

EVALUATION OF SOME RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN SZEKLERLAND - EXPERIENCES IN THE VILLAGE OF DITRÓ

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to analyse some rural development programs of Ditró, a large commune consisting of multiple settlements, with particular focus on eight large-scale investments between 2014 and 2020, and to examine the attitude of the local population. The research was based on online surveys, interviews, data analysis, and document analysis conducted between 2020 and 2021. Although the survey, which relied on 162 households, was not fully representative, it provided quite comprehensive data on public opinion.

The results indicated that the analysed investments had a positive effect on both the economy and the quality of life. To identify future development directions, a personal interview was conducted with the mayor of Ditró, and recommendations were made for developments in job creation, tourism, sports, and healthcare. While the study was conducted at the local level, the methods employed are generalizable and applicable to similar-sized communities. The study supports the positive trend of rural development and underscores the importance of active community participation.

Keywords: rural development, local economic development, subsidies, infrastructure

Introduction

Rural development in Romania has become a truly important factor following its accession to the European Union. The significance of rural areas, and thus the importance of rural development, generate resources aimed at making rural environments more liveable and attractive, improving life opportunities through

economic diversification as the primary goal. It is important to consider the fact that rural development programs encourage the sustainability of rural areas rather than their transformation or urbanization. Rural areas represent a highly complex and not clearly defined concept, interpreted differently by various scholarly sources. Rural areas can be environments distant from the noise of large cities, where one can experience the beauty of nature, tranquillity, security, and where one can truly recharge with positive energy. However, it can also be a space where agriculture often serves as the most important livelihood, and where establishing a basic comfort zone requires multiple efforts and investments. This is particularly true for the settlements in Szeklerland, where - despite agriculture having the lowest productivity among sectors (Erdélystat, 2021) - it is not only a fundamental source of employment and livelihood, but also a shaper of local identity and an important basis for population retention.

Rural development primarily assists residents and workers in rural areas through agricultural subsidies, but also serves infrastructure development and the strengthening of rural actors. In Romania, two sources of rural development promote long-term development and sustainability: the National Local Development Program and the National Rural Development Program. It is always a pertinent question how the impact of specific development programs manifests in a given region. A good example of this is the work of Kozomos (2022), who conducted a detailed examination of funding opportunities in the counties of Széklerland and highlighted the local effects of various development programs, or in a specific locality. Our research endeavours to explore this, specifically examining how rural development programs influence the development and long-term sustainability of the Ditró municipality in Harghita County. We consider it of utmost importance to contribute to the increase in rural living standards and to incentivize rural retention through these means. We believe that the development of a municipality significantly influences the quality of life, livelihoods, retention within the community, and economic revitalization.

In our article, we first examine the importance of rural areas and rural development, briefly discussing the European Union's rural development program with a focus on its relevance to Romania. Subsequently, we present the key findings of our primary research conducted on the topic.

Literature Review

The rural area is a multifaceted economic, social, geographical, and cultural concept that can be approached from various perspectives (Hart et al., 2005). It is interpreted differently from different structural considerations and viewpoints (geographical, cultural, economic, social) (Bennett et al., 2019). At the same time, it is important to consider that different rural delineations based on various criteria can result in different geographical coverages (Maácz, 2001). There are numerous definitions of rural areas, which vary in their interpretation of population size and density thresholds (Kulcsár, 2017). Depending on the size of the delineated area, different population sizes and compositions emerge, resulting in statistically different outcomes (Du Plessis et al., 2002).

