

# The Sustainable Livelihood Approach as a tool for the analysis of local living conditions in the villages bordering the Piatra Craiului Mountains

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*Within the framework of the Sustainable Livelihood Approach the author investigates in a case-study (based on an analysis of the macrostructural changes in Romania) how settlements bordering the Piatra Craiului Mountains in Romania are structured. In the villages of the area, the situation is quite diverse : while some villages have a booming rural tourism, others have high unemployment problems because of a restructuring of industries. In remote mountain-villages traditional lifestyles along with natural-resource-based livelihoods can be found. With this the author demonstrates that the Sustainable Livelihood Approach is adequate and fruitful when analyzing individual household structures not only in developing countries but also in a European context.*

## **Introduction**

After the 1989 revolution, Romania has faced a deep social and economic change. Compared to other Eastern-European transformation-countries the starting conditions in Romania were much worse after the end of the communistic system, so that the economic shock was dramatic. Only since 1999 Romania's economy has started to recover slowly, a process which was initiated much earlier in other Eastern-European countries.

In this situation individual households developed different living strategies. Based on this individual villages are very diversely structured today.

Within the framework of the Sustainable Livelihood Approach the author investigates – based on an analysis of the macro structural changes in Romania – how different villages in the Piatra Craiului Mountains are structured

and how a sustainable development of the area can be achieved.

## **Conceptual basis : Sustainable Livelihood Approach**

To analyse the situation of individual households in the study area the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) is used as a conceptual frame. This approach is shortly described here. The SLA is based mainly on research done by Chambers during the mid-1980s. Founded on this, a research-group at the Department for International Development (DFID) in London published in 1998 a modelization of the SLA (vgl. Department for International Development 2001, 3; Carney 1998, 3ff; Solesbury 2003, 10f.). The SLA is used today mainly in the International Development Cooperation, for example

as a field scheme to quickly evaluate the situation of households after shocks like droughts or earthquakes in developing countries or to analyse the situation weaknesses and strengths of households to find ways to improve their situation in longer focused

development projects. Generally the SLA is adequate as a heuristic scheme to structure the analysis of households and their living strategies. Thereby it is not limited to developing countries.

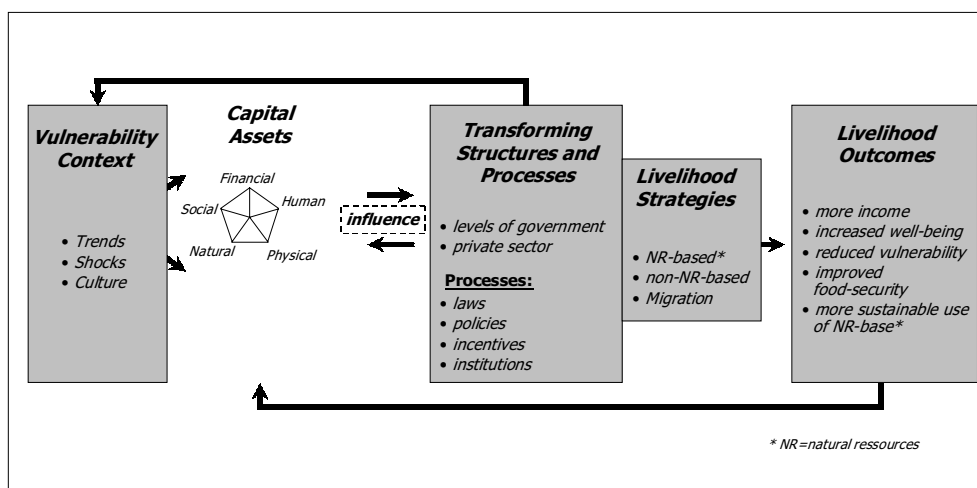


Figure 1. Sustainable Livelihood Approach (Carney, 1998, 5)

The approach is built (see figure 1) around the capital assets (financial, social, human, natural and physical capital) of the individual household (Carney, 1998, 5). These are influenced by an external vulnerability context (trends, shocks, culture).

