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OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR THROUGH PRIORITIZATION IN THE PLANS FOR INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT OF MUNICIPALITIES

ABSTRACT

The focus of the study is directed to the analysis of existing deficits in some of the plans for integrated development of the municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, having a direct relation to the development of a sustainable agricultural sector. On the basis of the identified weaknesses/gaps, specific proposals have been prepared to valorise the potential of this sector. Unpopular, "soft measures" aimed at realizing fruitful cooperation between interested parties have been

proposed. Cooperating efforts of farmers, public authorities and civil society are the basis of this targeted cooperation.

KEYWORDS: sustainable development, agricultural sector, farmers, plans for integrated development of municipalities, cooperation

JEL: Q01, Q13, R58

INTRODUCTION

The global challenges that the world has encountered in recent years have placed societies in a dilemma of simultaneously stimulating growth, necessary for maintaining the achieved quality of life, and better managing risks (of all kinds) to ensure long-term sustainability. They have also necessitated the adoption of timely, flexible corrective measures to address these challenges, mitigating imbalances at national, regional, and local levels.

The global framework for achieving sustainable development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, by itself, is not a sufficient guarantee for eliminating the aforementioned imbalances. The reconsideration of strategies, policies, and specific measures to achieve socially responsible and environmentally sound economic development increasingly occupies the agenda of governing elites.

In its quest to generate tangible leverage, the European Union implements the fundamental aspects of sustainable development outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the Union's strategic vision for building a prosperous, modern, competitive, and climate-neutral economy by 2050. This long-term vision, paving the way for a structural shift in the European economy, is transferred to the National Development Program "BULGARIA 2030," determining the overarching goals of development policies in all sectors of public administration, including their territorial dimensions.

The National Development Program "BULGARIA 2030" extensively describes the areas of impact subject to targeted interventions by 2030, prioritized and sub-prioritized, accompanied by outcome indicators, a framework of financial resources, funding sources, and comparable development goals as defined by the UN.

The priorities defined by the Program, as well as those outlined in the National Spatial Development Concept for the period 2013-2025, are embedded in integrated territorial development strategies for planning regions and plans for the integrated development of municipalities.

Specifically, the plans for the integrated development of municipalities are the documents defining the strategic framework for the development of municipal units for the period 2021-2027, taking into account the new approaches in implementing regional policy in our country, established through changes in the Regional Development Act adopted in 2020. They set medium-term goals and priorities for the integrated and sustainable development of municipalities, providing spatial, temporal, and factual coordination and integration of various policies and planning resources to achieve the defined goals for sustainable improvement of the economic, social, and environmental conditions of a given municipality.

The balanced and sustainable development of municipalities in Bulgaria is invariably in correlative dependence on the aforementioned challenges and the new reality regarding the socio-economic context, necessitating a timely review of the results achieved so far in the main strategic documents at the local level and undertaking specific actions to adapt the priorities and measures of the plans for the integrated development of municipalities to them.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of the study, a holistic approach was applied. Emphasis is placed on the results of the content analysis of the integrated development plans of 27 municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, including: Blagoevgrad, Boboshevo, Botevgrad, Breznik, Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Gotse Delchev, Galabovo, Dimovo, Dupnitsa, Elena, Kavarna, Kovachevtsi, Kocherinovo, Montana, Pernik, Petrich, Pleven, Sandanski, Simitli, Sofia, Stambolovo, Trun, Tryavna, Shumen, Yablanitsa. The choice of the surveyed municipalities is based on the desire for maximum representativeness of the sample (which constitutes 10% of the total number of Bulgarian municipalities). Small, medium and large municipalities (in terms of population), municipalities with natural limitations, urban, rural, high mountain, border municipalities, etc. are covered.

The content analysis is also based on the outlined priority lines of the main strategic documents at the supranational, national and regional level, related to goal setting at the local level.

The methods of comparative and deductive analysis for preparing the presented proposals for sustainable development of the agrarian sector are advocated.

1. PROPOSALS FOR ADDING NEW INTERVENTIONS TO THE PLANS FOR INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT OF MUNICIPALITIES

At the core of the approach to defining the strategic component of each integrated development plan lies a shift in focus from supporting settlements to supporting territories and from sector-oriented investments to integrated territorial investments. When developing each integrated development plan, the priorities of the municipal development plan of the respective municipality and its integrated urban regeneration and development plan for the period 2014-2020 should be taken into account, along with an assessment of the effects achieved and the areas where targeted investments are still needed.

