

A Multidimensional Analysis of Social Vulnerability*

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Abstract: *Social vulnerability is often defined as a life-situation characterized by a multi-dimensional combination of disadvantage and advantage, of inclusion and exclusion factors. Its distinctive characteristic is that the weak and unstable integration in the main mechanisms of resources distribution in contemporary society places the people in a situation of uncertainty and high exposure to the risk of poverty and, eventually, of social exclusion. Because of its often temporary nature, vulnerability is difficult to capture.*

The present paper presents various aspects of social vulnerability and the structuring of the main elements of which it is constituted.

The analysis focuses across the family structure, exposure to poverty (temporary or permanent), housing conditions, the family/work system (the presence of unemployed and temporary workers in the household), the ways in which work and childcare are reconciled, and the presence of dependent persons in households in economically compressed situations.

Key-words: vulnerable groups, poverty rate, social exclusion

JEL Classification: I 32, I39, J65, P36

1. Introduction

Social vulnerability is often defined as a life-situation characterised by a multi-dimensional combination of factors. Its distinctive feature is that weak and unstable integration into the main mechanisms of human resources' distribution within the contemporary society places individuals into uncertainty situations and exposure to poverty and, finally, to social exclusion. Social vulnerability is difficult to be captured due to its temporary nature. As opposed to the poverty notion, social vulnerability includes aspects that are associated both with the incomes' level, but also with the housing conditions, the labour force employment, the child- and dependent persons'- care management, the difficulties that occur in the family in different stages of the life. Also, social vulnerability does not refer to those persons facing severe difficulties or social exclusion, but to individuals that are permanently exposed to instability and weak integration into society.

Characteristic to the second half of the last century was the creation of huge systems of welfare protection. Due to strong economic increase and to a relatively peaceful international situation, the countries of Western Europe have developed economic and institutional mechanisms that guaranteed a high living standard for the majority of the population. Thus, the main risks with which people are faced during their lifetime (unemployment, sickness, invalidity, retirement) were insured by generous social protection systems. These assured that by the beginning of the 21st century the majority of the West-European population benefitted of social warranties that, in principle, would protect it from major threats with which economies are faced.

In Romania, the Government adopted a series of measures in view of solving some issues of socio-cultural, housing, health, employment, education, birth increase order, and for

diminishing abandon and protecting all children's rights, for an as good as possible solving of issues facing individuals and families from the social and economic viewpoint.

2. Main characteristics of the social vulnerability in the European Union

One of the definitions given to vulnerability is the one of "weakness", "lack of defence", "lack of means". The vulnerable groups are groups lacking support which often find themselves in chronic poverty situations, being incapacitated from profiting by the opportunities or from defending themselves against the issues with which they are faced.

The analyses realised by the European Statistical Office (EUROSTAT) have highlighted the fact that an impressive number of individuals live under the poverty threshold, and many persons are faced with difficulties regarding access to a job, education, housing, and financial services. At the European Union level is considered that "*all citizens should benefit from the advantages of prosperous periods and, also, from solidarity in difficult times*".

The most recent data show that 16% from the Europeans are still at poverty risk. Even if the best protection measure against poverty is ensuring a quality job, the percentage of 8% of those in employment but still facing the poverty risk proves that not all jobs provide for such safety.

Against the significant increase of unemployment in some member-states, the contribution of social policies is crucial in combating poverty.

Children are faced with a higher poverty risk of 19% in EU-27, as compared with the rest of the population, a phenomena persisting from 2000. The actions developed within the Open Method of Coordination in 2007 have contributed to identifying the factors triggering poverty among children in each member state and has underpinned the need for some comprehensive strategies that would mix adequate forms of financial assistance with quality employment opportunities for parents and by supplying the necessary services.

With respect to the population of Rroma ethnicity, the actions taken and enforced were centred mainly on desegregation, access to labour market, approaching education disadvantages and improving access to services like housing and health. Still, the majority of countries are short of an all-comprising political framework due, among others, to lack of basic data and information.