The capitals interfere with macro structural so called „transforming structures and processes“. Here – for the case study of the Piatra Craiului area –, these are understood as general processes and structures on the national level, *e.g.* restitution of former state land, economic situation of Romania or developments on the job market. This combination with the „transforming structures and processes“ then leads to individual livelihood strategies, which can in the original version of the SLA be natural resource based, non-natural resource based or migration. In later models this categorization of strategies has been broadened.

In the SLA these strategies then direct to an individual „livelihood outcome“, *e.g.* more income or an increased food security which is directly connected again with the capitals.

A livelihood is in this context *sustainable* (*cf.* name of the approach) when three conditions are fulfilled (*cf.* De Haan, 2000, 364):

- The by the individual self defined basic needs are fulfilled. These „basis needs“ are based on the context of the society and can change over time. *E.g.* the implicitness of the ownership of special durable consumer goods.
- There is a sufficient ability to cope with external shocks and long term stress factors.
- The natural resource base is not undermined.

As an „external shock“ in the sense of the SLA in Romania the end of the communist system can be seen. This leads to an

array of different and interconnected changes in the macro structural situation.

As figure 2 shows the „transforming structures and processes” of the SLA can be understood more general as a macro structural frame which determines developments at regional level. This is for example the economic situation of a country like Romania

which determines the social system’s spending possibilities and therefore the income of individual households. Or the closure of large industrial entities in the context of system change had strong influences at the job markets regional level. At the same time the regional specialities, *e.g.* the local traditions, possibilities for tourism or agriculture or the local transport infrastructure determine the promise of individual households.

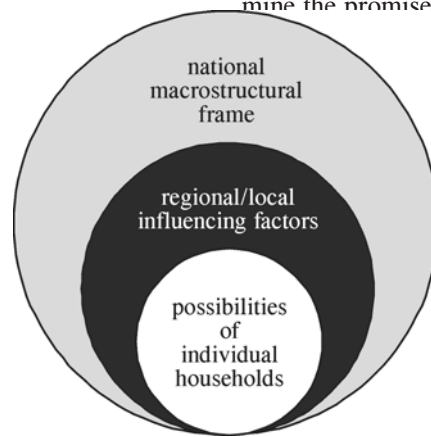


Figure 2. Frames for the individual household

### Case study: developing strategies for a sustainable development of the villages in the Piatra Craiului area

#### Localization

The study focuses on the settlement-region around the Piatra Craiului mountains, which is located in the South-East of Transylvania, approximately 25 kilometres South-West of the city Braşov (around 290.000 inhabitants). The Piatra Craiului massif is located in the Southern Carpathians and has a maximum elevation of 2.200 meters. Today the Piatra Craiului mountains are facing many different problems, *e.g.* excessive clear-cutting, overgrazing and erosion. One of the backgrounds for this situation is (besides a lack of institutions, education and powerful laws) the

inferior economic situation of large parts of the local population.

The Piatra Craiului area was selected particularly with regard to the high diversity of the villages in this area. Within a quite small region of about 20 × 20 kilometres many typical problems and developments of Romanian settlements can be analysed. While some villages have a booming rural tourism, others have high unemployment problems because of a restructuring of industries. In remote mountain-villages traditional lifestyles along with natural-resource-based livelihoods exist.

Purposefully the old-industrial city Zărneşti, the tourism village Bran as well as the dispersed settlements of Măgura and Peştera were selected. These villages are in direct neighbourhood to each other but have very different phenotypical structures.