The selection of measures and project ideas is also based on socio-economic analysis of the respective municipality, stakeholder consultations, exchange of information with experts from the municipal administration, and other potential sources of information. Consideration is given to defined areas, possible funding sources, readiness for partnership, and project maturity of individual ideas, as well as priorities in sectoral, national and local documents.

The strategic framework for the development of a given municipality should represent a logical and functional-temporal projection of the identified and evaluated comparative advantages, potentials, and problems of its territory. It should be directly aimed at providing the necessary conditions for generating tangible inclusive growth of the municipal economy, mitigating intra-municipal imbalances, and ensuring adequate infrastructure provision and service to meet the needs of the local community and business environment.

The main goal of integrated municipal development plans should be to integrate the interests of all stakeholders and the entire local community for sustainable development by proposing measures through specific projects in the key areas of sustainability from economic, social, environmental, cultural, and managerial perspectives.

2. POSSIBILITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

The role and significance of the agricultural sector for the overall socio-economic development of municipalities in Bulgaria are often underestimated and, at times, neglected. Although the contribution of agriculture to production and employment at the national level is not significant (NSI, 2022), maintaining the vitality of the sector and those employed in it is of essential importance.

The extensive discussions on global food challenges and the factors shaping them have catalysed the search for flexible and innovative solutions to capitalize on the potential of the agricultural sector, counteracting negative demographic trends, and preserving the identity of

rural communities. To adequately respond to the challenges posed by globalization, urbanization, as well as economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the military conflict in Ukraine, the implementation of sectoral policies should be more closely linked to the specificities of each region.

The definition of specific instruments and measures should, to some extent, be based on feedback from the population, which will directly reflect their implementation. Detailing them, relying on the "place-based approach," involving all levels of governance (including local civic initiatives), as a tool to ensure the relevance of these measures and generate added value, is also neglected but necessary.

Involving local civic initiatives, such as local communities, NGOs, various cluster associations, local initiative groups (LIGs), and others, in the programming, updating (in part, and implementation) of integrated development plans (IDPs), is a guarantee in itself for addressing interventions to specific problems and/or specific needs of rural communities.

The introduction of innovations and subsequent improvement of the competitiveness of the agricultural sector should be a top priority. Sub-goals should focus on indirectly correcting negative socio-economic trends and improving living conditions in rural areas, preserving and promoting local identity, among many others.

Establishing constructive and active partnerships between local authorities and communities could form the basis of a working approach to achieve these priorities, as well as to minimize a large portion of the generally encountered deficits in integrated development plans of municipalities.

2.1 ORGANIZATION AND CONDUCT OF INFORMATIONAL MEETINGS WITH AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS/PROCESSORS DURING CAMPAIGNS WITHIN THE ECONOMIC YEAR

By presumption, measures related to support for ecological agriculture and those related to modernization and innovation in the sector identify agricultural producers and/or processors as responsible entities for their implementation. Consequently, the achieved results regarding this type of project ideas in integrated community development plans depend on the agricultural producers themselves, their initiative, and proactivity.

To a large extent, this initiative (or lack thereof) is linked to the quantity and quality of information provided to them, both regarding potential financial instruments for the development and modernization of their farms, and administrative procedures related to them.

Given the logic that integrated community development plans were adopted during the period of the Rural Development Program 2014-2020 (Regulation (EU) 2020/2220), and the Strategic Plan for Agricultural and Rural Development started in early 2023, the need to conduct informational campaigns targeted at agricultural producers is essential.

The Strategic Plan for Agricultural and Rural Development includes a much larger number of schemes, new conditions, and requirements, and agricultural producers even from the smallest

populated areas in the country should be thoroughly acquainted with the opportunities available to them for financial support.

In early 2023, the Ministry of Agriculture conducted a national information campaign regarding the Plan, aiming to acquaint agricultural producers with the conditions for implementing its instruments (MAF, 2023). Various interventions outlined in it were presented during the events. However, the one-time conduct of such a campaign in certain locations is not sufficient to reach all agricultural producers and meet their informational needs within the five-year period of implementation.

