



Analysis of the Rural Labour Force in Romania's South-East Region

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the structure, challenges, and development opportunities of the rural labour force in Romania's South-East Development Region. Based on official statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics and relevant regional studies, the research highlights the dominance of the agricultural sector, the low level of formal qualifications among the rural workforce, and the persistence of informal employment. The study identifies significant disparities across counties, demographic imbalances caused by external and internal migration, and limited professional mobility due to inadequate infrastructure and lack of access to vocational training. The findings emphasise the need for integrated public policies focused on workforce development, improved transport connectivity, investment in rural entrepreneurship, and the expansion of training centres. The paper concludes that revitalising the rural labour market in the South-East Region requires both structural reforms and tailored interventions adapted to local conditions.

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1. Introduction

The South-East Development Region of Romania, comprising the counties of Brăila, Buzău, Constanța, Galați, Tulcea, and Vrancea, faces major challenges regarding economic development and social cohesion in rural areas. Despite its agricultural, touristic, and industrial potential, the rural environment in this region remains vulnerable to the effects of migration, an ageing population, and limited access to education and vocational training. The local labour force is often underqualified, poorly paid, and lacks sustainable employment opportunities.

In this context, analysing the rural labour force becomes essential for designing effective public policies aimed at sustainable development, reducing inequalities, and capitalising on the existing human potential. Since socio-economic realities vary from one county to another, and youth migration to urban areas or abroad significantly impacts demographic and economic structures, a rigorous assessment of the characteristics of the rural workforce is necessary.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the main features of the labour force in the rural areas of the South-East Region, with a focus on the level of qualification, employment dynamics, current challenges, and development opportunities. The analysis is based on official statistical data provided by national and European sources, as well as sectoral studies relevant to the regional labour market.

2. Literature review

The analysis of the labour force in rural areas requires an understanding of fundamental concepts such as human capital, skilled labour, employment, and occupational mobility. In the specialised literature, human capital is considered a key factor in economic growth, being defined by Becker (Becker, 1964) as the set of knowledge, skills, and competencies accumulated by an individual through education, training, and professional experience.

In rural areas, human capital has specific characteristics: a low level of formal education, limited access to continuous training, but also a strong connection to local resources and traditional activities. Skilled labour – as used in this article – refers to activities that require a defined set of technical competencies, certified through vocational training or specialised work experience.

Regional development models, such as the polarisation model (Perroux, 1955) and Myrdal's cumulative causation model (Myrdal, 1957) highlight the tendency of skilled labour to concentrate in urban centres, to the detriment of rural areas, which leads to persistent territorial disparities. Likewise, the dual

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labour market theory (Doeringer, 1971 points to the existence of a “secondary market” in rural areas— characterised by unstable, low-paid jobs with limited advancement opportunities.

Another relevant framework is the knowledge-based economy, which argues that sustainable development requires investment in training, innovation, and professional mobility—elements often insufficiently supported in rural areas of Romania. Consequently, the lack of well-trained labour hampers the absorption of European funds, the attraction of investments, and the diversification of rural economies.

Applying these theories to the South-East Region helps us better understand why certain counties have developed more slowly and what conditions are necessary to revitalise the rural labour market.

3. Methodology

The analysis of the rural labour force in Romania’s South-East Development Region was carried out using a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. This methodology allowed for a detailed understanding of territorial realities from both a macro-regional and local (micro) perspective. The indicators analysed include: the rural employment rate, unemployment rate, labour force distribution by economic sector, education level, and both occupational and demographic mobility.

The rural labour force in the South-East Region shows a heterogeneous structure, influenced by the economic profiles of its component counties, the level of urbanisation, and the dynamics of the active population. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (2023), approximately 44% of the region’s population resides in rural areas, yet the contribution of this segment to total employment is shaped by sector-specific and demographic particularities.

Overall, the agricultural sector continues to dominate rural employment, accounting for 35% to 50% of the active labour force, depending on the county. For instance, in Brăila and Vrancea, agriculture remains the main employer in rural areas, while in Constanța and Galați, there is greater economic diversification, with a notable presence of food industry, transport, and service activities.

The age distribution reveals a pronounced ageing of the rural workforce: nearly 30% of workers are over 55 years old, while those under 35 make up less than 20%. This situation has direct implications for workforce renewal and the sustainability of rural economies.