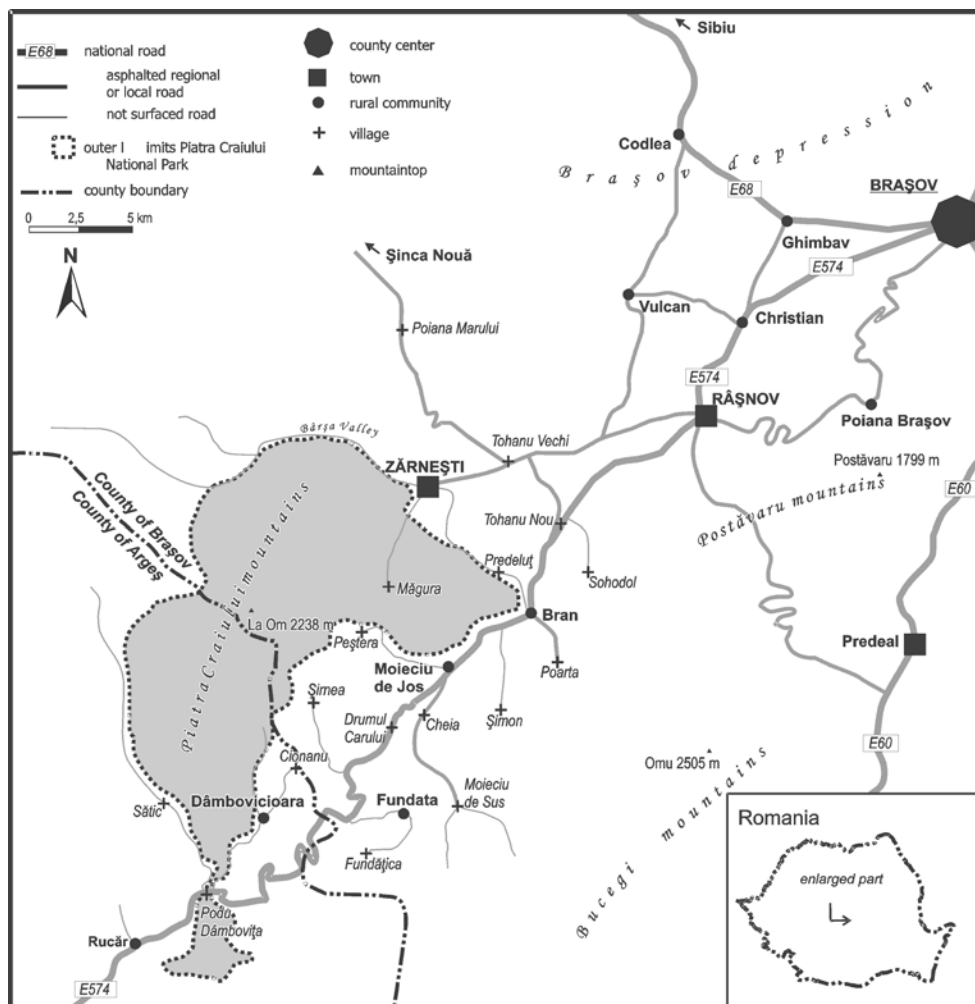


Figura 3. Localization of the research area (Cartography : Martin Birtel)

### **Macrostructural and regional changes**

In this sense in order to get a better understanding of the ongoing processes in the Piatra Craiului region the general macro structural situation in Romania is now shortly analysed :

After a long phase of stagnation the economy of Romania started to recover after 1999 (cf. Stănculescu/Berevoescu 2002, 189 ; Leibe 2006, 11). Only in 2003 the GDP in

Romania was again on the level of 1990. In Hungary this level was already achieved in 1996/1997, in Slovenia even earlier in 1995. But until today Romania has (along with Bulgaria) the lowest purchasing power per head of all other middle and Eastern European countries. Compared to the EU-15 countries Romania and Bulgaria have merely a quarter of the purchasing power of these countries and they have about 35 percent of the purchasing power of the EU-25 countries. This is mainly caused by the low wages : Romania

had a mean gross-hourly-wage of 1.04 Euro in 2005. Compared to this the mean gross-hourly-wage in the EU-15 states was around 14.88 Euro (*cf.* Leiß, 2006, 11).

