more easily access to loans to invest in modernisation. The drive for competitiveness in the EU and global markets does not place a value on the wider environmental, economic and social benefits of HNV farming. Additionally, smaller-scale farms suffer from barriers to markets.

Finding ways to maintain traditional farming systems and help them to become economically viable is critical not only for securing the survival of vibrant rural communities and high quality food, but also for conserving nature and the services it provides.

The Rural Development and High Nature Value Farmland in Romania project aimed at **helping farmers obtain access to the two main sources of income:**

- » **State funding**, which should be regarded not as support funding, but as payment for valuable public goods and services
- » **Market sales** of HNV goods and services

Specific issues targeted through this project were:

- » **Policy limitations:** Romania's HNV grassland payments support only 40% of estimated HNV areas (2 million ha out of an estimated 5 million ha). Payments could be extended more widely, and be improved in design to target the most needy farming families and farming systems.
- » **Barriers to market for HNV products:** small-scale farmers face administrative and commercial barriers to market. Hygiene and safety standards are often set too high for micro-scale producers, while bureaucracy makes it difficult for them to access funds. They also have low capacity to find and access markets and to present their products attractively to consumers.

The project designed and tested ways to solve these problems, by proposing policy improvements, designing training courses that respond to the needs of small-scale farmers, and carrying out analyses of barriers to market and proposing innovative marketing initiatives.

How has the project helped in finding solutions to these problems?

The project **overall goal** was to help **improve economic viability of local livelihoods from HNV farmlands in Romania and conserve agri-environmental benefits.**

Specific objectives were:

1. Policy:

Assist in design of rural development policies which better address threats and integrate trends and needs of HNV farming communities

2. Training and capacity building:

HNV farmers and organisations in key study areas have higher capacity to:

- » access markets and to make use of funding opportunities
- » pass on skills and innovative approaches to develop HNV farming into a sustainable income-generating activity

3. Marketing:

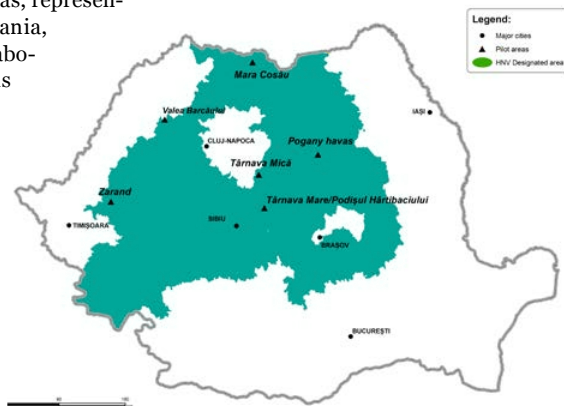
HNV farmers/producers in the study areas have better access to markets for their products

The project identified and used means to help bring genuine long-term prosperity to these areas, stimulating commercial viability as well as public funding support.

There are growing opportunities to revive rural economies, to secure livelihoods and maintain HNVF areas. Growing interest amongst urban populations in food quality and provenance, as evidenced by the growing popularity of farmer markets, food festivals and movements, is opening new markets for such products.

The lead project partners selected 6 study areas, representative of HNV farmed landscapes across Romania, in which to carry out project activities in collaboration with NGOs or community organisations active in each area (our local partners):

- » Zarand (Arad-Hunedoara counties)
- » Târnava Mare (Braşov-Mureş-Sibiu counties)
- » Târnava Mică (Mureş county)
- » Pogany-havas (Harghita-Bacău counties)
- » Valea Barcăului (Sălaj county)
- » Mara-Cosău-Creasta Cocosului (Maramureş county)



1. Policy

Collection of information

Local partners were selected by sending out questionnaires for basic information on characteristics of area, and willingness to take part. Six areas were identified. The six local partners then completed a survey of the socio-economic situation and trends in their area, and submitted reports on the HNV characteristics of their areas, and key concerns for future viability.

These six partners, plus the main project partners formed an Interest Group which met regularly to discuss questions raised by the project, based on experiences and opinions on the ground.

In addition, in 2013, we carried out a study trip to Switzerland with presentations, which presented many good examples of policy, training and marketing.

