

The importance of citizen engagement in the implementation of sustainable development policies in Romania

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Abstract

Sustainable development is at the core of every major decision in international politics, as the direction of the international community has been set towards protecting and restoring the resources of the planet. Although the goals are the same, each country is at a

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different level of achievement regarding the agreed-upon objectives. This article focuses on the current point Romania is in, the progress which has been made, and the path that lies ahead, analysed from the perspective of correcting measures that could help set its course on the right trajectory. Special attention is paid to the role that public participation has in implementing European policies designed to help the block follow through with its goal at the national level, in Romania. Considering that the literature is limited in this sphere, this article aims to connect some of the principal sustainable development pillars, contributing to the creation of a more complex picture of the actual context in Romania and the different dimensions that factor in the implementation of new policies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The need for effective sustainable development policies around the globe is becoming more and more apparent with each day that passes, generating a greater necessity for a complex and comprehensive understanding of the whole process, from policy proposals to different forms of community participation.

Although at the international level, this subject represents one of the biggest research interests, at the national level, in Romania, there is currently a literature gap. This is not to say that Romania does not prioritize steps taken towards reaching the European objectives, but the process is still relatively slow. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the information available regarding Romania's sustainable development progress by analyzing different levels of participation under the three main pillars: social, economic, and environmental.

For this goal, the article approaches the progress made by Romania toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) achievement from the perspective of community involvement. One of the keys to achieving the unity ideals is

represented by how the society acts, generating massive social movements, eventually changing the collective mentality. Starting from a fragmented society, Romania will continue to have a difficult time as community engagement is rarely taken into consideration, with most initiatives stopping at some raising awareness actions. Community awareness is only the first step of the journey, but it needs a follow-up and real reactions from the public if the results are expected to have a long-term impact and lasting results concerning mentality.

2. ROMANIA'S POLITICAL CONTEXT

Romania has made significant progress in its 30-year journey as a democracy and 16-year membership in the European Union, moving closer to embracing the universal values shared in our interconnected global community. However, it still has a long way ahead on the journey of becoming a reference state for progress.

One of the biggest challenges Romania is facing on this front is political instability. In a landscape where the government frequently changes, long-term policies often face challenges due to inconsistent resource management, leading to the postponement of many beneficial policies as each new administration seeks to establish its own direction.

On the Democratic Index, Romania scored 56 out of 100, being described as a semi-consolidated democracy at the end of 2022 (Freedom House 2023). The party politics of the national actors are seen as being opportunistic rather than result-oriented and prone to trying to win by accumulating influence through funds distribution; the civil society has a limited space to act, the legal and

political instruments at its disposal offering narrow opportunities (European Commission 2021); the media is not considered to be independent, as the level of transparency regarding media ownership and the state funding as the principal financing component tend to generate concerns regarding editorial autonomy; the level of corruption is perceived as being a fairly average one, with a score of 46 out of 100 in the year 2022 (Transparency International 2023).

With 2024 being an electoral year, a lot of attention needs to be paid to continuity. For any policy to have the chance to be effective, it needs to offer enough time for all the involved sectors to align themselves with the new direction. For this, Romania needs to work on the political stability.

Another important aspect of the success or failure of a policy revolves around community engagement and public participation. When a country's society is split between two or more opposing governing directions, the lack of unity affects the implementation of new policies.

In Romania, the ruling coalition, firstly seen as unacceptable by the public, is slowly gaining the support of the electorate. In a survey conducted in March 2023, when asked about their opinion of a PNL (National Liberal Party) and PSD (Social Democratic Party) alliance in the 2024 elections, approximately 43% of the liberal respondents declared that they would have a good opinion about this possibility, and 7% that they would have a very good opinion, with the answers coming from the democrats being even more promising, as around 45% of the democrat respondents declared that they would have a very good opinion and 12% that they would have a very good opinion (Postelnicu 2023).

This alliance has the opportunity to gain the electorate's trust, thus raising the level of community engagement and public participation if it delivers the

promised results. The possibility for continuity offered by the current ruling coalition could bring Romania closer to achieving long-lasting policies that have a real impact throughout society.