Persons without shelter represent the most severe form of social exclusion. At the level of many member states the efforts for ensuring more accessible dwellings were intensified, but the lack of data regarding the number of persons without shelter represents a hindrance in defining and monitoring effective policies.

At the level of the member states, inequalities with respect to access to health services between various socio-economic groups persist, and these tend to complete their universal approach with measures that are directed to those vulnerable. Basic policy approaches are: intensifying primary and preventive care, eliminating barriers in accessing health services and righting the situation in disadvantaged regions.

Solving some issues of vulnerable groups, of combating social exclusion can be also realised by means of education. Pre-school education is regarded in the member-states as a fundamental element, a key-element in straightening socio-economic disadvantages and as a means of facilitating reconciling professional and family life.

At European Union level, the year 2010 was appointed as the "European year of combating poverty and social exclusion" and had as purpose "increasing the awareness degree

about difficulties with which are faced *vulnerable groups* within society¹ (84 million Europeans were living under the poverty threshold in 2010). In the European Union 17% from population is affected by *poverty*. The four objectives that guided the Year were: recognition of rights, responsibility and joint participation, cohesion, commitment and concrete actions.

The actions taken in the 29 countries participating to this programme have completed the existing initiatives of the EU in the field and have increased the visibility of persons facing poverty and social exclusion. In the majority of countries were organised activities that answer to the needs of all vulnerable groups: elderly numerous families, and monoparental families, children and youths, persons with disabilities, immigrants, persons from among ethnic minorities. In this context, the vulnerable groups are delimited by comparison with the majority of the population, as having more difficult living conditions: precarious housing or lack of housing, unemployment, low education level, and lack of incomes.

One of the five major objectives of the Strategy “Europe 2020”² which follows to be fulfilled up to 2020 is “social inclusion”, as well. As result, at the level of the European Union is pursued that up to 2020 the number of persons running the risk of poverty and social exclusion shall be diminished by at least 20 millions.

Also, the achievement of this intention means undertaking a series of measures, among which:

- improving access to labour market, to social protection, to services of general interest (for instance, health care, finding a house) and to education;
- more efficient use of European funds for supporting social inclusion and for combating discrimination;
- testing and evaluating social policy reforms for increasing the efficiency in the field of social inclusion;
- realising new partnerships with the public and private sector and valuing the potential of the social economy;

By these measures is pursued that persons living now in poverty, and especially the most vulnerable (women, immigrants, Rroma population and other ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities) shall benefit from an improvement in their living condition and, thus, all European citizens shall live in a more cohesive society with a smart, sustainable economic growth based on inclusion.

Achieving the objectives of the “Europe 2020” Strategy depends on all actions that shall be taken by each country, in particular in the field of labour force employment, of education and poverty. The determinant factors in combating poverty and social exclusion are: economic growth and conceiving successful policies regarding labour force employment and education. Even if in countries with high employment rates of labour force, the poverty and exclusion levels tend to be low still, more often than not a job is not a guarantee against poverty. In this context is of importance “the modernisation and strengthening of the countries’ policies regarding labour force employment, education and training, as well as the social protection systems by increasing participation to labour market and diminishing structural unemployment, as well as by increasing social responsibility of enterprises within the business community”³

¹ Decision No 1098/2008/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, of 22 October 2008, on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

² “EUROPE 2020, A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth”, European Commission, Bruselles, 3.3.2010, COM(2010) 2020 final, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>;

³ “EUROPE 2020, A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth”, European Commission, Bruselles, 3.3.2010, COM(2010) 2020 final, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