Turning the information into policy

Local partners' reports on the HNV characteristics of their areas, and key concerns for future viability, were used to support the design of policy recommendations, as well as identification of marketing opportunities. Project partners cooperated with the Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) in the period 2014-15, when the new Rural Development Programme was defined. The detailed design of measures was improved as a result of proposals by project NGOs; for example, varied mowing dates according to altitude, and higher payments to protect hay meadows, faults which had been identified by project partners in 2013.

As a result of feedback from farmers, during the project, we are making further policy proposals and marketing ideas for the future.

Communication

We took first steps in creating an Information Network, by establishing an SMS information system for farmers.

Project partners won **first prize, for Innovative Communication, at the EU CAP Communication Awards 2013**, for this innovative information system. We are using it to pass information of funding, training and marketing opportunities, and currently connecting nearly 1,000 farmers.

In September 2015, HNV was given a high profile at the annual RuralFest in the centre of Bucharest. This was a major marketing milestone; producers' stalls were all gathered together under a shared HNV concept, which gave it a major public boost. We were also invited by MARD to hold a conference for the *Rural Development and High Nature Value Farmland in Romania* project in the MARD official tent. Speakers at the meeting included the Director of Rural Development from MADR, the State Secretary from the Ministry of Environment, the Head of the Swiss Contribution Office, as well as producers and consumers. This mini-conference at RuralFest helped to consolidate our project results with the farmers, and to demonstrate the support of the ministries involved.





“ An intelligent SMS system, so that CAP opportunities reach those parts that the internet cannot reach ”

Objective: improving access to CAP opportunities by Romania's small-scale farmers through simple SMS information messages

Target audience: the 1.2 million small-scale farmers in Romania with farms between 1-10 ha, most of whom have no internet access

Creativity: raw information, often hard to understand, is distilled into short and relevant messages. Continuous updates, not one-off as in meetings/workshops. Can be used in future for two-way communications.

Innovation: using intelligent interface between database and SMS so that relevant information can be sent to thousands of farmers immediately

Impact: improved access by small-scale farmers to Rural Development measures, improving economic viability

Relevance to the CAP: family farms better supported, the CAP reaches its target on a continuous basis

Capacity to be replicated: as easy to send targeted information to 100,000 farmers as to 100 farmers, owing to the intelligent system.




2. Farmer training

We have given high priority to farmer training and capacity building, so that our work leaves long-term benefits.

Our local project partners helped us identify local people in each HNV study area, whom we then engaged in a training programme designed to address practical aspects of farmers' activities. After "graduating" from the training programme, the "community facilitators" took on the task of delivering trainings on the local level, dedicated to farmers.

In short, the training approach consisted of two implementation phases, as follows:

- » Phase 1: 6 basic + 2 specialisation "train the trainers" courses - training sessions for community facilitators (15 participants)
- » Phase 2: trainings, hands-on workshops, field trips organised by community facilitators for farmers from the 6 study areas (435 participants)

Phase 1: Train the trainers

The training plan dedicated to community facilitators included two sessions:

1. General courses

2. Specialisation courses

The general courses were focused on the following topics:

1.1. Financing

1.2. Legislation (hygiene)

1.3. Association

1.4. Marketing

1.5. HNV farmland management

These topics were identified through a training needs assessment survey organised in collaboration with local partners in the first year of the project. Following consultations with local partners, communication was also added to the 5 fields of interest. It was found that communication will be particularly useful for fostering an HNV-supporting community more widely.

The curricula and other training materials for both the general courses and the specialisation on topics of choice from the 6 above-mentioned fields of interest were prepared by ProPark experts. The courses were tailored to local contexts, concentrating on case studies and examples of good practices. Community facilitators were actively involved by providing examples from their own communities.

Upon graduating the general courses, community facilitators decided for a specialisation in at least 2 of the 6 general fields. At the end of the full training programme, they were certified by the National Agency for Qualifications.

Phase 2: Workshops for farmers delivered by community facilitators

With the knowledge acquired during the general and specialisation modules, community facilitators were in charge of organising the training sessions for farmers in their communities. They organised practical workshops which were adapted to the audience (e.g. helping out in filling in a financing request).

More than 500 farmers participated in these workshops and found them very useful. Additionally, more than 250 farmers visited other farms and associations from Romania, Germany, Hungary and Austria in order to see some other models and analyse what could work best for them.

As a general observation, there is a real need amongst small farmers for information regarding funding opportunities (through the Rural Development National Programme and not only), as well as for motivating them to form associative entities.