However, if the coalition fails, the Romanian society is going to be split into three principal directions: liberals, democrats, and nationalists. This unwanted outcome could harden the process of democratic consolidation, affecting Romania's position on the international scene, as the nationalist party, AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), is gaining more popularity, following the European trend that marks the rise of right-wing populist parties across Europe (Silver 2022). This type of ideology could potentially affect the well-being of the citizens, the country's security, and environmental actions, as the framework of our world is based on international cooperation, not on national-oriented policies of isolation.

3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

Sustainable development is currently defined as being "the development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (European Commission 2019). Environmental issues and the current rate at which we are using the planet's resources threaten not only the well-being of our generation but also the existence of future generations.

Although we now have a universal definition, throughout the years, the concept has been differently interpreted by countries all around the globe (Duran, et al. 2015). In 1989, in the United Kingdom, the definition was: "Sustainable

development involves devising a social and economic system, which ensures that these goals are sustained, i.e. that real incomes rise, that educational standards increase that the health of the nation improves, and that the general quality of life is advanced" (Pearce, Markandya, and Barbier 1989). In 1999 in South Africa, the definition was: "Sustainable development is a program for changing the process of economic development so that it ensures a basic quality of life for all people and at the same time protects the ecosystems and community systems that make life possible and worthwhile" (Vander-Merwe and Van-der-Merwe 1999). In 2012, in Romania, sustainable development was understood as "the ability of a society, ecosystem, or any such existing system to operate continuously in an undefined future without reaching key resource depletion" (Marin 2012).

From all these different definitions, the concept of sustainable development started to gain more and more implications in a multitude of sectors, becoming the transdisciplinary and complex concept we work with today. The sustainable growth of our world rests on three foundational elements: the social, economic, and environmental sectors. Sustainable development is attainable only through maintaining a harmonious balance among these three aspects and their respective areas of influence.

The European Union is constructing its policies around the 17 SDGs agreed on at the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 when the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was signed.

The SDGs address existing inequalities in a wide spectrum of domains, such as the social one, the economic one, the educational one, etc. The main concern raised by the variations in the level of quality of life across European countries is that it could lead to different national policies, slowing down or stopping

altogether the progress towards achieving sustainability ideals. For example, the rising wave of populism can be attributed to the fact that many societies do not feel represented at the European Union level, as they can see the context as being unfair (European Commission 2019). This kind of inequality leads to social preferences favoring populist ideals, which offer people a glimmer of hope of improvement in their quality of life, but in the long term could lead to even bigger differences in population growth and living standards.

The European Union has made great progress in elaborating and implementing policies that support the SDGs, but their effectiveness depends on how the member states integrate them. There is a policy implementation gap throughout Europe, as different governance systems achieve different results (Hudson, David, and Peckham 2018).

Another challenge that sustainable policies face is related to their multidisciplinary approach. For example, environmental problems cannot be improved solely by environmental policies if economic policies are promoting fossil fuels, and social policies cannot be effective without educational policies supporting the society's workforce preparation for the carbon transition.

In this article the focus is on how community engagement can improve the multilateral approach to sustainable development policies, focusing on the realities and improvements needed at the national level. Community involvement will be analyzed through the lenses of the three main pillars: environmental, social, and economic.

4. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK IN ROMANIA

Romania's current Sustainable Development Strategy is based on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, focusing on the three pillars, and recognizing the need for popular support, by citizen's integration of the promoted principles in their lives. In this context, Romania's government has established a Department of Sustainable Development through the Government Decision 313/2017 (Department of Sustainable Development 2017).

Besides the Strategy, the biggest mechanism Romania has that contributes to the Sustainable Development of the country through the adaptation of new policies and integration of sustainable values in different areas of the political, social, and economic life is represented by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) for Romania. The mechanism was created by the European Union to offer support to the member states in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and Romania could access 29 billion euros, half as a grant, and half as a loan (Ministry of Culture 2021).