In Europe, two approaches are distinguished regarding the delineation of rural areas. According to the first approach, rural space can be defined using objective indicators, while the second approach argues against the necessity of defining such areas as definitions are not universally applicable and do not meet all criteria. In the latter case (see, for example, the approach of the European Commission - EC, 1988), rural areas are not merely geographical delineations but also take into account the societal situation and specific functions essential for the population (Kis, 2011). It is important to highlight that the concept of rural multifunctionality is emphasized not only for rural populations but also for society as a whole in the literature. According to the basic concept of multifunctionality, rural population income derives not only from the production of raw materials, food, and industrial goods but also from cultural and environmental tasks (Eftekhari and Shadparvar, 2018). In the European model, multifunctional agriculture and the rural areas that host it fulfill ecological-environmental, socio-economic, cultural, and societal functions alongside food production. These include, among others, creating conditions for recreation and tourism; supporting small and medium-sized enterprises; nurturing rural communities; maintaining landscape and folk cultural heritage; preserving traditions, and agricultural-environmental protection, etc. Additionally, agriculture remains important, providing farmers with a suitable standard of living and stable income (Molders, 2013).

Rural development primarily aims to improve and enhance the quality of life and standard of living of rural populations. It is achieved through various perspectives, with the combined efforts across multiple areas resulting in effective development of rural life, encompassing economic, social, societal, and environmental impacts

(Farkas, 2002). In our opinion, to achieve the effectiveness of rural development, it is essential to meet the needs and expectations of the local population, as rural residents are the ones who truly understand what would lead to genuinely relevant progress for them.

The effectiveness of rural development comprises three fundamental components, the coherence of which presupposes efficacy: political measures, established practices in rural areas, and theoretical frameworks that integrate these into a coherent conceptual framework (Madarász, 2003). We concur with the Author's opinion that political measures wield significant influence in the implementation of developments in contemporary rural societal life. Every development entails intervention in the daily lives of the population, correlating with the improvement of living conditions and changes in human existence, thus development always results from political decisions and naturally carries political content. In this regard, it is crucial to highlight the relevant policy of the Union.

The European Union's Rural Development Policy, considered the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), specifically aims to facilitate the economic, social, cultural, and environmental development of rural regions. In pursuit of revitalizing rural economies, improving quality of life, maintaining landscape and environmental structures, and increasing employment, the Union has set three overarching goals: 1) to promote the competitiveness of agriculture; 2) to ensure sustainable management of natural resources and combat climate change; and 3) to achieve balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities, including the creation and maintenance of employment. In line with the Union's rural policy, each member state devises its own rural development program, through which, with co-financing, it supports its rural areas with resources from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Romania's rural development program finances prioritized areas under six rural development priorities, with particular focus on enhancing competitiveness in the agricultural sector and sustainable forest management; restoration, preservation, and consolidation of ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry; as well as social inclusion and development of rural areas (EP, 2023). In order to achieve these objectives, LEADER programs play a crucial role, supporting rural development initiatives through local action groups and enhancing the participation of local communities in development processes. Szabó-M.'s (2019) case study sheds light on the effectiveness of these rural development priorities, indicating that LEADER programs have a significant impact

on the economic and social development of rural areas, particularly through the involvement and support of local communities.

In our own research, we examined how the resources allocated for rural development in Romania and the resulting development projects contribute to the living conditions of a specific locality – Ditró – and how the local community, representing the ultimate goal of these developments, evaluates them. Our line of reasoning aligns with the findings of Biró (2008), who analyzed the autonomous development possibilities of the Szeklerland region and emphasized the role and opinions of local communities in the development processes. The examination of Ditró's development through the implementation of rural development programs serves as the research objective, justified by personal attachment. One of the authors of the paper – Orsolya Varga – resides in the locality and works as a project manager at the Ditró Municipal Office. The interconnections, such as Varga's personal attachment to Ditró and her work at the Ditró Municipal Office, further emphasize the examination of Ditró's development inspired by rural development programs. These personal experiences and professional relationships enrich the context of the research and enable a deeper understanding of local challenges and opportunities. In this light, the previous study conducted by Biró and colleagues (2019), which examined the competitiveness of local governments in the Szeklerland region, could be particularly relevant to this research, as it may help in understanding the connections and factors influencing Ditró's development.