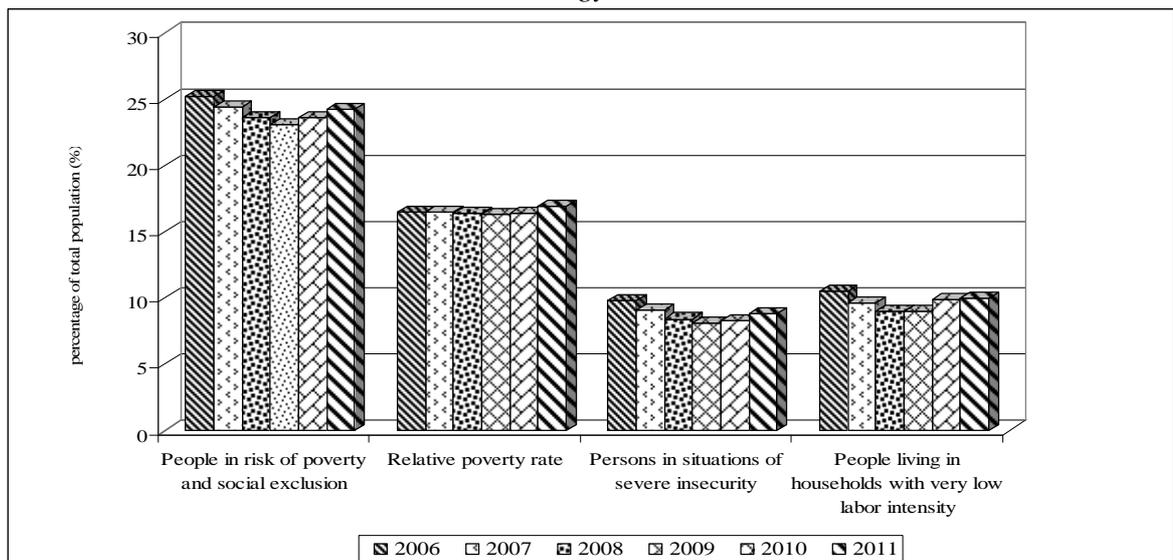
The objective of the “Europe 2020” strategy to guarantee the fact that the benefits of economic growth are widely distributed and that persons currently at the fringes of society can play an active role within its framework is reflected by means of three indicators that approach the varied characteristics of poverty and exclusion in Europe, as well as the different situations and priorities among the member-states:

- i) the number of persons exposed to poverty risk;
- ii) the severe material precariousness level;
- iii) number of persons living in households where the extremely low level of labour force employment represents a primordial element.

Also, the European Commission and the member-states have adopted a common list of indicators, from among which we enumerate: *the relative poverty rate, material precariousness, the number of persons exposed to poverty risk or to the social exclusion one, and the number of persons living in households with very low labour intensity.*

In the period 2008-2011, at European Union level, none of these indicators underwent significant changes (Figure 1). For the year 2011, the relative poverty rate was of 16.9%, by 0.5 pp higher than in 2010 and material precariousness – indicator describing the situation of persons that cannot afford goods regarded as essential for decent living in Europe and reflecting the differences with respect to living standards was, in average, in the year 2011, of about 8.8% (which means that over 40 million individuals were in a situation of severe material precariousness) (Figure 1).

Figure 1 European Union Level Indicators Used for Monitoring the “Europe 2020” Strategy