However, the opportunity to access these funds comes with certain conditions that the receiving country is obliged to meet, such as:

- Rule of law: following concerns in Hungary and Poland, the European Union decided to use the Resilience and Recovery plan for a country as a means to be assured of the enforcement of the rule of law (European Parliament 2023);
- Transparency and public participation: access to information needs to be facilitated for the members of the society, and the national plans need to have a consultation component, where local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organizations, and other relevant actors come together to decide the best course of action (Lopez 2021);

- Strategic environmental assessment and environmental impact assessment: national resilience and recovery plans need to be aligned with the European Union's legislation, promoting the "do no significant harm" principle, and finally contributing to the EU Green Deal (Lopez 2021).

Romania's RRP was approved by the European Commission in September 2021, with Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission expressing her support towards our country: "By focusing on measures to secure the green and digital transitions, from improving the energy efficiency of buildings to improving connectivity and digital skills, the measures set out in the plan have the potential to be truly transformative. We will stand with you in the years to come to ensure that the ambitious investments and reforms set out in the plan are fully implemented" (European Commission 2021).

The principal measures included in the national plan that promote sustainable development are the following: modernizing the railway infrastructure; modernizing urban mobility by creating the necessary infrastructure for a green and safer urban transport; making the shift towards renewable energy; renovation and modernization of buildings; conservation of biodiversity and protection of the environment through reforestation, ecological reconstruction, and species protection. All these measures will be accompanied by a series of digital, social, and economic reforms (European Commission 2021).

Over time, Romania has also accessed European funds through the creation of three different Ops (Operational Programmes) concerned with the implementation of sustainable development policies: POR (The Regional Operational Programme), POCU (The Human Capital Operational Programme), POSDRU (Human Resources Development Sector Operational Programme).

POR 2014-2020 was centered around raising the economic competitiveness and improving the living conditions of local and regional communities through the development of the business, infrastructure, and services sectors, to achieve the sustainable development of different regions through efficient management of resources (Romanian Government 2014). The proposal has been adopted by the European Commission, but the results at the national level remain to be seen yet. POCU 2014-2020 attracted the support of the European Social Fund and was concerned with helping Romanians, including the youth, to find suitable jobs, contributing to reducing the level of poverty, social exclusion, and social inequities (European Commission 2013). However, in May 2022, Romania still had a relatively high percentage of youth unemployment, ranking just under Greece and Spain, with 23% (Eurostat 2023).

POSDRU, one of the first programs of its kind, elaborated at a time of political turmoil, during Romania's accession to the European Union was supposed to correlate education and the teaching and learning processes with the life-long parcourse of an individual's working life (Romanian Government 2007). However, in 2023, a decade and a half later, education reform is still a subject of public interest, at the center of debates, with it being part of the election platform of Romania's President, Klaus Iohannis, who is on his last term as a president.

The existence of such programs from the earlier stages of European Union membership represents the commitment Romania made to being a factor of change. However, having the policies on paper is only the first stage, and the assessment of the progress will aim at how many of the objectives were reached, and to what extent.

5. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE POLICY PROCESSES

Education, access to information, and public awareness are three of the most crucial factors when it comes to civic participation in the decision-making process. Fostering a beneficial collaboration relationship between communities and governmental institutions could help raise the level of community engagement, as people take into consideration the dedication of political actors towards improving their living standards.

The level of community involvement and the participative aspect of democracy are directly linked to the cultural norms of the society and the importance attributed to the concept of the respective nation as a whole, leading to two possible identities: civic nation and cultural nation (Bakk 2010).

If we look at the implementation of sustainability policies, community awareness and involvement become much more important, as the communities vulnerable to the effects of climate change are forced to adapt in order to increase their level of resilience (Khatibi, et al. 2021).

The level of community involvement and public participation is heavily influenced by the trust that people have in their leading institutions. Public participation has many forms, including, but not limited to informing and listening through dialogue, debate, analysis, and implementing jointly agreed solutions (Stephan Hügel 2020). Public trust can be split into two categories: actor-based trust, when people gravitate towards a certain person in a leadership position to represent their interests, and system-based trust when people trust the capacity of the political system and its instruments to represent them (Sapienza 2021). When creating new policies, policymakers need to know how to

address the public, as the efficiency of a policy and its success depend on public involvement.