The conditions for an "active agricultural producer" (Article 54, Paragraph 1 of the Law on Assistance to Agricultural Producers) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food's inspections initiated from July 1, 2023, to establish whether direct payment applicants meet the criteria, have unintentionally caused dissatisfaction among agricultural producers due to the lack of accessible and clear information.

The absence of data in the annual activity reports of active producers for the previous year submitted to the National Statistical Institute and/or based on data from annual tax declarations submitted to the National Revenue Agency shows that these bureaucratic procedures are a serious obstacle for a large portion of farmers (Article 20, Paragraph 3 of the Statistics Act).

The coding of operations (revenue from sales with code 15110, revenue from financing with code 15411, insurance expenses with code 10320, etc.) in the income and expenditure statement, as well as the possibility of submitting it with electronic signature or personal identification code to the National Revenue Agency in the Business Statistics Information System, also raised certain concerns among producers.

Many new farmers, on the other hand, experience difficulties with the procedure for initial registration, when and how it is done, what the mechanism for issuing and receiving a registration card is, respectively - the registration number of the agricultural producer, and many others.

Survey forms during initial registration also raise questions - whether a separate survey form is filled out for each plot of land cultivated by the farmer and/or for each type of livestock raised, or if all cultivated areas/raised livestock are recorded in a single form.

This "information obscurity" could potentially be eliminated through the organization and conduct of informational meetings with farmers/processors during campaigns within the agricultural year, in collaboration with Municipal Agriculture Services, Regional Directorates of the State Fund "Agriculture," and the National Advisory Service in Agriculture.

Establishing effective partnerships with the aforementioned territorial structures for conducting informational meetings aimed at farmers should be initiated by local authorities and ensured by them. The financial resources necessary for holding regular informational meetings during campaigns within the agricultural year can be provided by the municipal budget or through grants.

The main objective of these meetings is to provide timely, clear, and focused information relevant to farmers, assisting them in achieving the goals outlined in many integrated community development plans.

Particular emphasis should be placed on specific regulatory requirements related to:

Certification of farmers' registration cards, declaring changes in circumstances, and other details outlined in Regulation No. 3 of January 29, 1999 (still in use at present);

Requirements when ceasing activities, deregistering from the Register of Farmers, and returning the registration card;

Opportunities for re-registration in the Register of Farmers (in case of deregistration or missed annual verification),

since:

Only registered farmers possessing certified registration cards for the respective agricultural year are eligible to apply for and receive funding under relevant schemes and measures from the European Agricultural Funds through the State Fund "Agriculture";

Only registered farmers have the right to sell their produce in markets throughout the country without cash registers (excluding exchanges and markets).

The aforementioned assumes the presence of a linear relationship between the quantity and quality of information provided to farmers and the possibility of achieving satisfactory results in objectives related to the competitiveness of the agricultural sector.

The absence of laws regulating industry organizations limits the opportunities for real representation of the interests of Bulgarian farmers (especially small and medium-sized farms). Often, the problems of small farms do not reach the legislator.

Small-scale farming poses a number of problems, mainly regarding the lack of sufficient mechanization opportunities, possibilities for implementing new technological solutions, application of good agricultural practices, and development of efficient farming, which are precisely the focus of the strategic vision for sector development, both at national and local levels (Strategic Plan, 2022).

Direct contact and the opportunity to hear the opinions and problems of small farmers are yet another motive for initiating these informational meetings.

The idea is for their structure to be two-way:

1. Competent experts provide legitimate and sufficiently comprehensive and clear information needed by farmers;
2. Farmers share their problems and difficulties in an attempt to find an effective mechanism for resolving them.

Topics related to agreements and concluded contracts for the use of municipal agricultural land, as well as frequently occurring problems with pastures, investment opportunities for irrigation as outlined in the Recovery and Resilience Plan, issues arising from the significant imports of agricultural products from Ukraine, and other current cases should also find a place in these informational meetings.

The regulatory framework governing activities in the sector is one of the most frequently supplemented and amended. Timely informing farmers about these changes would have a significant positive effect. Bringing to their knowledge information related to transitional

national aids and other similar, but insufficiently publicized measures, would also be beneficial for both parties.