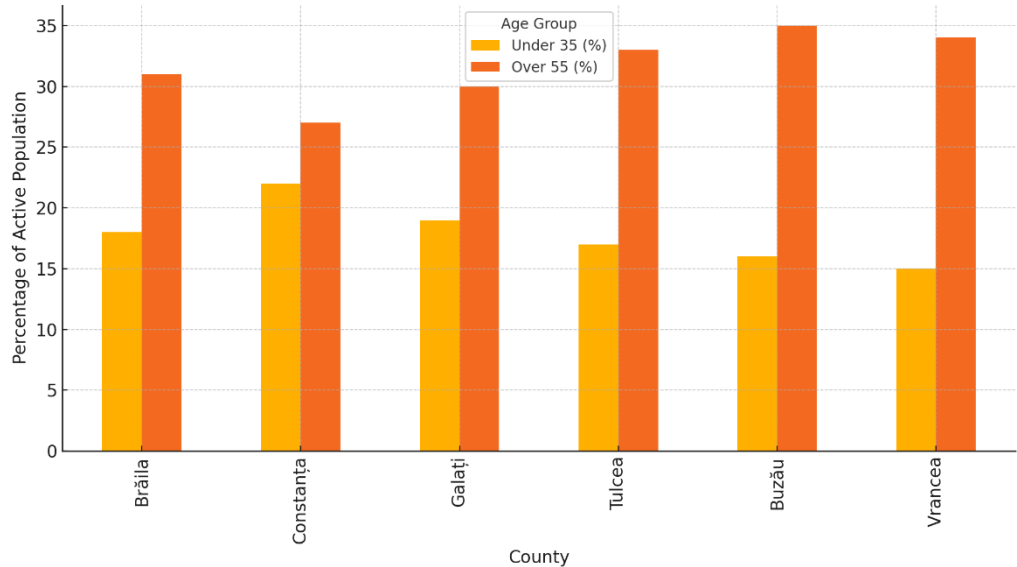


Figure 1. Age Distribution of the Rural Workforce – South-East Region

Source: author, data processing based on (INS, 2023)

This bar chart compares the share of rural workforce aged under 35 and over 55 across the counties of Romania’s South-East Region. The data highlight a concerning trend of ageing within the active population, particularly in counties such as Buzău, Vrancea, and Tulcea, where more than one-third of rural workers are over 55. At the same time, the proportion of young workers (under 35) remains low across the region, ranging from only 15% to 22%.

This demographic imbalance poses a serious challenge to labour force renewal and long-term rural development, emphasizing the need for targeted youth retention policies and intergenerational workforce strategies.

Another key feature is the high prevalence of informal labour, particularly in agriculture and seasonal services, where a significant portion of the active population is not formally registered with employment or social insurance systems. This phenomenon limits the ability of public institutions to implement effective training or reintegration policies.

Women are underrepresented in well-paid sectors in rural areas, often working in subsistence farming, local trade, or low-paid community services. This gender imbalance increases economic vulnerability and reduces professional mobility for a significant portion of the rural population.