3. Marketing

HNV farming systems and lands are being supported at European and at national level through public funds, mainly under the Rural Development Programme. However, on the market, they do not have an identity, and they do not have added value, in spite of the key role they play in preserving nature and its services, rural traditions and cultural landscapes, the conditions for a high quality and vitality of life in the countryside and beyond.

The marketing component of the project assessed the present state of the food market at national level and in the study areas to create a **unique, umbrella-brand and positioning of HNV products to address critical needs in study areas**. The team has concentrated on food products that are typical of HNV areas and dominant in the local partners' range of products: milk and dairy, fruits and fruit products (jams, juices), honey and meat.

The main findings indicate both threats to and opportunities for HNV products:

- » From 2007 until now production of fruit and honey has risen, while milk and meat production has declined at national level.
- » Most products (with the exception of pork) that enter the market are sold directly by producers rather than being first processed and sold with added-value.
- » In Romania, most of the organic area is taken up by arable crops – primarily cereals, followed by permanent grassland and permanent crops; between 2013-2014, Romania had the biggest increase in the EU in organically farmed sheep and cattle (Eurostat, 2015); organic holdings tend to reach industrial sizes (at EU and national level).
- » The big foreign retail chains have expanded significantly in the main cities around the country and are now making inroads in smaller towns, taking around 30% of the budget spent by consumers on food. Romania is the most favourable country in Europe to expansion of hypermarkets and supermarkets (PlanetRetail, 2015); they attract customers with discounts and cheaper “household” brands, long opening hours, the possibility of one-stop shopping, and with a growing offer of Romanian fresh produce (vegetables and fruits) and products branded as “made in Romania” or “traditional”.
- » At the same time, smaller, independent shops have lost more and more ground, with the exception of organic shops, which are steadily growing as a result of a growing consumer interest in a healthy lifestyle and diet.
- » Farmers markets have seen decreases in number of producers, quality of produce, quality of shopping experience and, number of customers, due to lack of vision to strengthen them

as a main selling spot for Romanian local products. However, a recently founded Romanian Association for Farmers Markets is building its position as a key player representing the interests of farmers market operators. To counteract fierce competition from big retailers; this association is also developing a standardised business model for farmers markets around the country.

- » In Romania, people have become aware that biodiversity is indispensable for the production of goods such as food and medicines, and that our well-being and quality of life depend on nature. The loss of biodiversity is increasingly recognised as a very serious problem and people have started to act on this, for example by buying eco-friendly products. However, the full potential of this sector is not fully realized because of scepticism towards the legitimacy of claims made by brands in relation to nature protection and insufficient information to make the right choices – for example, product labels are not seen as providing enough information about their environmental impact (2013 Eurobarometer surveys).

The team carried out chain analyses in project study areas and identified the commercial paths used by the local farmers to place their produce on the market: local and direct sales at farm gate or at farmers' markets; a regional private processor collecting raw materials from local producers and selling the processed products in local shops or at the farmers' markets; a cooperative of producers is looking for a better price for their members' milk by developing processing and sales regionally; a regional private processor collecting raw material from local producers and selling the processed products to big retailers on the national /international markets, with a private brand.

The most important findings of these analyses include:

- » Most HNV producers are family farms that don't have a long term business vision and are not aware of biodiversity as a selling point, nor proud of their critical contribution to conservation.
- » Most are semi-subsistence farms and their income sources are diversified – they do not rely solely on what they can make by selling their produce.
- » Current HNV farmers and custodians of the HNV heritage are ageing and the younger generation are tempted by a more comfortable life in urban areas and abroad.
- » Producers have a strong artisanal processing know-how, but there is weak local/regional processing infrastructure.

- » Producers are still in the process of upgrading their operations to meet hygiene and food safety regulations.
- » HNV raw produce is being exported in bulk or collected and mixed by large processors with non-HNV produce, thus the attributes and value of HNV are being lost, while farmers get very low prices for the produce they deliver.
- » In processed/finite products there is no reference to HNV attributes and the HNV place of origin.
- » In spite of a historic resistance to associative structures, producers are beginning to understand the advantages of such structures and to work together to increase their commercial viability.
- » Some HNV producers have developed long-term relations with retailers and deliver processed products for national distribution, but they pay high fees for their product to reach the shelf and they risk becoming dependent on retailers.
- » HNV areas have high tourist potential and family farms have the opportunity to diversify their income sources by developing tourist facilities or activities.