Gyergyóditró, also known as Ditró, is located in Harghita County (Figure 1), constituting an independent municipality. It is the second largest settlement in the Gyergyó Basin, administratively encompassing two smaller villages: Orotva, located 8.5 km north, and Cengellér, situated 12 km northeast. The total area of Ditró municipality is 11449 hectares, with a population of 5284 inhabitants, comprising 2,619 males, constituting 49.56% of the total population, and 2,665 females, representing 50.44% of the total population. (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2021). Based on the demographic data of Ditró municipality, the age group distribution is as follows: the largest proportion of the population falls within the 40-49 age group, with 908 individuals, representing approximately 17.18% of the total population; the smallest number of residents is in the 80+ age group, with 226 individuals, accounting for around 4.28% of the total population; additionally, the proportion of individuals aged between 0 and 49 years is 62.06% (compared to the national average of 60%),

while the proportion of those aged 50 to 80+ years is 37.94% (compared to the national average of 40%). This indicates that the population of the municipality is, on average, younger than the national average (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2021). The population of the municipality shows a continuous decline, primarily due to a decrease in natural growth and outmigration. Based on the 2021 Romanian census data, the educational attainment levels of the population in Ditró municipality are as follows: 6.3% of the population has higher education (university degree or higher); 29.8% possess secondary education, equivalent to a high school diploma; 34.1% have completed primary education, which represents the largest group; and 29.8% have basic or lower-level education (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2021). These data indicate that the majority of the municipality's population holds secondary or lower educational attainment, which is consistent with the average educational level of similarly sized settlements in Romania.

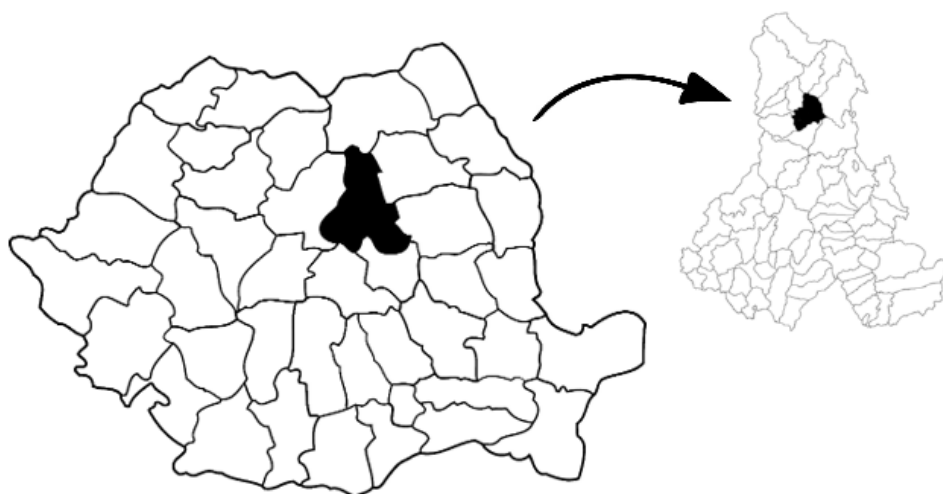


Figure 1. Location of Ditró municipality in Romania and Harghita County

Source: Own design and editing, 2024

In the social context of Ditró municipality, local civic movements and heritage preservation groups play a prominent role. The Ditró Nest, for instance, organizes programs for mothers, children, and families, while the Seniors' Club provides opportunities for the elderly to maintain social connections and engage in leisure activities. For the youth, both the 20th Knight Takó János Scout Troop and the Ditró Youth Forum serve as platforms for constructive leisure activities and community engagement. Community spaces and institutions, such as the library, cultural center,

health center, and schools, are pivotal in fostering community life and nurturing social ties, offering avenues for knowledge dissemination and recreational pursuits. Furthermore, the local community not only participates in rural development programs but also actively shapes and influences them. Regular attendance at municipality meetings and other communal events enables direct involvement in development processes, thereby influencing the future and progress of the municipality.