The EU-accession process resulted in a massive series of reforms and an acceleration of the economic upswing. As the German federal agency of foreign trade recently informed also an overheating of the economy could thereby be triggered (*cf.* Bundesamt für Außenwirtschaft, 2006). But at a national level there are large disparities today: It is well-known that while especially cities like Timișoara or Bucharest could profit from the upswing other, especially rural areas, are more and more marginalized. To analyse the apart from the disparities between regions and large cities also existing differences on a *local* scale had been the interest of this study.

Another important aspect to understand the present situation of former industrial cities (*e.g.* Zărnești: see below) is that after 1989 many of the industrial complexes in Romania – like in other Eastern European countries – lost their (foreign) markets. To market conditions the majority of the mostly ailing firms were not competitive and could not market their products, since most were of bad quality or too expensive.

At the same time, especially after 1996, the Romanian government withdrew more and more from the national economy and lost its former dominant macroeconomic role (*cf.* Stănculescu/Berevoescu, 2002, 190). The result of the reform-package consisting of privatizations, reorganisations of the companies after Western European models and renewals of the production techniques (Wagner, 1996, 217) was the closure of most of the firms and mass dismissals of workers: Between 1990 and 2003 the number of employees in the industrial sector declined from 4.005 to 2.055 million (*cf.* Institutul Național de Statistică, 2004). Since the service sector has only gradually been able to compensate this massive loss of working places, many of the former industrial workers turned towards agriculture.

This resulted in an agrarization of society (*cf.* Benedek, 2000, 42) and that Romania's rural areas had to absorb a large share of the „losers” of the transformation-process (Ursprung, 2002, 74.). So instead of a sinking percentage of people active in (mainly subsistence) agriculture (as was the case in the other Eastern European countries), a rising percentage could be observed on a national level (*cf.* Stănculescu, 2004, 2): In 2003 about 35 percent of the active population of the country were working in agriculture or forestry (*cf.* Stănculescu, Berevoescu, 2002, 199; Institutul Național de Statistică, 2005). In rural areas this value was even higher: Here about 70 percent of the rural population of Romania are active in agriculture, while in countries like Poland or Hungary this value lies at about 30 percent (*cf.* Stănculescu, Berevoescu, 2002, 199).

Combined with reduced governmental investments in rural areas, the dominance of the unproductive subsistence-farms lead to unfavourable living conditions in rural villages (*e.g.* Măgura and Peștera – see below). Because subsistence agriculture is able to guarantee the survival of a single household and to absorb the influence of poverty, it is „not a source of prosperity, nor does it serve as an engine of economic growth.” (Stănculescu, Berevoescu, 2002, 199).

Another aspect of macrostructural/regional processes was the creation of National Parks in Romania after 1990. Especially in areas where there settlements were in direct proximity of the park the local population had been influenced by this step since for example the possibilities of grazing or cutting wood were restricted.

The Piatra Craiului National Park (size 14.800 ha) is one of the twelve national parks in Romania and has been created in 1990. Since 1999 a park administration exists. Today the national park administration is faced with the challenge to sustain a protection of the environment and biodiver-

sity, promote sustainable tourism along with a socioeconomic perspective for the local communities (which also include handicrafts and forestry). One of the biggest problems in this context is the clear cutting of large areas of the forest in the Piatra Craiului area. The background is the restitution of the former state forest in the area to their former owners, which are mainly villagers of the area. While most of the clear cutting is totally legal, there are many occasions where areas of the forests are illegally cut. Other problems are the overgrazing of the alpine pastures, illegal or semilegal building-activities in the park. Since the area is frequently visited by tourists (*e.g.* Bran – see below) the park has a high tourist potential, which could raise the income of locals but also faces negative influence through uncontrolled tourism activities.

### ***Regional/local influences on the household***

As described above the possibilities individual household have are to a great extent also dependent on regional and local factors. Otherwise the differences in living conditions and general structures in different areas in Romania would not be explainable. Therefore the specialities of the analysed settlements are described here.

