

PATTERNS OF CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT

Assessing challenges and opportunities

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Index

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I. Ștefăniță, Oana (ed.)

II. Radu, Loredana (ed.)

III. Durach, Flavia (ed.)

Table of contents

OANA ȘTEFĂNIȚĂ, LOREDANA RADU, and FLAVIA DURACH

**Introduction. Patterns of development and inequality in a
turmoil world / 7**

BOGDAN VOICU and CĂTĂLIN AUGUSTIN STOICA

**Patterns of associationism and trust in Europe: Consequences for
development / 13**

ANDREEA CONSTANTINESCU and SIMONA FRONE

Basics of sustainable development ethics / 33

CORINA DABA-BUZOIANU, GEORGIANA UDREA, and ION CHICIUDEAN

**Addressing vaccine hesitancy in Romania. An analysis of the
Romanian authorities response to public's reluctance / 45**

COSMIN ȘERBĂNESCU, ADRIAN VINTILESCU, and LĂCRĂMIOARA CORCHES

**Human and social development in the context of economic
growth / 61**

DIANA-MARIA CISMARU and OANA ȘTEFĂNIȚĂ

**The state of innovation in Romania: The lost key for the economic
development / 75**

LOREDANA-ADRIANA TUDORACHE and ERSZEBET BANGA

Human diversity between politics and social impact / 89

MARIA CORINA BARBAROS

**Development communication. The potential of local
communities / 99**

GRIGORE GEORGIU

**Culture in the equation of social development. Interpretation of
cultural indicators from the perspective of the Romanian
cultural model / 115**

MANUELA LILIANA MUREȘAN and PUIU NISTOREANU

**The impact of the fair and exhibition on the host community. Case
study – Tourism fairs / 141**

INGA BULAT

Financial evaluation methods of investment projects / 151

ANDREEA RAMONA ACIOBĂNIȚEI (ONOFREI)

Development based on human resources: Democratic governance for the higher education institutions / 169

MIRELA PÎRVAN

The theme of migration in the Romanian media and the political discourse: Diaspora as a topic in populist communication in current political and media debates / 187

CORNELIA ZEINEDDINE

Lessons learnt from the models used in the European Union in terms of nation branding. Comparison with the Romanian case / 201

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INTRODUCTION. PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT AND INEQUALITY IN A TURMOIL WORLD

*“An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest
and most fatal ailment of all republics.”*
(Plutarch)

Development has become a global concern after the Second World War, when dedicated studies have coagulated in a stand-alone subject aimed at scrutinizing the gaps between states, regions, as well as the looming inequalities among various social groups. Despite initial optimism triggered by the belief that targeted measures and strategies will successfully create convergence mechanisms, not only that inequalities have persisted, but they have spurted, revealing that “those who miss the globalization train at the start often are unable to catch up later” [1], being left far behind by a “prospering minority” [2]. “In that global inequality maps relative deprivation, it challenges the legitimacy of world order in a way that mere poverty statistics, accompanied by benevolent policy declarations, do not” [2].

Nowadays, debates over development go hand in hand with the discussions on the ever-deepening gaps between the “rich” and the “poor”. This dichotomic approach – focusing on the distance between the more advanced, and the lagging-behind economies – is not anymore used only to differentiate between the “first world”, the “second world”, or the “third world” countries; it is as valid when, for example, trying to snapshot the economic and social situation in Western or Northern Europe, as compared to Eastern Europe, or, when looking at the situation of

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some minorities groups in the USA. Data is self-explanatory – the top 1 percent of America’s income earners have more than doubled their share of the nation’s income since the middle of the 20th century [3]. Income inequality in OECD countries is at its highest level for the past half century. The average income of the richest 10% of the population is about nine times that of the poorest 10% across the OECD, up from seven times 25 years ago [4]. Furthermore, in-country cleavages have been constantly deepening, creating vulnerabilities and social unrest, further fuelled by ineffective political platforms. The most striking recent example of an unwise political strategy to cope with inequality is the post-crisis austerity – considered by some of the world’s most renowned economists as “an utter and unmitigated disaster” [5], or as a “rat poison” [6]. Acknowledging that extreme austerity might have been a disaster to Greece, Christine Lagarde – the Director of the International Monetary Fund – emphasized that – “contrary to conventional wisdom – the benefits of higher income are trickling up, not down. This, of course, shows that the poor and the middle class are the main engines of growth. Unfortunately, these engines have been stalling” [7], due to the “austerity obsession” [5] that contaminated the minds and decisions of Europe’s elites.