HNV products as a stand-alone new food sector

HNV products need to be kept separate from other types of products and to embrace a common identity, for them to maintain their value and to help farmers strengthen and develop their farms into viable businesses.

Differentiation is the most suited marketing strategy for HNV products. What differentiates them from other products is the fact that they are **natural, minimally processed products, with a varying full taste which come from small family farms in mosaic landscapes and support the survival of rural economies and nature**. They could fill the demand of educated, discerning consumers with an environmental awareness and a taste for travel in rural areas and cooking.

At present, the project team is developing an HNV marketing strategy and national-level brand which could be used in the future as a **certification mechanism**. The brand would be granted on the basis of compliance to certain criteria, thus ensuring that HNV products are **authentic**

and truthful to HNV principles and practices, and that they are promoted in a consistent way that enhances their value. The team will continue working with the local partners in the first phase of the branding process, encouraging them to use the HNV brand on their products.

Distribution strategy: a diversified approach is probably the most advantageous. Distribution strategies need to be developed locally by farmers associations and cooperatives, taking local factors into account. Reliance on a single distribution channel, and failure to develop processing infrastructure and marketing skills, are factors that will maintain producers' vulnerability, uncertainty and weak bargaining power.

Innovation at farm level, combined with tradition and not linked with intensification, and the development of **alternative distribution channels and schemes**, which **foster the relation between producer and consumer**, are recommended to be pursued to tap into consumers' interest in small producers and quality food.

In the future, the project team will continue to work with producers to build the HNV brand, to revive farmers markets and to empower farmers associations.

Study areas

Zarand

Local partner: Zarand Association



© Zarand Association



© Zarand Association

Zarand is in the Western Carpathians, on the border of Arad and Hunedoara counties. The landscape is characterised by the steep-sided valleys of the Zarand Mountains and undulating hills that run down to the flood plain of the River Mures. The complex topography and micro-climates, the mosaic of natural and man-made landscapes make Zarand a biodiversity hot-spot. It is a Natura 2000 site and an eligible area for HNV support payments.

The area holds a rich genetic heritage of traditional fruit trees, flowers, herbs, vegetables, and medicinal plants. The combination of a landscape dominated by traditional wooden buildings and the preservation of local customs and traditional land management gives Zarand a unique identity that has been shaped by centuries of interaction between nature and humans.

Asociația Zarand's mission is to conserve and promote the rich natural and cultural diversity of eastern Zarand. Since 2012, Asociația Zarand and its local and international partners, with support from the local community, have started a multi-faceted programme of rural development that addresses four main themes: education, culture, economy and environment. Within this programme, two socio-economic projects have been developed: a milk collection facility and a project to promote the local traditional products.

The milk collection facility provides the local community with a sustainable source of income that supports the natural and cultural values of the region. Eftimie Ardelean, the president of the newly established Local Farmers Association that is managing the milk collection facility puts all our efforts into perspective: *Now, with this milk collection facility, every farmer that sells milk has some extra money in order to put bread on the family table.* Another local farmer adds on the impact of the association: *As single producers we would never be able to sell our products on any market because of the small quantities. Only together, as a group, we might have a chance in today's market economy.*

With support from the *Rural Development and High Nature Value Farmland in Romania* project, Asociația Zarand organised training and knowledge-sharing events for local producers about food hygiene, legislation, forming and managing associations, funding opportunities, the value of HNV farmland, and marketing products. These events were aimed at providing local producers with knowledge to develop small-scale businesses that are sympathetic to the natural and cultural values of the area. This has provided further support to the communities of eastern Zarand, demonstrating how to develop sustainable livelihoods that use and enhance the natural diversity and cultural richness of the region.

Study areas

Târnava Mare

Fundația ADEPT Transilvania in charge locally



Târnava Mare is a lowland area of high biodiversity, 85,000 ha, farmed by 5,000 families in 24 small-scale farming communities. The extensive mixed farming carried out in this region for over 8 centuries has created one of Europe's finest surviving lowland HNV farmed landscapes. It is a Natura 2000 site and also eligible for HNV support payments, for maintaining HNV grassland.