2.2 NATIONWIDE PROVISION OF FARMERS' MARKETS IN THE MUNICIPALITIES OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

The World Health Organization identifies unhealthy eating as a major threat to human health. The lack of essential nutrients in the body due to improper nutrition, as well as overweight, represent particularly prominent trends in developed countries over the past few decades. Its studies indicate that about 60% of all cases of cardiovascular diseases, stroke, and type 2 diabetes could be prevented if people adopt healthier eating habits and are physically active (WHO, 2022).

This threat has been identified as a global problem and naturally found its place in the global Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals, along with its eight associated targets, is aimed at achieving food security and improved nutrition, as well as promoting sustainable agriculture.

In turn, the European Union has also initiated efforts to address this issue. The "Farm to Fork" strategy comprehensively tackles the challenges of sustainable food systems and defines the inseparable interconnection between healthy individuals, a "healthy society," and a "healthy planet." Thus, it rightfully occupies a central place in the United Nations' sustainability agenda, as well as in the European Commission's program for achieving sustainability.

The focus of the Strategy encompasses not only accessible, safe, and nutritious food (from a public health perspective) but also mechanisms for generating fair economic returns, promoting the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, and fair trade (Farm to Fork Strategy, 2020).

European priorities aimed at supporting small-scale agricultural producers and the products they produce, as advocated in the National Development Program "Bulgaria 2030," particularly sub-priority 6.4.b "Organic production," reflect the compelling trend in recent years towards seeking healthy and proven quality foods by consumers. It is precisely this trend that necessitates the implementation of measures to accelerate the development of this subsector at the local level (National Development Program BULGARIA 2030, 2020).

The organization and conduct of farmers' markets at the municipal level are an effective tool for achieving this goal.

By its very nature, a farmers' market is a market where independent suppliers (mainly farmers and local producers) offer fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat products, often including prepared foods and beverages, produced in home conditions.

These markets are a global phenomenon existing in many countries worldwide and in extensive regions in Latin America, Europe (mainly France), North America (USA and Canada), and Asia.

They are part of the life of small communities around the world. The market is a good way for tourists to sample local cuisine, thus promoting the cultural and culinary identity of regions and local communities.

The first farmers' market in the new history of Bulgaria was organized in 2013 in the city of Plovdiv. Today, such markets can be visited in Sofia, Dobrich, Balchik, Varna, Sliven, Pernik, Gabrovo, and others.

The advantage of farmers' markets from the consumer's point of view is the direct purchase from the producer of fresh, organic, seasonal, and healthy food. As for the agricultural producer, the absence of third parties (resellers) shortens the food chains, and the added value remains with the producer.

The direct contact with the "hands that produce the products" is particularly exciting. The affinity of local consumers for "delicious" and "healthy," as well as the growing role of so-called sustainable consumption, sufficiently justifies the need for organizing and conducting such markets in the municipalities of the Republic of Bulgaria.

The following can participate in farmers' markets:

Registered agricultural producers;

Craftsmen registered under the Crafts Act;

Producers of beer and spirits registered under the Law on Wine and Spirits and the Food Act;

Establishments, cooks, and culinary specialists registered as mobile or temporary food preparation facilities, according to the Food Act;

Traders registered under the Trade Act.

Agricultural producers are required to have a registration document according to Ordinance No. 3 of January 29, 1999, and in the case of producers of organic foods - in the Register of Organic Farming of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Each of the participants in the farmers' market, regardless of which category they belong to, must meet the following requirements: to be registered in the register kept by the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency; to have Food Safety and Self-Control Systems (Bulgarian Food Safety Agency, 2023).

The registration procedure with the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency is significantly facilitated for persons offering products at farmers' markets. This is because participation in them is voluntary and depends on the capabilities and desires of the participant. Registration with the Agency's Register is done by submitting an application in the prescribed form to the respective territorial division depending on the area where the activity is carried out. A list of foods to be offered is attached to the application. Given the transient nature of the markets, the exact location where the goods will be offered is not specified when filling out the application. A state fee is paid for processing the application.