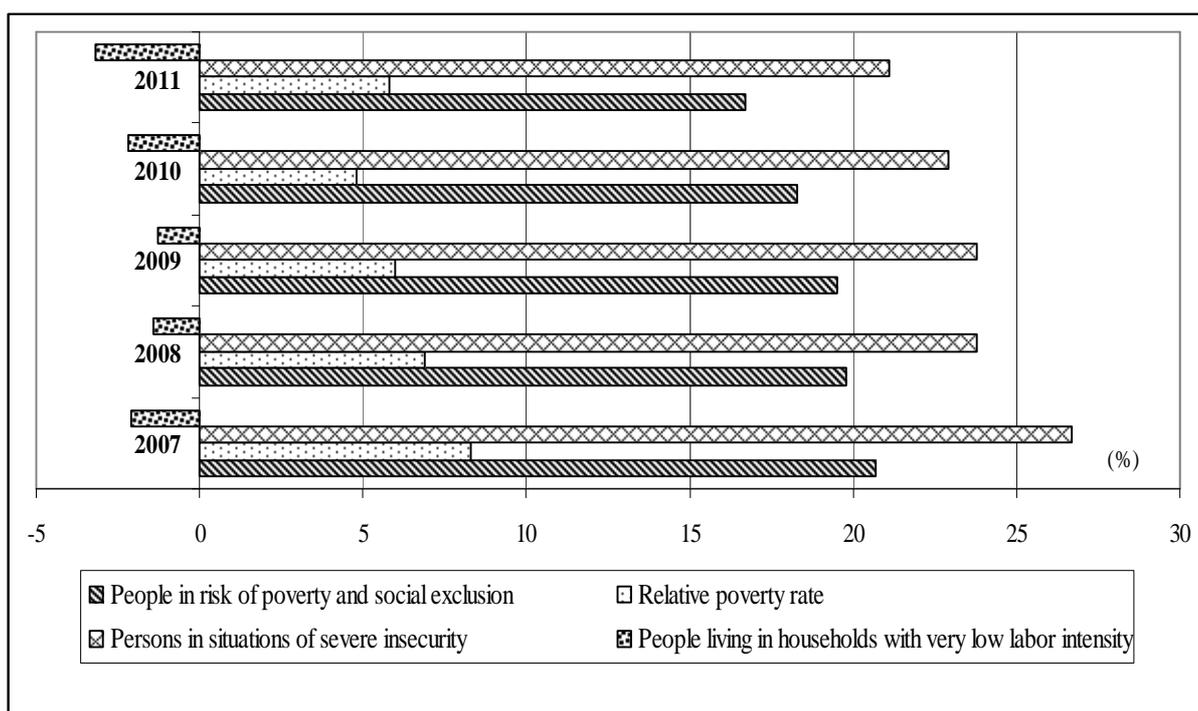
Data sources: Eurostat statistics, online code: [tsdsc100], [tsdsc270], [tsdsc310], [tsdsc320], [ilc_lvh11]

With respect to the weight of persons living in households with very low labour intensity in total population, for the year 2011 it was of 10%, which indicates that over 37 million persons live in households where non are employed (or where the members of the households work very little), yet who do not necessarily live with very low incomes. Also, in the year 2010, over 115 million persons, that is 24% from the European Union population

were in a risk situation quantified at least by one of the above-mentioned indicators regarding poverty, precariousness and pertaining to a household with very low labour intensity.

For Romania, the relative poverty rate had a decreasing evolution in the period 2007-2010, reaching in the year 2010 the value of 21.1 pp, at a difference of 4.7 pp from the value of the EU-27 relative poverty rate, but in 2011 in Romania this rate increased by 1.1 pp. If the weight of the persons in severe precariousness situations was in the year 2011 in Romania of 29.4% much over the EU-27 value (8.8%), the weight of persons living in households with very low labour intensity in total population was under the EU-27 average (6.7% against the 10% EU-27 average) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Evolution of the gap between the poverty and social exclusion indicators in Romania and EU-27



Data source: Eurostat statistics, online code: [tsdsc100], [tsdsc270], [tsdsc310], [tsdsc320], [ilc_lvh11]

3. General characteristics of social vulnerability in Romania

The state by means of economic-social policies developed, by measures for stimulating employment, and for guaranteeing the minimum wage on economy, of ensuring the necessary resources for paying rights resulting from social insurances, by granting the services pertaining to the social assistance system, as well as by ensuring quality social services has an important role in diminishing poverty.

Due to the multidimensional character of social vulnerability, for its diminishment the Government of Romania adopted a series of measures in view of solving some socio-cultural, housing, health, employment, education and birth increase issues, along with the ones for diminishing abandon, and promoting and protecting the rights of all children, for better meeting the issues faced by the individuals and families from the social and economic viewpoint.