#### ***Zărnești***

The small city of Zărnești (25.000 inhabitants) is a typical old-industrial locality in Romania. Based on already existing industrial structures (for example a paper and a cellulose factory had been in place in Zărnești since the 19th century) in the 1960s the industrial structures had been enlarged and workers were settled in new build blocks of flats. In this context the size of the city rose from about 5.000 inhabitants to above 25.000 in 1989.

Like many other mainly industrially embossed cities in Romania Zărnești today is confronted with a large unemployment

problem, since here like in the rest of the country (see above) the restructuring of the factories led to massive job-layoffs. Today the unemployment-rate in Zărnești is around 40 percent.

The town council today pursues a double strategy : On the one hand an industrial park was established in order to revitalize the industrial history in 2004. Until 2005 16 companies settled here. On the other hand there are plans to help intensify the tourism business. Because of its location at the foot of the Piatra Craiului, which is (because of its location to the capital Bucharest and its dramatic shape) one of the most frequented massifs in Romania so the city has a high tourist potential. Zărnești is the main entrance point to this massif.

But at the moment the city is not very appealing to tourists. The old industrial plants and some of the housing blocks from the 70s are decaying. There are twelve pensions nowadays, but besides accommodation no other tourist infrastructure like restaurants or tourist trails exists.

#### ***Bran***

Bran (around 5.000 inhabitants), just around 15 kilometres away from Zărnești, has been transformed in a centre for rural tourism in the last few years. In the centre of the village the Bran castle can be found, which is one of the most visited attractions in Romania. Besides the massive day-visiting tourism, the Bran-area is today a popular centre for weekend-tourism, because of its location within two mountains-massifs (Piatra Craiului at the Western and Bucegi on the Eastern side). Many pensions exist and some of the local households are offering private rooms. Beyond that the outer areas of the village are still mainly characterized by households which are engaged in subsistence style agriculture.

#### ***Dispersed settlements Măgura and Peștera***

The dispersed settlements Măgura and Peștera are located in heights of 1.000 to 1.400 meters in the foothills of the Piatra Craiului massif. The settlement type which can be found is typical for mountain-areas in Romania. Măgura is totally included in the national park area; half of Peștera is within the National Park.

Today Măgura und Peștera are mainly characterized by subsistence style agriculture and traditional lifestyles. Elements of this are traditional mowing and grazing activities on the meadows of the Piatra Craiului massif.

After 1990 because of the collapse of the industries in Zărnești and other industrial centres in the area, many of the villagers in Măgura and Peștera lost their jobs. This led to a downgrading of the conditions in the mountain villages „The living conditions have dropped at the same time with the increase of the unemployment rate.” (Piatra Craiului National Park, 2005).

In the last five years this trend has gradually changed: Along with some pensions, many holiday- and weekend-homes have been built in Măgura und Peștera. But while much of this development is rather uncontrolled and the new buildings which do not have the architectural style of the traditional houses in the area which already partly alter the landscape, a majority of the locals are positive about a further touristic development of the area.

Based on the SLA a socioeconomic assessment of the households in the area has now been done. Around 250 households in the former industrial city Zărnești, the tourism village Bran and the dispersed settlements Măgura and Peștera were interviewed with a standardized questionnaire in July 2006 flanked by participant observation. The questions dealt with the engagement in agriculture, household income, and attitudes towards the national park, social capital, family structures and tourism. The interviewed households had been selected by a random-route mode in Zărnești and a cluster-mode in Bran and the dispersed settlements. The individual res-

pondents in the household were elected by the „birthday”-method so that altogether the study can be seen as representative for the selected localities.

Now some of the results of the case study are presented: Exemplarily five important aspects of the study that describe differences in household living conditions and strategies are presented here. This are: household income, household equipment, family structures, tourism and Piatra Craiului national park.

The following table 1 shows how important the local/regional possibilities (see figure 2) are for the activities of individual households. While in Bran in proximity of the frequently visited castle there are tourism possibilities, much more households are engaged in this business.