Regarding the food safety and self-control systems, they are developed by technologists who are familiar with the current national and European legislation regarding offering, storage, health and hygiene standards, and requirements for working with food. These systems are individual, depending on the type of products offered by the respective farmer.

For example, individuals selling low-risk products such as fruits and vegetables only need to monitor good hygiene practices. However, if the commercial activity includes the sale of dairy and meat products, then requirements must be met according to which the products should be displayed in mobile refrigerated showcases.

An important condition for participation in farmers' markets is to offer only own production or products that have been produced in an ecological, natural, and healthy manner, in accordance with the requirements of current European and national legislation. Foods labelled as "bio" or "organic" should possess the respective certification.

From the above, it becomes clear that the responsibility for the goods offered at the farmers' market lies with the individuals selling them, rather than with the local authorities, who determine the time, place, order, and conditions for its conduct.

Farmers' markets are not regulated in the Law on Support for Agricultural Producers or in any other legislative act. A sub-legal act regulating the specific requirements for the production of small quantities of food in home conditions is also not available. Their regulation is achieved through municipal ordinances governing the order and conditions for placing movable facilities on the territory of the respective municipality.

Although sustainable food systems require a collective approach involving state, regional, and local authorities, participants from the private sector, NGOs, social partners, and society as a whole, local proactivity in implementing such initiatives is also of immense importance.

To accelerate the transition to healthy and environmentally friendly food chains, policies (at both national and local levels), innovative approaches, and the implementation of good practices are essential because they are instruments for developing and testing solutions, overcoming barriers, and discovering new opportunities. These opportunities support the activities of local producers while ensuring citizens' access to quality local products and goods.

2.3 ORGANIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN INFORMATION CAMPAIGN AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL, IN CONNECTION WITH THE FRAMEWORK PROGRAM FOR LOCAL TRADITIONAL AND REGIONAL TRADITIONAL PRODUCTS 2022-2032

Sustainable local development largely depends on the possibilities for rational use of available natural resources, the measures implemented to improve the standard of living of the population, and last but not least - the preservation of the cultural identity of local communities.

In its endeavour to support less developed regions to achieve growth and increase employment and living standards, the European Commission, through the Common Agricultural Policy, has set three main objectives: improving the competitiveness of agriculture, achieving sustainable management of natural resources and actions in the field of climate, as well as balanced territorial development (Bankova, Ramkovata programa za mestni tradicionni i regionalni tradicionni producti 2022-2032 v konteksta na ystoichivoto razvitie na selskite rayoni, 2023).

At the national level, these objectives are directly reflected in several strategic documents, including: the National Development Program "Bulgaria 2030", the Strategic Plan for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas of the Republic of Bulgaria 2023 - 2027, as well as in the Framework Program for Local Traditional and Regional Traditional Products for the period 2022 - 2032.

The main goal of the Program is to valorise the traditional products specific to a given territory and strengthen their connection with the communities, aiming at the development of the local economy and the agri-food sector (Ramkova programa za mestni tradicionni i regionalni tradicionni producti 2022-2032, 2021).

Considering the fact that regional traditional and local traditional products represent a kind of national wealth, reflecting our Bulgarian cultural identity and heritage as a people, stimulating the production and processing of these products would inevitably contribute to the development and competitiveness of local agricultural producers, to the promotion of social welfare and to the improvement of the quality of the products themselves. Priority is given to the development and consolidation of these products as a stimulus for the socio-economic growth of Bulgarian regions and municipalities, as well as as a recognizable and attractive element of Bulgaria's cultural identity, our culinary map, and tourist destinations (Bankova, Ramkovata programa za mestni tradicionni i regionalni tradicionni producti 2022-2032 v konteksta na ystoichivoto razvitie na selskite rayoni, 2023).

As an intervention object, the Program covers all agricultural products and foods intended for human consumption, including wines, flavored vinous products, products based on fruit wines and vinegars, and other alcoholic beverages.

However, the specific measures, especially those aimed at assisting producers of products with potential for protection under European quality schemes, remain relatively distant and unclear to farmers and local producers, given the lack of a comprehensive information campaign.

Organizing and conducting a series of informational meetings in the municipalities, related to the implementation of the European policy for the quality of agricultural products, foods, and beverages, guaranteeing unified protection of designations as intellectual property rights could mobilize the potential of local producers.