In terms of both income, and wealth distribution, the gap between the rich and everyone else, has been growing markedly, by every major statistical measure, for some 30 years. Despite massive investing in underdeveloped regions, inequalities did not improve. Nowadays, 71 percent of the world holds only 3 percent of global wealth [3]. The cohabitation between extreme poverty and unimagined wealth or the “paradox of development” [8] is the main global concern, with many social, economic, and political implications. According to OECD’s Secretary General, “we have reached a tipping point. Inequality can no longer be treated as an afterthought. We need to focus the debate on how the benefits of growth are distributed.” [4]. Is the tipping point of inequality a point of no return? This remains an open question, which needs to be approached with maximum caution. Inequality raises in geometric progression, being driven by technological advances, labour market, skills and education, as well as by politics and state policies. Development goals need to take into account the patterns of inequalities in a given state or region, so as to effectively address the right kind of issues. Both policy-makers and academics have been addressing the issue of (raising) inequalities, aiming at mitigating the risks directly

linked to globalization, and, thus, at contributing to “fair” uniformization of the income distribution mechanisms. In fact, fixing social inequalities has turned into “the greatest single problem and problem confronting the twenty-first century” [9]. However, development as well as inequality could not be possibly fixed only by means of dull economic measures; they both need consolidated and coordinated actions in multiple fields, starting from demography and ending with personal security, or housing conditions. In the vast literature dedicated to development and inequality, two paradigms seem to orient the scholarly debate: the individualistic approach, and the structuralist approach. Irrespective of the explanatory paradigm, designing a proper and relevant system for measuring development has proven to be no easy task for analysts, especially that internal inequalities have now become the number one issue facing most of the world’s economies. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Income (GNI) have long been regarded as emblematic for measuring development. These indicators allow us to make comparisons between countries, regions, and continents. Often presented as landmarks of development or of national performance, both GDP and GNI are used to categorize countries into „poor“ and „rich“ and, based on this, to orient macro-policies and decisions. However, in the past decade, criticism over the relevance and usefulness of GDP, GNI, and their derivatives emerged. This criticism highlights several limitations of these classical measurements

“Ordinary citizens feel uncertain about the future and frustrated with their governments, which have so far failed to protect them from globalization’s fallout” [1]. Development is far from being solely a “technical” problem; it should be seen as a puzzle waiting to be solved by the society at such; it might sometimes involve a massive modernization of traditional relations, traditional paradigms, traditional views on education and health; it might also entail change management strategies. In order to engage society in this process, the development goals, as well as the progress towards those goals, need to be communicated in a straightforward and suggestive manner. The increased relevance of statistical data needs to be accompanied by transparency and visibility in the national public spheres. Furthermore, public trust meaningfully impacts the main economic and political trends. For instance, it is argued that financial/ economic crises are frequently a matter of “mood”, as well as a matter of economy. Consequently, measuring the public’s trust in the national institutions, and their perception of the state of the nation needs to become part of the governing processes. Development

is a multidimensional field, which needs multi-layered systemic approaches, including both “soft” and “hard” indicators.

This book is a collection of contributions that revisit, from a theoretical and/or empirical standpoint, the key advances in the field, taking into consideration the past and current crises, as well as the changing patterns of globalization. Authors have sometimes engaged in an experimental, yet courageous revision of the fundamental concepts related to the topic: development vs. underdevelopment, inequality, wealth vs. poverty, first world vs. second world vs. third world etc. In this vein, some book chapters explore the basic dimension of development, by means of identifying indicators that measure the deepening inequalities within nations, as well as between nations, by proposing or designing tools and instruments, that enhance evidence-based policy making capabilities of governments and business alike. Also, there are authors that expose interesting practices in communicating development, new tools to improve the clarity and speed with which statistical data can be accessed by the wider public, and the distinctive features of the public/political/ media discourse on development. Furthermore, investigations of the public opinion on issues related to the government performance and the state’s performance in different areas, are mingled and corroborated with findings on hard development data.

On a final note, this coordinated book is an academic umbrella for key contributions developed within the “State of the Nation” project (www.starea-natiunii.ro), which advances the creation and institutionalization of a statistical data aggregator covering multidisciplinary areas, to be used in the process of strategy- and policy-making. The first of its kind in Central and Eastern Europe, this project addresses a sensitive need and seeks to fill in some gaps identified at the level of Romanian central administration system. Specifically, the Romanian public administration faces a sort of paradox in the sense that, despite a large amount of available statistical data, it lacks the access to a database aggregating all the relevant public data needed for the foundation of the decisional processes. The State of the Nation project seeks to address this paradox and to offer an accurate and reality-based solution to one of the most striking challenges facing the Romanian public administration. Its main objective is to provide a long-term solution to the issue regarding the limited institutional capacity of the Romanian government in terms of decision- and policy-making. Once created, the online data aggregator could be used both by central and local administration

and officials as a beneficial tool within the processes of decision-making and developing strategic documents.

The State of the Nation project has created the grounds for a fruitful debate focusing on the key development goals and priorities, on mechanisms for coping with growing inequality, eroding trust in governance structures, political and social polarization. Of course, the academic debate should be further complemented by an open and honest political debate on how, when, and where to catch up with the development train, before it is not too late.

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