

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract

The paper examines strategic management of rural development in the countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYROM, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo - UNSCR 1244), as an essential factor of sustainable development in terms of European integration process. The aim of the paper is to analyze the development of rural areas in these countries, as well as to define key priorities and challenges in terms of drafting the future rural development strategies that will include a more efficient endogenous development and EU accession issues. The countries of the Western Balkans, as candidate/potential candidate countries for EU membership, base their rural development policies on the European model and implement major structural changes in production, organizational and management structure in order to strengthen competitiveness of their rural economies and development of local communities. These countries have made significant progress in the development of rural areas thanks to the accession funds and other types of the EU financial assistance programmes, therefore, the existence of national strategies and rural development policies which include a realistic assessment of local potentials, problems and needs in particular areas is very important in order to improve the performance of rural communities. A key hypothesis of the paper is that sustainable development of rural areas in the Western Balkans depends on the comprehensiveness and continuity of efforts of all sustainable rural development actors, especially the state, in terms of permanent innovation and introduction of adequate development options in the management of sustainable rural development in the conditions of a very dynamic environment, as well as in the context of numerous internal problems of particular rural areas. For the purpose of testing the initial hypothesis, qualitative methodology based on the study and descriptive analysis of the defined problem was applied. Review of the relevant literature, analysis of the official statistical data and empirical research point to the possible limitations and future directions concerning the development of rural areas in the Western Balkans. The paper, following the introduction and a short review of relevant research in the field, consists of the following sections: Development of rural areas in the Western Balkans; Key principles in formulating, implementing and monitoring the success of strategies for sustainable rural development; Comparative analysis of sustainable rural development in the EU and the Western Balkans in the period 2014-2020; Visions, strategies, priorities and models for sustainable rural development in the Western Balkans; and Concluding remarks, where it is indicated, among other things, that a strategic approach to sustainable rural development in the EU by 2020 is a significant reference base for the development of future strategies and policies for sustainable rural development in the Western Balkans in accordance with the existing situation, differences and numerous problems related to both rural economies and communities.

Keywords: *rural development, rural areas, rural strategy and policy, Western Balkans, European Union.*