Clarifying the possibilities for product certification in one of the three main categories: "Protected Designation of Origin", "Protected Geographical Indication", or "Traditional Specialty Guaranteed" would have a substantial contribution to achieving priorities related to the development of a competitive agricultural sector (Geographical indications and quality schemes, 2023).

At present, Bulgarian specific products and foods meeting the provisions of Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 November 2012 on quality schemes for agricultural products and foodstuffs, and possessing implementing regulations, are included in the two major European legal registries. Inclusion in the European register "eAmbrosia" includes a total of 69 Bulgarian specific agricultural products, foods, alcoholic beverages, and wines. These include: Gornooryahovski sudzhuk, Bulgarian rose oil, Strandzhanski manov med, Trojanska slivova rakiq, Lovechka slivova rakiq, Sukhindolska grozdova rakiq, Sungurlarska grozdova rakiq, Straldzhanska Muskatova rakiq, Slivenska perla, Pomoriiska grozdova rakiq, Karlovska grozdova rakiq, Burgaska Muskatova rakiq, Grozdova rakiq ot Targovishte, Karnobatska grozdova rakiq, Yambolska grozdova rakiq and 54 wines originating from Bulgaria (eAmbrosia, 2023). Apart from the aforementioned, inclusion in the European register "GIview" also includes: Bulgarian white brined cheese; Bulgarian yogyrt; and Strandzha herbal tea (GIview, 2023).

Undoubtedly, the list of local traditional and regional traditional products and foods is far from exhausted with already certified ones, but the interest in European quality schemes remains low.

The lack of accessible and clear information on the rules and procedures for certification is one of the reasons for the low levels of interest. At present, there is no systematic approach at the national level regarding local traditional and regional traditional products by competent authorities. There is also no publicly available database (such as an electronic platform) to assist interested parties in finding accurate and up-to-date information on issues related to these products.

Sporadically, in recent years, limited in time and scope targeted initiatives have been implemented, unfortunately remaining on the periphery of both state policies and public attention.

Limiting deficits of this nature would assist in directing collective efforts (of stakeholders) towards popularizing and promoting the production of local traditional foods and beverages. Prioritizing such measures and the potential certification of authentic, traditional local products, foods, and beverages, and valorising them would directly reflect on both local producers and the local economy as a whole.

Organizing and conducting information campaigns at the municipal level, with the participation of experts from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and/or its territorial structures, would mitigate the negative effects of the widely accepted understanding that the limited capabilities of the predominant part of Bulgarian micro and small enterprises to bear the investment costs for ensuring compliance with product specifications make their certification impossible.

From a factual point of view, the lack of a large number of agricultural products and foods from the country certified under quality schemes for agricultural products and foods could be defined as a "missed opportunity."

Realizing the untapped potential for improving the position of producers of agricultural products and foods in the value chain would inevitably also contribute to sustainable local development and the preservation of our cultural identity (FAO, 2011).

Ensuring unified protection of designations as intellectual property rights and providing clear information about products with specific characteristics related to geographical origin enable producers to enhance the image of their products, hence the prices of registered products, as consumers are willing to pay for guaranteed production methods and traditional products (Bankova, Ramkovata programa za mestni tradicionni i regionalni tradicionni producti 2022-2032 v konteksta na ystoichivoto razvitie na selskite rayoni, 2023).

It is increasingly necessary to intervene in a more targeted manner towards achieving a high level of interaction between central government, local authorities, representatives of the agricultural sector, economic entities in the tourism sector, and not least, the local communities themselves, in order to achieve coherence in their actions and a synergistic effect in unfolding the potential of local traditional and regional traditional products.

CONCLUSION

The complex socio-economic, political, and demographic reality in Bulgaria presupposes and requires the adoption of a holistic approach to governance, both at the central and local levels.

The precise formulation, execution, monitoring, updating, and reporting of strategic documents at all levels of governance are essential for valorising the opportunities for sustainable development. Integrated development plans for municipalities in Bulgaria for the period 2021-2027 are no exception. As instruments for managing and coordinating the joint efforts of local authorities, businesses, and citizens for balanced and sustainable development of municipalities, they undoubtedly require updating regarding the measures laid out to achieve competitiveness in the agricultural sector.

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