Women entrepreneurs’ contribution to rural socio-economic diversification. Case studies from Romania

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1. Romania’s small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) sector comprises over 426,000 enterprises, which employ about 2.7 million people; with an average 21.9 SMEs/1000 inhabitants, Romania lags far behind EU 28 (2013). There are major disparities in the territorial distribution of SMEs, with only less than 1/3 of SMEs based in rural areas in 2011.

2. SMEs and rural development. The sustainable development of Romania’s rural communities depends to a large extent on the creation of SMEs which provide socio-economic diversification, job and income creation and higher life standards. Romania’s new Rural Development Strategy (2014-2020) targets the creation of micro-enterprises in non-farming activities as processing, services, rural tourism etc. Romania’s business environment poses major handicaps to the development of SMEs: rural population’s low education levels and lack of entrepreneurial skills, deficient business infrastructure, bureaucracy, expensive credits and heavy taxation system, difficult access to CAP subsidies.

3. Rural women entrepreneurs in Romania
In 2012, around 29% of all entrepreneurs in Romania were women. By sectors, most women entrepreneurs were active in services (trade, human health and social service activities). Most rural women start small family businesses, which require minimum initial investment, labor & time, and are flexible (synergy with farming and other household activities or off-farm employment); farm/household-based, some of these enterprises are mere extensions of farm activities (agri-food processing, crafts, tourism etc), venues for self-employment.

4. The 2 case studies represent very different patterns. Rucar, in Arges county has a dynamic business environment, with very little CAP financial support. 72 of the approx. 200 local businesses were managed by women: food processing, crafts, tourism, retail etc. Saschiz in Mures county, benefits from CAP subsidies and support from local and foreign-based NGOs. 22 of the 125 local businesses are owned/managed by women entrepreneurs with promising results.