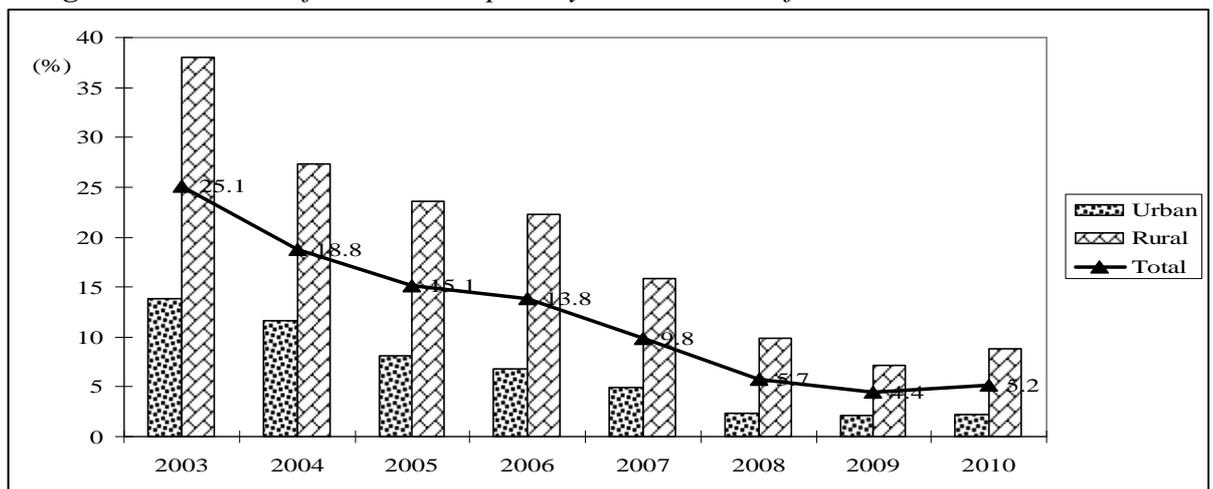
In analysing the vulnerability a series of indicators were used: primary – calculated in accordance with the methodologies set at European level, and secondary and tertiary ones – which reflect the social situation specific to Romania.

For Romania, the fields in which the *tertiary* indicators were grouped are: resources, labour market, housing conditions, education, health, and public order.

Some of these indicators refer to poverty and inequality, respectively: *relative poverty*, *absolute poverty*, *income* (taken into account for measuring relative poverty) and *consumption* (including self-consumption) for measuring absolute poverty. Also, for Romania, consumption expenditures estimate much better than incomes the actual economic situation of the households due to the tendency of under-reporting of incomes, to the difficulty of measuring informal incomes and to the existence of population's credits. To these is added also the fact that Romania is an economy with a strong agricultural component, the consumption expenditures reflecting thus much better the actual economic situation of the households due to a higher stability in time, as compared with the incomes affected by seasonality.

The analysis of absolute poverty on areas of residence in Romania for the period 2003-2010 highlights a decreasing trend at the level of each region up to the year 2009. As result of the economic crisis, in 2010 were recorded increases of this indicator, more marked for the rural areas (Figure 3).

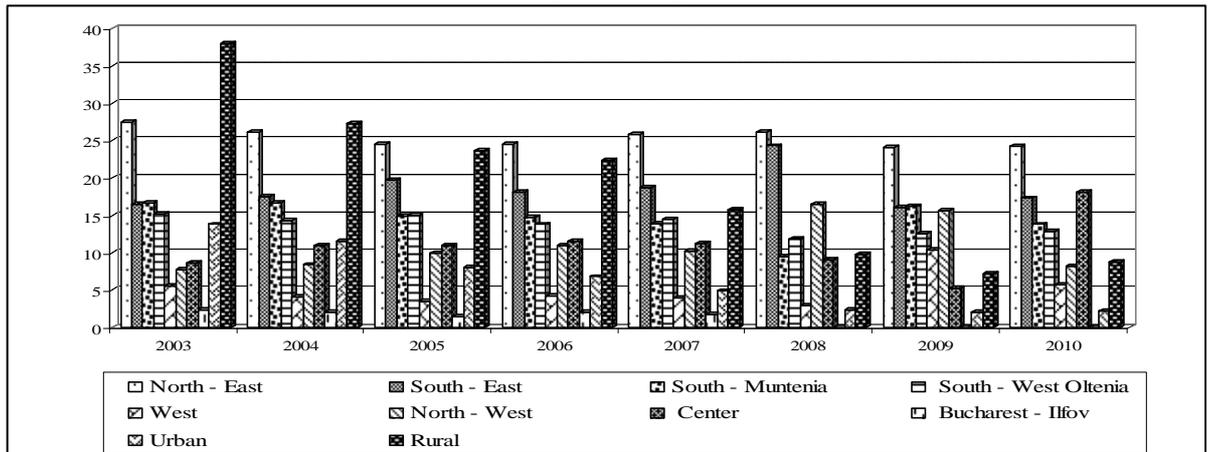
Figure 3 Evolution of the absolute poverty rate on areas of residence in Romania