Opposed to this people in dispersed settlements on the hills like in Măgura/Peștera rely mainly on transfers, since regular-wage-jobs are here only limited prevailing and commuting is because of a bad transport infrastructure almost impossible and are active in subsistence-agriculture. If the infrastructure (accessibility by car, canalisation) is improved in the foreseeable future the percentage of households active in tourism could rise. The households in Zărnești have until now only limitedly engaged in tourism and at the same time are lacking the possibilities for agriculture, so they focus on wage income or are dependant on transfers as the table shows. Nonetheless transfers in Zărnești are very important but to an inferior extent than in the other settlements, on the other hand households here are above-average supported by relatives from abroad.

Further results of the empirical study showed that because of a lack of different community infrastructure (*e.g.* shops, transport, education) which is typical for mountain villages in Romania (=macro structural element) today the living conditions in Măgura and Peștera are quite different to the situation in the valley (*e.g.* in Bran and Zărnești): The individual household in Măgura and Peștera is significantly inferior endowed with

Table 1. *Main sources of monetary income of the households (in percent ; multiple response ; N=262)*

Source of income	Bran	Măgura/ Peștera	Zărnești	Total group
Transfers (pensions, unemployment benefits)	63,3	87,5	51,8	63,2
Wage income	48,3	29,7	67,2	53,6
Tourism	21,7	6,3	2,2	7,7
Other self-employment (without agriculture and tourism)	6,7	3,1	6,6	5,7
Money from relatives abroad	3,3	1,6	8,8	5,7
Own agriculture	3,3	7,8	2,2	3,8
Money from relatives in Romania	1,7	1,6	1,5	1,5
Forestry	1,7	0,0	0,0	0,4
Other	0,0	1,6	0,0	0,4

household infrastructure and durables than in the other two localities. This is represented also in the content with the living circumstances : 29.7 percent of the respondents in the dispersed settlements answered to be „unsatisfied” or „very unsatisfied” with the overall-standard of their dwelling. Opposed to this result this value had been in Bran at 18.1 percent and in Zărnești at 21.2 percent. This resulted already in the 1990s in the migration of especially young families from the village into the valley (vgl. Muica *et al.*, 1999, 309), which lead to an aging of the population in Măgura and Peștera.

It was also apparent in the study that in Zărnești families are significantly larger and multi-generational households can be found significantly more often than in the other two analysed settlements. This can be interpreted that the difficulties arising from the economic problems of the city and the stressed job marked lead to survival structures which forced families to stay together.

The empirical results show that 24.6 percent of the households in Bran answered that they have had income from tourism in the last year. While this value is much higher

than the mean of the whole research group (=9.6 percent) tourism is to a much lower extent important in Bran than anticipated beforehand. At the same time most of the interviewed households who are actively engaged in the tourism business have rather small accommodation capacities and answered that tourism is more an *extra*-strategy and is not generating sufficient income to fully concentrate on this activity.

The study proved that the park is on the one hand well-known under the local population : 91.2 percent of the interviewed answered that they had heard already about the park. But at the same time the knowledge about the limits of the park is low : 81.1 percent answered to know „imprecisely” or very „imprecisely” about the outer limits of the park. This poor knowledge of the extent of the national park can be interpreted as one of the reasons why there are frequent conflicts between the park administration and the local population and why the locals often do not comply with the rules of the park. Parallel there is a generally insufficient information of the locals about the park rules

which can also be explained by the fact that the park only has been created quite recently.

## Conclusion

As shown above the use of the Sustainable Livelihood Approach makes it possible to focus on the macrostructures at the national, regional and local level on the one hand and on the microstructures of individual households on the other hand simultaneously. Based on this method the broad approach of the SLA can be used to design sustainable development

strategies for the local and regional level when proposing development plans. But in this context it may not be forgotten that the SLA is not a model: Instead it should be used (as it had been done here) as a tool to structure the research.

Concerning the Piatra Craiului area the effect of ongoing changes at the subordinate national level on the level of individual households was proven.

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