Material and method

The aim of our primary research conducted in the municipality was to assess the perception of rural development projects implemented during the 2014-2020 period, thus obtaining an accurate picture of the opinions of the municipality's residents. Secondly, we aimed to identify future development needs.

Based on the literature review and primarily on local experiences, we formulated the following hypotheses for examination using scientific methods:

- 1. Hypothesis: The population of Ditró municipality prefers to reside in the locality and positively evaluates the economic situation of the settlement.*
- 2. Hypothesis: Rural development projects implemented between 2014 and 2020 effectively contribute to the development of the municipality, and the local population is satisfied with these developments.*
- 3. Hypothesis: The examined projects positively contribute to improving the quality of life of the population.*
- 4. Hypothesis: The future development of the municipality should focus on job creation, tourism, sports, and healthcare.*

The basis of the research was constituted by the significant projects implemented in Ditró municipality during the examined period through rural development programs, the financial data of which are summarized in Table 1.

Our research aimed to conduct the quantitative part through personal questionnaire surveys, but unfortunately, due to the Covid pandemic, this was not possible. Therefore, we opted for online questionnaire surveys. Overall, our research is based on online questionnaire surveys, complemented by qualitative in-depth interviews, observations, data analysis, and document analysis. We started the research in September 2020 and completed it in February 2021. During the

questionnaire survey conducted through random sampling, we managed to reach a total of 162 households, whose data were all used in the analysis. During the questionnaire survey, households were targeted, with responses provided by a single individual; however, the answers actually reflect the comprehensive opinions of the respective households.

In addition to the questionnaire survey, we considered it important to engage in a structured interview with Elemér Puskás, the mayor of Ditró municipality, who has been leading the municipality since 2008. This provided us with a more precise picture of the municipality's situation, its development, the effects and evaluations of rural development grants, as well as future development opportunities and risks. The interview took place on February 12, 2021, at the mayor's office.

Table 1. Financial data of the examined rural development projects, RON

Nr	Project title	Total investment value	The value of the support	The value of the co-financing	Supporting program
1	Establishment of a multi-functional community health centre	743.196	455.608	287.588	LEADER program
2	Renovation of the kindergarten building and expansion of equipment/ furnishings	1.090.347,86	995.347,86	95.000	National Rural Development Program
3	Expansion of equipment for the Cultural House	996.655,29	806.013,93	190.641,36	National Rural Development Program
4	Renovation of Erőss Zsolt Street in Orotva	2.029.493,33	1.379.493,33	650.000	National Local Development Program

5	Renovation of Horea, Hompothok, Szarvas, Halászkok, Hétkapú, Akác, Vágás, Tórnák streets	2.187.916,12	2.129.970,86	57.945,26	National Local Development Program
6	Renovation of Állomás, Malom, Fűzes, Fenyő, Kárpátok, Gábor Áron, Hosszú streets	5.423.137,52	4.251.855,38	1.171.282,14	National Rural Development Program
7	Construction of sidewalks towards Remete and Tölgyes, along the Maros and Nicolae Bălcescu county roads	1.935.513	1.922.423	13.090	National Rural Development Program
8	Deployment of free Wi-Fi networks in public squares through Wifi4eu	73.000	73.000	0	European Commission

Source: Based on data from the Mayor's Office of Ditró, own compilation, 2024

In this paper we focus on presenting the results obtained during the primary research, highlighting the most important findings.

The proportion of male participants who completed the questionnaire was 43.80%, while that of female participants was 56.20%. More than 80% of the respondents belonged to the age group under 44 years, whereas only 15% were over the age of 45, which we believe was influenced by the online questionnaire survey. Likely for similar reasons, over 35% of the respondents had a college or university degree, while 32.10% had a high school diploma.