Data source: Annex 3 Report regarding social inclusion in Romania in the year 2010, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, Directorate Social Services and Social Inclusion, Department social indicators and social inclusion programmes

Regarding the distribution of poor population, in the year 2010, 82.9% of this population was in the rural area (on increase by 8.9 pp against 2009), year in which, in the urban area the poor population diminished by 8.9 pp. Almost one quarter of the poor population in accordance with the definition of severe poverty lived, in 2010, in the North-East region: 24.4%, and in the Centre region 18.1%, and in the South-East region 17.3% (Figure 4). Against the year 2009, the pauperisation process was most marked in the North-East region (change in 2010 against 2009:12.9%) and inexistent in the Bucharest region.

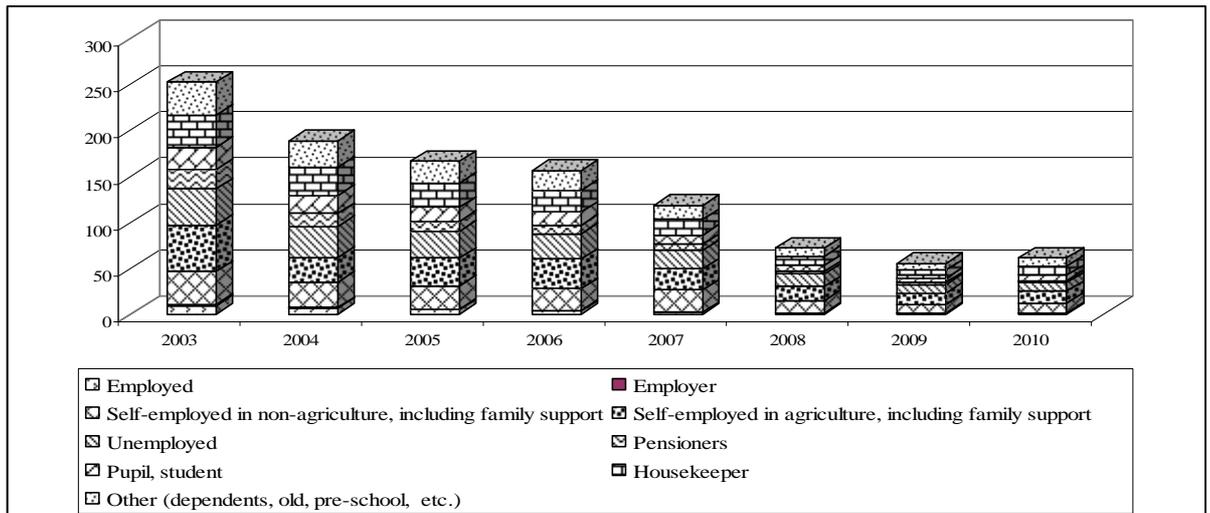
Figure 4 *Distribution of poor population (severe poverty) in Romania on areas of residence and development regions*



Data source: Annex 3 Report regarding social inclusion in Romania in the year 2010, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, Directorate Social Services and Social Inclusion, Department social indicators and social inclusion programmes

The analysis of absolute poverty depending on the occupational statuses highlights a substantial diminishment of it for all occupational categories in the period 2003-2009 (Figure 5) and slight increases in the year 2010.