Agriculture remains largely traditional; each household with strips of arable land in the different areas that are good for the various crops, and larger parcels, typically 5–10 ha, of hay-meadow. Grazing is still maintained on the common pastures, by the village grazing associations.

The grassland habitats and species of Târnava Mare are especially important. These kind of wildflower-rich grasslands, especially the traditionally-mowed meadows, are the most threatened type of habitat in Europe; they have disappeared over much of Europe as a result of intensification and heavy mechanisation, but are still widespread in this area. The area is threatened by land use changes, intensification and abandonment.

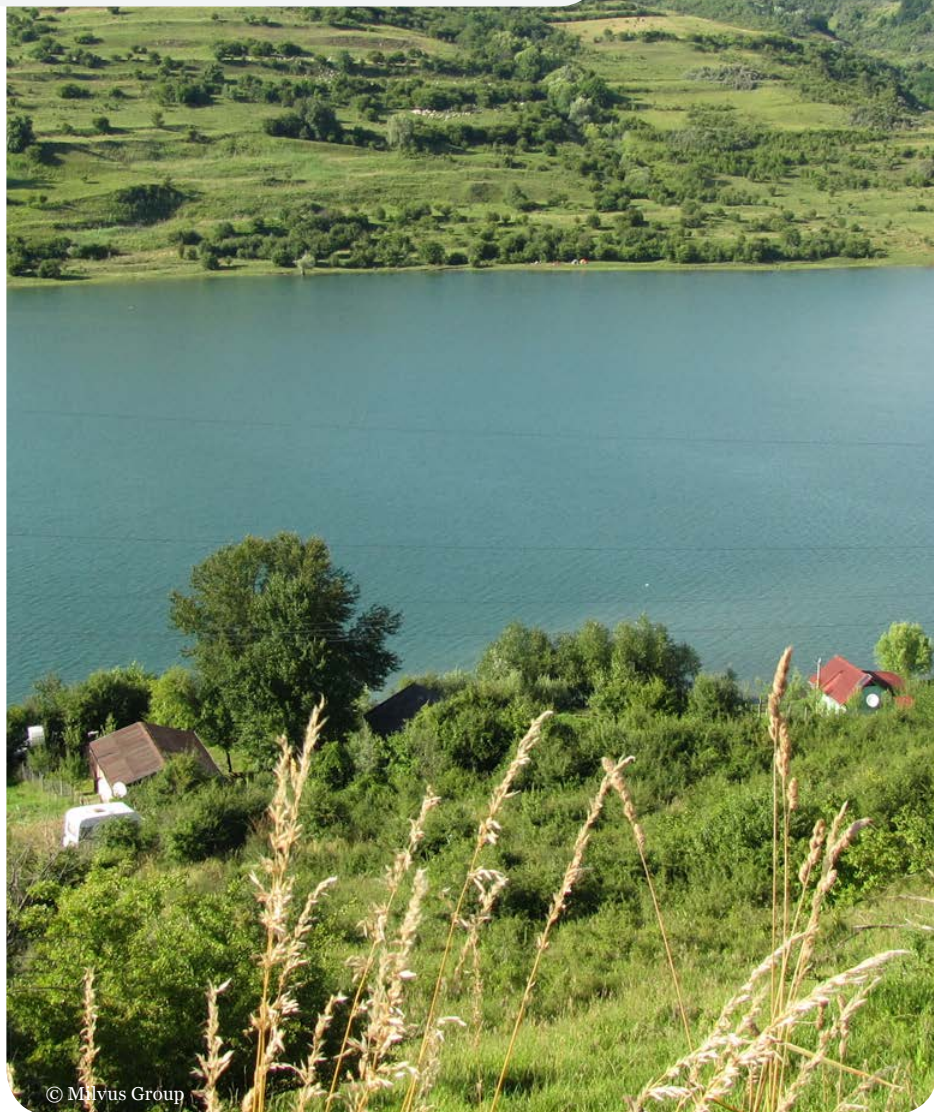
Fundatia ADEPT has been working with the farming communities in this area for 10 years, and has won prizes at EU level for its innovative approach to farmer communications, and to using HNV landscapes to improve local economy, increase community prosperity, showing that HNV, far from hindering development, is an effective tool for economic growth.