Based on the data, the research cannot be considered fully representative for several reasons. Firstly, a total of 162 households were surveyed, which, while significant, may not adequately represent the population of Ditró, which stands at 5284 inhabitants. Despite the random selection of the sample, the use of online surveys may introduce bias into the results. Additionally, over 80% of respondents belong to the age group under 44, while only 15% are aged 45 and above. This is likely a consequence of the online survey method, leading to underrepresentation of older age groups. Regarding educational attainment, more than 35% of respondents hold a college or university degree, compared to only 32.1% with a high school diploma. This overrepresentation of higher educational levels contrasts with the general population, where only 6.3% have attained tertiary education. In summary, the research lacks full representativeness due to potential biases introduced by the online survey method, as well as underrepresentation of certain demographic groups, particularly older individuals and those with lower levels of educational attainment.

Therefore, based on the sample, the representativeness of the results is not fully appropriate; however, it can be determined from our own experiences, professional work, and previous research that they provide a realistic depiction of local opinions. These experiences and prior findings offer additional context and depth to the current study and can aid in interpreting the results from the perspective of the local community. In further analysis of the research, these factors must also be taken into account to formulate a comprehensive understanding.

Research results

When asked whether they enjoy living in the municipality, more than 96% of the respondents answered affirmatively. When assessing the economic situation, respondents had to evaluate the quality of six economic factors: agriculture, services, industry, business activity, tourism, and job opportunities (Figure 2). For each economic factor, respondents could choose from four qualifications: excellent, good, acceptable, or poor.

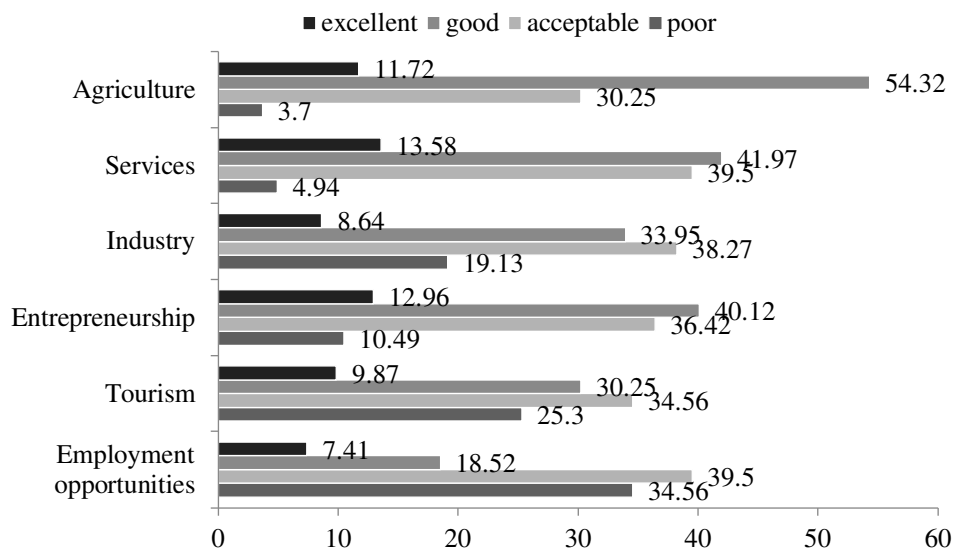


Figure 2. Distribution of assessments of certain economic factors in Ditró (%)

Source: Own research and editing, 2024

It can be stated that the respondents evaluated agriculture (66.04%), services (55.55%), and entrepreneurship activity (53.08%) overall positively, with the "good" and "excellent" ratings totalling over 50%. In our opinion, agriculture received such a high proportion of positive evaluation because agricultural activity is the primary source of income in the municipality. Additionally, support for agricultural activities also plays a significant role in this positive perception, as national area-based subsidies and agricultural grants provide significant assistance to farmers in achieving proper operation and development. However, in parallel, job opportunities are rated the weakest by the largest proportion (with over 34% receiving a poor rating), thus representing a critical point in the municipality's economy. The second highest proportion of poor ratings was attributed to tourism, at 25.30%, followed by industry with 19.13%. In our opinion, the residents of the municipality rate job opportunities so negatively because the locality lacks significant industrial zones, with most local businesses operating for family livelihoods. Moreover, the primary source of income comes from the agricultural sector, which involves demanding physical labour and requires independence. The municipality lacks prominent tourist facilities and an established tourism infrastructure, which also contributes to the residents' negative perception. In terms of industry, the municipality is predominantly characterized by