Figure 5 *Evolution of the absolute poverty rate depending on the occupational statuses*



Data source: Annex 3 Report regarding social inclusion in Romania in the year 2010, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, Directorate Social Services and Social Inclusion, Department social indicators and social inclusion programmes

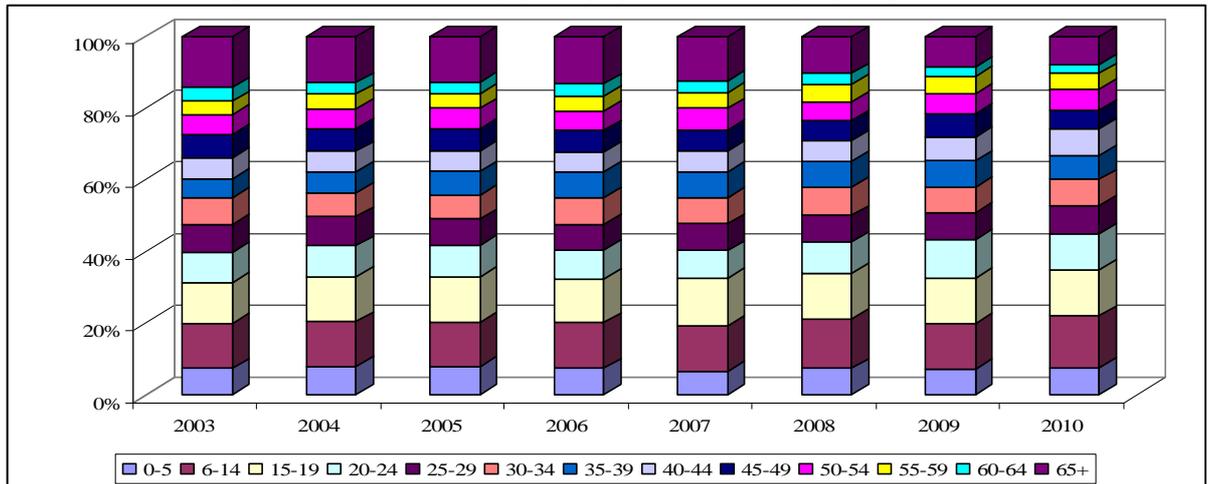
The differentiation of social vulnerabilities at the level of Romania’s development regions is due also to regional disparities of the gross domestic product per capita. Thus, in the year 2010, in the North-East region the GDP/capita was of 21827.2 RON/capita, 3.87 times less than the one registered in the region Bucharest-Ilfov. Also, in the regions with a high degree of social vulnerability, the average number of employees is much smaller than in the others.

In all regions, the ILO long-term unemployment rate is situated under 6%, high values being registered in the regions Centre, South-East and South-Muntenia. Much higher values

were recorded for the long-term unemployment rate amongst youths in the majority of regions, which indicates that this population segment is the most vulnerable.

Population with ages between 6 and 24 years represents 37.5% from the poor population of Romania (Figure 6), the absolute poverty rate for this segment varying between 7.7 - 9.5%. For all the other age groups, the absolute poverty rate varies between 2.3 - 5.7%, the lowest level being recorded for the segment 60 to 64 years of age.