When analyzing community engagement, another aspect that needs to be addressed is public opinion. For a policy to be supported and the goal to have greater chances of achievement, it is important to have the sympathy of the public opinion, as it is one of the pillars of a healthy and well-functioning democracy (Political Science 2021). Public opinion also represents one of the deciding factors regarding the decisions made about future policies since the primary goal of any politician is to benefit from public support to be re-elected.

In Romania, generally, the community involvement level can be noticed in public debates, where the relationship between citizens that participate and the public institution is based on consultation, so the community participation could be portrayed as being composed of moderately involved citizens (Haruța și Radu 2010). A reason for the generally low level of community involvement in policy processes could be attributed to the fact that ultimately, the decision belongs to the policymakers, and Romanians believe that these decisions are based on the interest of certain groups who hold influence, not on the general well-being of the community (Olteanu și Beyerle 2015). The political class, in turn, shows interest in community engagement primarily during times of crisis management. Typically, this engagement is orchestrated in a way that centers the conversation around the reputation of specific political figures, rather than focusing on the necessary actions to resolve the situation at hand.

Public participation has four steps: giving information to the public, listening to the public, engaging in problem-solving, and developing agreements (Creighton 2005). This article focuses primarily on which of these steps need to be improved

for the Romanian society to have a better chance at aligning with the SDGs, considering that policies without compliance deliver no meaningful results.

6. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES IN ROMANIA

The level of political polarization present in a country also influences public participation. The subject of climate change is a highly controverted one, generating debates throughout Romanian society. Although there is a considerable level of community awareness when it comes to climate change and its consequences, with 84% of Romanians thinking that it represents the biggest challenge for humanity in the 21st century and 88% believing that climate change has an impact on their everyday lives (European Investment Bank 2021), the polarization is still strong, as loud climate-skeptic views are gaining more popularity because of the rise of right-wing and populist actors that influence the public climate discourse (Max Falkenberg 2022).

Attitudes towards carbon taxation and other sustainable development policies depend on the level of political trust (Fairbrother 2022). In Romania, the level of trust in public institutions is low, with approximately 12% trust in the Parliament, 17% in the Government, and 25% in the Presidential Administration (Statista Research Department 2023). This translates to initiatives for mitigation efforts and new climate policy proposals being withdrawn because of the public opposition.

There are, however, some positive examples of well-received measures taken towards the carbon-neutrality objective, the most prominent one being that the

transition to green energy enjoyed some success, as this is where the regulation of the renewable energy market and other new forms of “luxury” come into play, resulting in the spread and popularization of electric vehicles, which depends almost absolutely on the reaction of the end consumer, which is the public. This is where the transition towards eco-friendly alternatives really shines, as people do not even need to express themselves, they simply buy the product, with electric and hybrid cars reaching 20% of the market share in Romania in 2023 (Dumitrescu 2023).

To extend this approach to other key areas of environmental policy in Romania, the public's understanding must be straightforward: the requirement for policies in a particular sector does not automatically imply that the issue should be politicized. Climate change carries a significant amount of different ideologies whenever it is talked about, being continuously contested (Coulson 2023) and this aspect can also be identified in Romania. Community awareness cannot be realized without a coherent message, and the mixed rhetoric discourses promoted by different political parties contribute to the public confusion phenomenon, creating new limitations for the much-needed sustainable development policies.

For gathering public support and eventually contributing to the engagement of the community, the first step is assuring proper information channels. Raising community awareness involves educating and acquainting people with the issue of climate change. Romania will face numerous challenges in adopting and incorporating European sustainable development policies unless proactive measures are taken to involve communities in discussions and actions that benefit them. This is essential for citizens to realize the significance of being

actively engaged in societal issues. There's a disconnect in communication between different social mechanisms, like state institutions and the average citizen. Regrettably, the state's passive response to major issues often results in engagement only in the wake of tragedies, rather than proactive involvement aimed at preventing such events and enhancing overall quality of life.

7. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL POLICIES IN ROMANIA

The Sustainable Development Strategy for Romania recognizes the high level of inequities, social exclusion, and marginalization (Romanian Government 2018). Despite considerable progress, the journey towards social equity remains extensive. The lingering impact of communist-era mindsets means community engagement is inconsistent, and affected by varying levels of skepticism. Citizens are increasingly worried about growing disparities, not only economically but, more crucially, in terms of social inequality. Some of the main problems are related to the level of social security as poverty levels are above the European average, the social stratification that points out a thinning middle class (Sergiu 2017), and the social exclusion of specific groups.