small-scale family-owned wood processing units, employing only a few workers. Overall, it can be concluded that the economic situation of the municipality falls into the category of good based on the respondents' opinions, but there is also a significant representation in the acceptable category. Therefore, there is a need for improvement in the economic situation of the municipality, with the most important aspects being the creation of job opportunities and the development of tourism, industry, and businesses.

During the questionnaire survey, we attempted to measure the satisfaction with the eight projects implemented by the rural development programs. In the satisfaction measurement questions, respondents could rate on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 indicated not satisfied at all, and 4 indicated completely satisfied with the project in question. Figure 3 presents the distribution of the effectiveness of the eight community development implementations in a diagram.

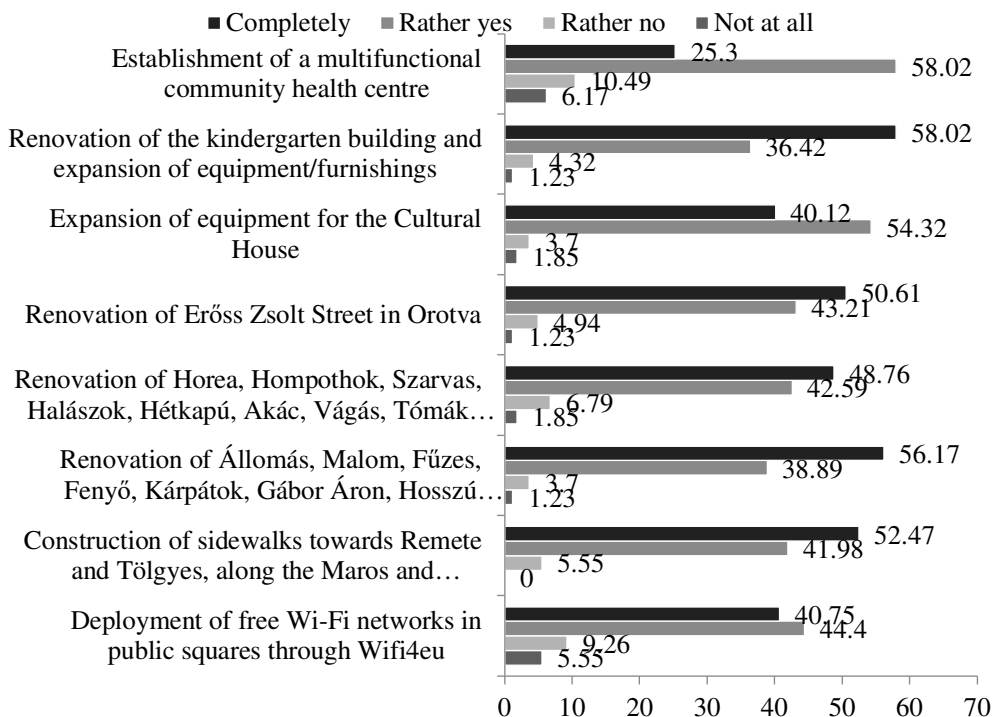


Figure 3. Distribution of satisfaction with community development projects in Ditró (%)

Source: Own research and editing, 2024

Respondents consider the renovation and expansion of equipment/facilities for the kindergarten building to be completely effective (with the highest percentage at 58.02%), while sidewalk and street renovations also received favourable ratings. All these assessments reflect the success of the implementations and the importance of basic infrastructure developments. On the other hand, the multifunctional public health centre (6.17%) and the Wifi4eu - Free Wi-Fi network deployment in public areas (5.55%) were considered not effective at all by the community. Overall, it can be stated that the majority of respondents from Ditró consider the community development implementations carried out between 2014 and 2020 to be rather effective or completely effective.