During the project, Târnava Mare farmers have pointed out trends in land use, and problems that need to be solved if support payments will be really effective. Rolf Roth, a Saxon farmer from head of the Cattle Association in Mălâncrav, says: *Although we have a large farm by local standards, with 20 cows, I have told my son to learn another trade, because I see no future in farming. He is learning to be an engineer. One big problem is the loss of hay meadows. The HNV payments are generous for grazing, but are not enough to compensate losses of production when we mow our hay meadows later than we used to. So, more sheep everywhere, and cow dairy farming, the traditional activity of the area, is disappearing, along with the traditional management of the grasslands. The other big problem is the market. The price of milk is too low. And I have beautiful „mangaliță” pigs, but cannot sell them. We need help to improve the payment systems, and to find markets for what we produce.*

Study areas

Târnava Mică

Local partner: Milvus Group



The Târnava Mică area is characterised by mosaic landscape, created and maintained over centuries by traditional human activities, with settlements grouped primarily in the valleys between the two rivers: Târnava Mică and Niraj. The landscape is typical of medium or low hills (200-600 m) with oak forests and where agriculture, orchards and vineyards are the main land use. Forests and natural hay-meadows are in the slopes of higher land, 500-600 m. Land use is strongly influenced by the steepness of slopes, and whether they are facing southeast or northwest. Small arable patches are found at lower altitudes, growing crops for home use or animal feed.

Agriculture is the main economic activity of the area, much of it semi-subsistence farming. Plots are small, 1-5 ha in 75% of households, and local production is mainly used for home consumption. However, the number of plots that are worked in association to create and manage monocultures is rising. Mixed farms of a bigger size, which have both arable and animal production, are still few and located in Chibed, Bălăușeri, Sângeorgiu de Pădure or Fântânele.

Speaking of the project, Mr. Bátori István, who is a local active farmer and also works for Magherani Townhall in agriculture-related matters, said: *The information provided by the community trainers has been useful to the farmers. They have a better understanding of the legislation on funding and subsidies; and they have also benefited from assistance in filling in and submitting official requests for funding which resulted in a higher number of requests. They have also been informed on agriculture practices and their impact, and ideas and the benefits of association, as farmers based in this area are reluctant to form associations.*

Study areas

Pogany-havas

Local partner: Pogany-havas Association



The Pogány-havas (Pagan Snow Cap) region extends from the valley of the Csík Basin and out to the eastern edge of Transylvania, continuing out into Bacau. Few visitors from Western Europe have discovered this very special part of Transylvania.

This diverse area consists of parts of two very different regions, Csík and Gyimes, separating by one of the most important passes in the East Carpathian Mountains: the Gyimes Pass. Csík has a wide, open landscape surrounded by mountains. It is characterised by bustling agricultural activity with the beautiful backdrop of green mountains. Another characteristic is the naturally carbonated spring water, called “borvíz” (wine-water). The terrain in Gyimes is mountainous and the villages are tucked in narrow valleys. Gyimes also has many natural springs.

Both areas are uniquely beautiful, home to a wide range of cultural and natural heritage, and scenic trails. Both are rich in natural treasures: many rare plants and animals, including the southernmost range of several species surviving here since the last ice age.

Farming still uses traditional methods, on a very small, semi-subsistence scale. The great value of this method of farming is that it creates and preserves habitats for the animals and wild flowers of the alpine grasslands and wet meadows, while also maintaining a rich cultural value. Research has shown that these grasslands are among the most biodiverse habitats at European level, a direct result of the rich traditional knowledge and practices used by the villagers.

The biggest problems identified by farmers are loss of hay meadows, and lack of added-value for the products made in these special natural areas. Once again, design could be improved for support measures for hay meadows; and development of markets is essential if these landscapes and communities are to survive.

Study areas

Valea Barcăului

Local partner: Agapis Foundation



Valea Barcăului is one of the most beautiful areas in northwestern Transylvania, with a complex landscape including natural protected areas, as well as cultural diversity and valuable traditions typical of Sălaj and Bihor.

Some of the tourist attractions worth mentioning include: Valcău de Jos, with its wooden churches, old centre and the ruins of the Subcetate citadel; Şinteu, a village inhabited by Slovaks who maintain ancestral traditions; the thermal resort of Băile Boghiş; Sâg, with the Barcău-Tusa reserve (a Natura 2000 site) and the Barcău Springs; Halmăşd, with wooden churches and Morii Valley; Plopiş, renowned for its stone crayfish, the Iaz bog, a living ethnographic museum and the chance to experience a bee-keeping “safari”. People have been living off bee-keeping here for over 2000 years, and honey is one of the oldest Romanian food products.