Social policies in Romania often garner public interest and community engagement, as a significant portion of the population is directly impacted by them. These policies tend to receive more support compared to, say, environmental policies because the immediate benefits and enhancements to quality of life are more apparent to the community. However, as long as Romania's social sector lags behind that of Western European countries, the

adoption and integration of the SDGs will face challenges. This is because the population is more preoccupied with immediate concerns rather than those of a distant future.

However, this does not mean Romanians are not concerned with the future. This year, Romania was confronted with one of the biggest vulnerabilities the system had concerning care homes for the elderly and disabled, with tens of centers being shut down for abuse and squalid living conditions (Stefănescu 2023). For a country where there are already concerns about the quality of life when reaching retirement age, considering that the rapport between the number of retirees sustained by state social insurance and the number of employees is 8 to 10 (Rosu 2023) when the news hit about the reality from the care homes, the community reaction was a strong one. The inquiry garnered significant community interest, especially as it involved well-known politicians, including the notable Gabriela Firea, the former Mayor of Bucharest. This journalistic investigation was carried out by independent bodies: The Investigative Media Center and Bucharest Bulletin. Although initially reported early in the year, the topic only gained widespread attention and became a major point of discussion in the community after official authorities stepped in (Cârgulea 2023).

This example perfectly illustrates the need for better social policies in Romania. Because of low pensions, a great amount of the senior population and their families end up relying on these types of care homes, that draw their money from the state (Vlad 2023) to provide their services. This scenario highlights the necessity for better integration of the elderly in the community and calls for improved social policies that cater to all segments of the population. It also resonates with the widespread fear among many Romanians about their future.

In Romania, community engagement in social policies is significantly shaped by how individuals connect with the specific policy in question. Regarding the care homes, the public reaction was intense as many Romanians recognized that existing social policies were not supportive enough, leading to a heightened awareness of their own risk of falling into that marginalized group.

Another example of a massive form of public participation can be identified in 2018. After the Coalition for Family raised over three million signatures in a petition to modify the Romanian Constitution so it would specify that a marriage should be between a man and a woman, replacing the term "spouses"² (Reuters 2016). Despite efforts made by different religious groups or nationalist formations, the community involvement delivered a low turnout for the referendum, with only 21% of the constituency expressing a vote, thus rendering the referendum "not valid" (Digi24 2018). This instance of participation was unique in that the community collectively chose to boycott the referendum. Recognizing that voting would likely result in losing the referendum, the opposition opted to abstain from voting entirely. This strategy aimed to prevent the referendum from reaching a valid turnout, effectively winning through a deliberate absence.

8. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN ECONOMIC POLICIES IN ROMANIA

In Romania, when analyzing economic policies, certain factors should be taken into consideration, such as:

² ARTICLE 48 - Family. *Constitution of Romania*. Chamber of Deputies. "The family is founded on the freely consented marriage of the spouses"

- the economic disparities between rural Romania and urban Romania;
- the economic disparities between the public sector and the private sector.

Romania's society, despite the recent economic growth of some densely populated urban areas such as Bucharest or Cluj (Rosu 2018), is still above the European average regarding the percentage of the population that lives in rural areas, with 46% in 2019 (Băncescu 2021). Community involvement in economic policies is subject to major discrepancies between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, where there is a large concentration of the population, the public interest is a major force of influence, whereas, in rural areas, where the population is spread throughout the country, even if in a certain village there is a major involvement, it does not usually have the power to influence the direction of certain policies.