The assessment of the impact of community development implementations on the quality of life (Figure 4) clearly shows that the majority of respondents (54.30%) believed that these rural development implementations have a significant impact on improving local quality of life.

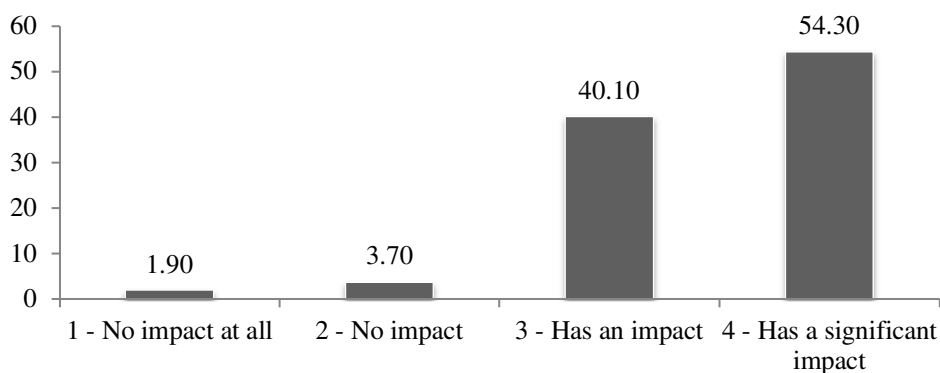


Figure 4. Distribution of the impact of community development implementations on the quality of life in Ditró (%)

Source: Own research and editing, 2024

40.10% of the respondents believe that these projects have an impact on maintaining or improving their personal quality of life. It is noteworthy that only 5.60% of the population is of the opinion that the projects in question have no effect.

Regarding the development of the municipality, we also inquired about measures that would contribute to local retention, avoiding aging, and increasing the value added generated locally (Figure 5).

The majority of respondents (90.10%) believe that creating jobs is the solution to local retention, avoiding aging, and increasing local value creation. 78.40% of the surveyed population sees the improvement of healthcare as crucial, while 75.90% prioritize tourism development, and 74.70% emphasize the development of sports activities. Overall, the residents of Ditró perceive job creation as essential for local retention, aging prevention, and increasing local value. Furthermore, according to the community's opinion, the future development of the municipality lies in the enhancement of tourism, healthcare, and sports activities, including the improvement of sports facilities.

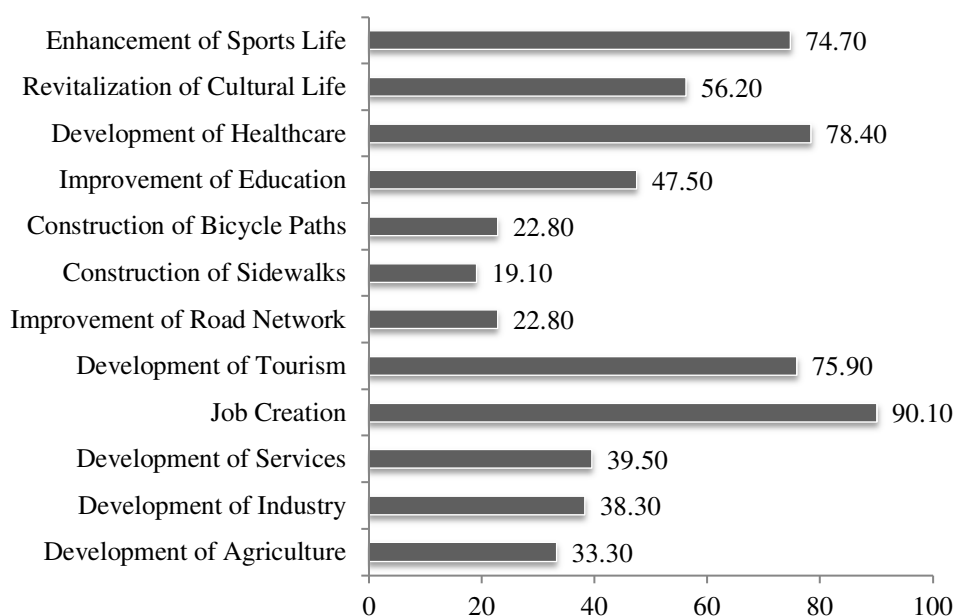


Figure 5. Distribution of the importance of measures serving the development of the municipality in Ditró (%)