Borz Marius Vasile, a local farmer, says: *Through the project, we have understood that associations can be the solution for a brighter future; and we have trained as much as possible in this direction. We appreciated very much the study visits organised under the project – they have mobilised and motivated people. We came home after every visit with more courage and determination to take things on, to grow our communities. Since the Biofach fair in Germany, I am eager to create a farming business and to stay in the community”.*

Agapiz Foundation’s main achievements include:

- » Two cooperatives created, Plaiul Barcăului Animal Breeders Cooperative (established in February 2016, having 10 founding members, with more keen to join, and focused on raising cattle) and AgroCoop Huta in Şinteu: it has 6 members who are raising cows for meat and have potato crops.
- » Better capacity at the Valea Barcăului social enterprise to work with a larger number of beneficiaries, especially bee-keepers; the development of the Sănătate Dulce brand has encouraged other local entrepreneurs to think seriously about putting products on the market in an organised, professional way: walnuts, fried fruits, „pălincă” (famous Romanian brandy), jams, potatoes, rye flour.
- » The creation of online and offline platforms to promote small producers from HNV areas and to sell their produce – **www.coltulromanesc.ro** is currently hosting a range of 20 producers, with some of the most interesting Romanian products; the website also has an associated blog which is promoting the stories behind these products and events organised by producers, while the Colţul Românesc caravan builds more visibility for them around the country and abroad, at fairs and special events.

There is a kind of momentum, more confidence and dynamism to find new solutions to usual problems that local communities are facing. One of these is to form associations and to access European funds. The area will grow better, as a result of the project. It’s in good hands. Local entrepreneurs are better able now to manage the process.

Study areas

Mara-Cosău-Creasta Cocosului

Local partner: Apavie Association



The Mara-Cosău-Creasta Cocoşului area lies in northern Maramureş, known as Historical Maramureş. Its topography of medium-altitude hills and species-rich meadows means that the local economy is based primarily on sheep rearing. Until the 20th century the area of grasslands grew constantly, used as hay meadows in lower lands and grasslands in higher altitudes. Arable land was along the rivers, mainly for growing animal feed. The local population earned a living through livestock and so the whole area turned into a real “grass civilisation”.

In the mid 90s, due to the diversification of income sources, animal rearing started to decline. Many arable areas were left fallow, and mowed to produce hay; this hay has an ideal composition of protein, energetic and aromatic plants and coupled with the influence of a rich soil, they endow the food products with special qualities.

Mowing in lower, flatter areas tends to be done by using light mechanic equipment, but in uphill areas, with steep slopes, most meadows are still mowed traditionally, by hand, with a scythe, from June onwards. This has allowed farmers to take agri-environmental payments, motivating farmers to increase livestock numbers. After a period of abandonment, smaller patches have been “adopted” by small farmers who cleared and mowed them, leading to the formation of a beautiful mosaic landscape.

Part of this landscape are also the traditional orchards which are interspersed with wild species, leading to a prolonged flowering period in the spring, filled with pleasant natural scents and colours.

Asociația Apavie was founded in 2009 in response to the need for associative structures in the agriculture sector, to be able to use resources in a smart, efficient way. The association offers information and counselling to its farmer members, so that they develop their activities and access funds. The next stage in the development of the association, as a result of the *Rural Development and High Nature Value Farmland in Romania* project, is to establish a cooperative with its own brand. This will enable farmers to sell their produce on the market with a unique, visible profile and the first types of products that are to be sold are apple juice, dried fruits, jams and, possibly, honey too. They have the scents of orchards in autumn, vivid colours and a strong taste, provided by the qualities of native varieties and the local soil. These products, with all their qualities, for which an integrated marketing plan is to be prepared, represent the starting point in the development of local farm holdings, which shall include non-agricultural endeavours, and will help preserve the traditional rural values of Maramureş.

Other Swiss projects contributing to the development of HNV areas

The Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Programme has funded several projects in Romania, beginning in 2013, with positive complementary effects on HNV landscapes and farming communities. They bring extra income to HNV communities, and increase public appreciation of their value.