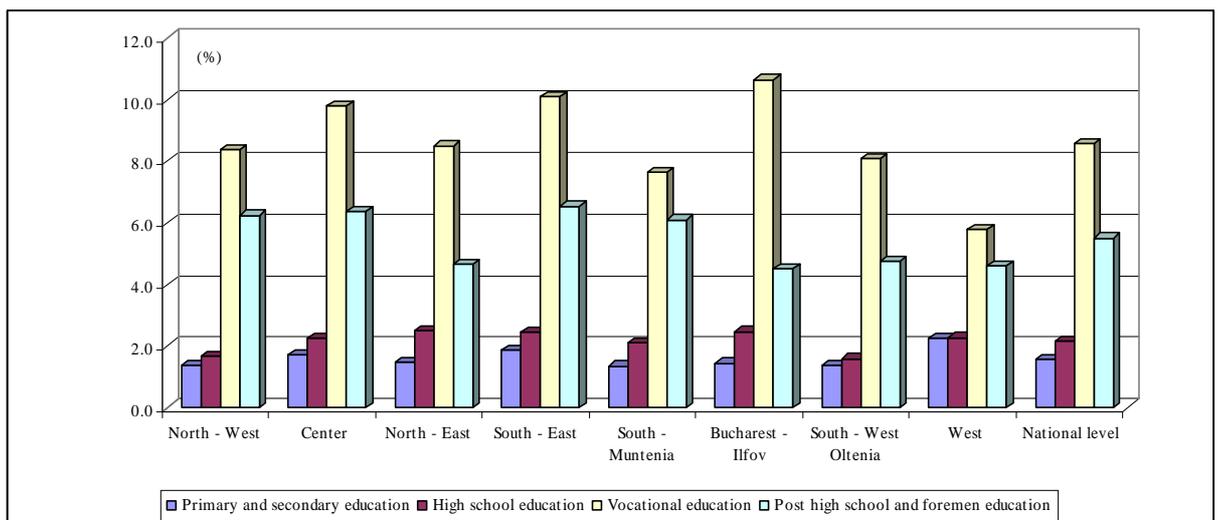
Figure 6 Distribution of poor population on age groups



Data source: Annex 3 Report regarding social inclusion in Romania in the year 2010, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection, Directorate Social Services and Social Inclusion, Department social indicators and social inclusion programmes

Another element leading to the increase of the vulnerability degree of some persons is also *school abandon*. In the development regions of Romania, this indicator for primary and secondary education in the school year 2009-2010 exceeds the average value of 2.2% only in the South-East region.

Figure 7 Abandon Rate in Pre-University Education, at Regional Level, in 2009/2010 Scholar Year



Data source: Romania's Statistical Yearbook, 2011, National Institute of Statistics, Table 8.29

High values of the school abandon rate are registered for vocational education where the value at national level is of 8.6%, and in the regions Centre, South-East and Bucharest-Ilfov is exceeded (Figure 7). Because in Romania the obtained skills don't have the same

specialisation degree as those obtained in other European countries, as they are based more on general criteria and not on the specific abilities of each individual, this could be an explanation for the high abandon rate for this type of education in the Bucharest region, region which comprises the capital of the country and which can provide for other opportunities of vocational training, employment, etc.

In this context, in the year 2010, 33.6% from the poor population was represented by individuals with no education, 24.7% with primary education, and 24.4% with secondary education. The weight of poor population with secondary education (classes 9-10 or 9-12) and of those graduating vocational/trades/apprenticeship schools was of 9.2%, respectively 8.1%.

4. Conclusions

The brief analysis of some indicators of the social vulnerability have lead to extracting some conclusions, among which:

- Ø the absolute poverty risk was, in average, 4 times higher in the rural area than in the urban area;
- Ø the North-East region and the regions from the southern part of Romania register higher poverty rates than the ones at national level;
- Ø self-employed have registered the highest poverty rates (especially those developing their activity in agriculture, and pensioners have a poverty rate under the national average);
- Ø the most vulnerable age segments are, irrespective of the region, children and youths;
- Ø according to the education level, the highest poverty rates were the ones of individuals with no education, and for those who graduated only primary education (grades 1-4), and of those with secondary education;
- Ø school abandon, which is high in particular in the Centre region and in the regions from the southern part of Romania, determines the much higher unemployment rate amongst youths against the general one and this, together with the specific socio-economic factors to each region might become an important factor in increasing the vulnerability of several persons;
- Ø in Romania the Roma ethnicity continues to register a poverty rate much above the national level (about 6 times higher than the value registered at national level) and it also represents a population segment which is very vulnerable from the social viewpoint;
- Ø persons living in large households of five members or more are exposed to a 5 times higher poverty risk as compared with the one corresponding to persons in single households;
- Ø households managed by women, irrespective of the region in which they are, are much more affected by poverty than the ones managed by men, due to the fact that to a large extent women designated as family heads are less active on the labour market.

5. Selective Literature

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