Note: Multiple answers were possible

Source: Own research and editing, 2024

Conclusions and recommendations

Considering the above results and the insights from the mayor's interview, the following conclusions can be drawn along the lines of our hypotheses.

The first hypothesis has been confirmed, as over 96 percent of respondents expressed a willingness to live in Ditró municipality, and they positively assessed the

economic situation of the locality. The substantial proportion of positive responses suggests that residents are satisfied with living conditions, are willing to stay in the municipality, and positively evaluate its economic situation. It is important for the municipal leadership to implement projects during the current programming period (2021-2027) that can maintain this positive perception of the municipality's livability and strengthen its economic situation.

The second hypothesis has also been clearly confirmed, partly based on the questionnaire and partly on the interview. The implemented rural development projects effectively contribute to the development of the municipality, and the local population is satisfied with these developments. Respondents largely perceive the implemented rural development projects as effective.

The proposition that rural development projects positively contribute to improving the quality of life for the population has also been confirmed. In our opinion, it is crucial for a municipality's population to positively assess their quality of life, which includes ensuring basic infrastructure, stable income, security, a peaceful and pleasant environment, a healthy living space, sports facilities, and education. The examined eight rural development projects clearly serve to maintain and improve this quality of life.

The fourth hypothesis has also been confirmed, indicating that job creation, tourism, sports, and healthcare development should be prioritized in the future. The mayoral interview fully supported the findings from the population survey.

As a recommendation, it is crucial in the field of job creation for the municipality to provide favourable conditions for existing businesses and newly established ventures, including tax incentives, well-equipped industrial areas, and the provision of skilled human resources. In the tourism sector, the establishment of an interactive tourist information office would be paramount, facilitating communication between visiting guests and local hospitality businesses. Concurrently, the promotion of local tourist attractions, such as the Jézus Szent Szíve templom, Kossuth Lajos Park, Szent Katalin templom, Erdő Háza, Só-Birtok, Ditró Nature Trail, through online accessibility and attention-grabbing campaigns (preferably through online, television, and radio channels targeting domestic, Hungarian, and foreign audiences) would be beneficial.

In the area of sports activities and facilities development, it would be critically important to construct a comprehensive sports complex that provides suitable sports

experiences for both the younger and older generations, as the municipality currently lacks such facilities. Forward-thinking initiatives would involve the launch of local grant programs supported by the municipality, focusing on the creation of sports events, support for sports clubs, procurement of sports equipment, and organization of training camps.

In the field of healthcare, based on the results of the survey, it is evident that the inadequate medical provision is the primary issue, the resolution of which, in our opinion, requires effective administration. Secondly, it is of paramount importance for the municipality to provide modern, needs-appropriate equipment, machinery, and tools for specialist doctors, thereby ensuring the professional care of residents.

Overall, although the composition of the sampled population differs from that of the general population, particularly in terms of age and educational attainment, in our opinion and based on our own experiences and previous research, the results can be considered acceptable and realistically reflect the opinions of the local residents.

Based on our research, local experiences, and the information gathered during our work in the community, we can conclude that Ditró municipality underwent gradual positive development during the 2014-2020 period, which was made possible by European Union and national rural development programs. In our view, it is crucial for a rural community to develop in a positive direction, provide adequate quality of life for its residents, and implement projects that contribute to well-being and active leisure, thereby promoting an increase in rural living standards and encouraging rural retention. Our hopes and experiences indicate that Ditró is progressing in this direction.

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