GIRO - Protecting Romania's traditional products and adding value to them

Geographical Indicators in Romania (GIRO) is a project implemented by Agridea, Fundația ADEPT Transilvania and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The main objective was to support Romanian institutions and producers in establishing clear characteristics for certain agri-food products using the GI protection system, to help small and medium scale farming systems to become economically, socially and environmentally viable.

The project has had concrete results, raising the ability of the administration to support producers wishing to use the GI system to protect and add value to their products. We have identified 60 potential GI products, helped 10 potential products get started in the GI registration process, given detailed guidance to 4 products (Pita de Pecica, Gem Săsesc de Rubarbar, Scrumbie Afumată de Delta Dunării and Telemea de Mărginimea Sibiului), introduced a new measure in the Romanian National Rural Development Programme supporting the registration process and covering part of the cost, and worked with the National Rural Development Network for the promotion of traditional and GI products.

Cincșor info centre and a comic book inspired by nature

Natura 2000 and rural development in Romania is a project which aims to raise the capacity of local community members in Natura 2000 sites (especially in the Hârtibaciu-Târnava Mare area) to tap into the economic benefits of protected areas through sustainable traditional activities. We have helped 5 local entrepreneurs (craftsmen and small food producers) to develop business plans and buy the equipments they needed to improve their work and access to markets; we have also assisted forest operators in reaching the standards of sustainable forest management, under the FSC certification system. And we are also trying to boost rural/ecotourism in the area, by opening a tourist information and experience centre in the precincts of an old fortified church in Cincșor, and to lure people to the area through innovative communications materials, such as a comic book: *Beyond the horizon in the Transylvanian Highlands*. The project is being implemented by WWF-Romania in partnership with WWF-Switzerland, Milvus Group, Ecotur and ProPark Foundation.

Mountain bike trails and guesthouse networks

Since 2013, Fundația ADEPT has built over 100 km of mountain bike trail in the Târnava Mare area. The trail is an all-weather track, built with local materials and local labour. It links 8 villages and has catalysed a network of guesthouses and guiding services. Higher visitor numbers (over 3,000 visitors and 300 local children use the trails each year) bring income to food and craft producers as well as to guesthouses. We have designed a smartphone application for the bike trail, offering an interactive map with information about the area. The trail has been so successful that local authorities have banned motorised off-road recreation in the area, since mountain bikers bring in more income and are not destructive.

Conclusions

This project has aimed to be truly practical. We have gathered information from six HNV areas and the wider food market in Romania and turned it into concrete actions and recommendations. We have identified:

- » the characteristics of HNV farmlands in order to map them, follow trends and threats, and propose improved support policies;
- » the characteristics of HNV products that distinguish them from other products, so that we can improve marketing and add value to them;
- » the needs of farming communities for training and information, to develop relevant training packages which will remain as local resources, and to train local trainers responding to top local needs, who will continue to work in their areas.

Under the project, we have created policy, training, and marketing ideas in direct response to farmers' needs. We have observed problems and possibilities, and reacted to them, as shown in the following examples – we are pleased to say that we are already in discussion with the MARD and farmer representatives about these proposals:

1. Inspiring greater cooperation: several partners demonstrated how associations can be effective channels for information, and for creating producer, marketing groups or cooperatives. We are proposing innovative policy incentives for Territorial Cooperation, so that farmers are helped to work together and so gain real benefits.

2. Agri-environment schemes: we noted farmer comments about low payments for hay meadows, which do not fully compensate loss of income when hay is mowed late. As a result, we are proposing innovative results-based agri-environment payments schemes, which give more flexibility to the farmer.

3. Mapping of HNV: we are proposing improved identification of HNV farmland areas, based on best practice in Switzerland and some EU countries. This methodology will use a range of indicators for HNV farmland: species richness, landscape complexity and landscape features, land management, etc., to build up a more complete picture of HNV assets in Romania.

4. Marketing and adding value: we noted the need expressed by many farmers for better-organised marketing to add value to HNV products. We are developing an HNV brand, under the project, which we hope to launch in cooperation with the MARD.

All in all, we believe that this project has provided the framework to develop practical, effective and long-lasting solutions to the complex challenges facing HNV farmland landscapes and communities. It is worth continuing to work hard for these solutions to be followed through, because of the enormous economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits that HNV farming brings to Romania and to Europe.