In rural areas, the principal source of income is predominantly agriculture, with a significant part of the non-agricultural population commuting to nearby cities (Sandu 2005). However, even though the rural population is scattered around the country, in the year 2023 Romanian farmers organized one of the biggest agricultural protests in the country, as policies designed to help Ukrainian farmers were starting to affect Romanian farmers, as Klaus Iohannis, President of Romania promised to ask for a solution from the government (Cosiță 2023). Romanian farmers declared their dissatisfaction with the fact that the Romanian market started being flooded by Ukrainian produce, contributing to the phenomenon of unfair competition, as Ukrainians are excluded from taxes in an effort to show solidarity and support toward the conflict they face. They also condemned the lack of involvement from governing bodies in attracting financial support from the European Union, with Romania only receiving 10 of the 56 million given to support Romanian, Bulgarian, and Polish farmers (Negreanu

2023). This protest marked one of the highest levels of community involvement regarding economic policies in Romania.

Another type of polarization in Romania concerning economic policies is related to the differences between the public and the private sector. The employees from the public sector are earning 32% more than the employees from the private sector (Chirileasa 2022). Moreover, Romania has the largest number of employees in public institutions from the European Union, and to reduce expenses, the Romanian government decided to freeze new hiring in public institutions, with a few exceptions, from May 2023 until the end of the year (Niculescu 2023).

People's involvement in economic reforms regarding the public sector is relatively high, as the employees are part of syndicates that are involved in making sure the workers' rights are respected. This year alone there were different protests regarding policy proposals in the respective sectors:

- in April 2023 there was a wave of protests concerning education reform, where educators demanded higher wages in response to the evolving economic landscape and the increasing cost of daily living (Costiță 2023). The teachers refused to go to classes for a few days, signaling to the government the importance of their jobs. The strike lasted for three weeks and ended in a protest march where 20000 people participated, after which promises were made regarding the increase of their salary (Peticilă 2023);
- in June 2023, employees in the health sector, particularly 10% of medical professionals who undertake extra shifts, staged a protest. They threatened the possibility of resigning, demanding that their work's value

be accurately reflected in their salaries and calling for adherence to the existing salary legislation (Digi24 2023).

- The situation in Romania, where workers in crucial sectors for national development and future generations feel their rights are being ignored, should be a wake-up call for the political class. The stalemate in education reform is partly due to the near absence of dialogue between the Ministry, Inspectorates, and teacher-parent councils. When communication does occur, it's often during political crises, lacking continuity. This pattern is not isolated; engagement with other civil society representatives typically gains importance only in times of conflict or protest, rather than being a consistent priority.

Sustainable development hinges on devising policies that enhance the population's well-being and foster interdisciplinary collaboration. The emergence of protests in response to economic issues within sectors like food, education, and health reveals a profound mistrust between the governing bodies and the populace. For comprehensive progress, citizens throughout the country, regardless of their profession, must feel that their interests are being considered and adequately represented.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Romania has consistently demonstrated its aspiration to move towards a more sustainable future, with certain sectors like IT&C leading the way as industry pioneers. However, when it comes to creating and maintaining a system that is

sustainable, self-sufficient, and people-oriented, Romania still has a long way to go.

There have been policies elaborated to improve day-to-day life and the overall wellness and life quality of the Romanian society, policies that take into consideration important aspects, that to approach multidisciplinary measures, touching on every interconnected sector. Unfortunately, there is a lack of continuity and follow-up that comes from the isolation of the political class from the citizens it represents which slows down this process. To achieve the European sustainable development goals, which Romania does support, the ruling class needs to look inward, to listen to the needs of the society, as models that have worked in other countries may not necessarily work here as well.

The Romanian society, composed of all the local and regional communities show a lack of trust in the political institutions, which affects the expected results of proposed and implemented policies. One of the most needed improvements the legislators could bring would be to work towards involving the community in the elaboration of new policies. The civil society already has a lot of necessary instruments, from involved individuals to representatives of different sectors, to civil experts that could help the process. As far as the political communication sector is concerned, the current official communication infrastructure with the general public needs to be used more consistently and for the public interest.

In conclusion, Romania's journey towards sustainability involves addressing the interlinked pillars of the environment, society, and the economy. While progress has been made in various sectors, there's a pressing need for a more holistic and people-centered approach. The disconnect between the political class and the citizens, as well as the lack of trust in political institutions, hinder the

implementation of well-intentioned policies. To achieve European sustainable development goals, Romania must prioritize community involvement, utilize existing civil society resources, and improve public communication to bridge the gap between aspirations and action.

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