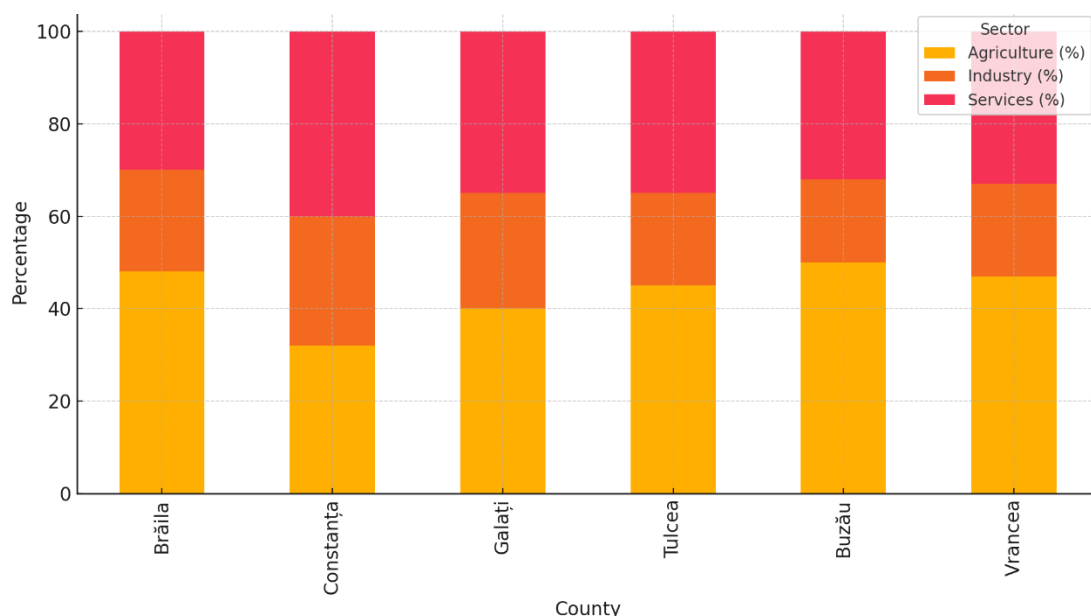


Figure 2. Structure of Rural Employment by County

Source: author, data processing based on (INS, 2023)

This figure illustrates the distribution of rural employment across the counties of Romania's South-East Region, highlighting the share of the workforce engaged in agriculture, industry, and services. The data reveal strong dependence on agriculture in counties such as Brăila and Vrancea, while Constanța and Galați exhibit more economic diversity, with greater participation in industrial and service sectors.

In conclusion, the structure of the rural labour force in Romania's South-East Region reflects a strong dependence on agriculture, a low level of employment diversification, a high rate of informal work, and increasing demographic pressure. These characteristics highlight the urgent need for coherent and tailored interventions to revitalise the rural labour market.

The low qualification level of the rural workforce represents a major obstacle in the process of economic modernisation and attracting investment. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS, 2023), over 45% of the active rural population has no more than lower secondary education, while only around 20% have completed vocational or technological high school training.

The South-East Region also faces significant challenges related to both internal and external migration, as well as limited labour mobility in rural areas. These phenomena have a direct impact on local development dynamics.

- × External migration: According to INS data, the region records high levels of emigration, especially among young and economically active individuals. This trend is driven by the search for better-paid job opportunities abroad, amid a shortage of attractive rural employment options.
- × Internal migration: Studies show that cities such as Brăila, Tulcea, and Galați have low attractiveness for internal migrants, as reflected in their high magnetism index (indicating a limited capacity to attract newcomers). This points to a lack of economic opportunities and inadequate infrastructure, which pushes people to migrate to more developed regions.
- × Commuting: Daily commuting from rural areas to urban centres is limited across the South-East Region. Cities like Brăila, Galați, and Tulcea register low rates of commuters, indicating weak regional labour market integration and underdeveloped transport infrastructure.

Policy Recommendations:

- ✓ To counter these trends and unlock the development potential of rural areas, it is essential to implement public policies focused on:
 - ✓ Developing transport infrastructure to improve labour mobility.
 - ✓ Creating attractive employment opportunities in rural areas by stimulating entrepreneurship and investment.
 - ✓ Implementing vocational training programmes tailored to the needs of the local labour market.
 - ✓ Improving public services and the overall quality of life in rural communities, to reduce both internal and external migration.

4. Results

The results of the analysis highlight a series of structural and demographic imbalances that persist in rural areas of Romania's South-East Region, particularly concerning workforce qualifications, occupational structure, and professional mobility. To address these issues and capitalise on local potential, public policy must be redefined with a strong focus on the human and economic dimensions of rural employment.

A first direction for intervention involves investment in rural vocational training tailored to the needs of the local labour market. Given that a large portion of the active population has a low level of formal education, and that access to training courses is often limited by distance or lack of information, it is essential to expand the network of vocational training centres in proximity to rural communities. These centres should offer flexible programmes, focused on employment-oriented sectors such as modern agriculture, rural tourism, care services, crafts, or renewable energy.

In parallel, stimulating entrepreneurship in rural areas can serve as a catalyst for local job creation, especially in territories where employment opportunities are scarce. Supporting private initiatives through grants, microcredits, business mentoring, and advisory services can help diversify the rural economy and reduce dependence on subsistence farming. National and European programmes such as Start-up Nation, AFIR, or the NRRP (PNRR) could be better adapted to the rural context to encourage local initiatives and attract young entrepreneurs back to their home communities.

Another critical dimension is transport and digital infrastructure, without which labour mobility and access to economic opportunities remain limited. Many communes in the South-East Region are poorly connected to regional transport networks, which discourages commuting and limits access to training centres or jobs in urban areas. Simultaneously, the lack of adequate digital infrastructure restricts the development of modern services and hinders participation in online training or remote work.

Youth migration and the departure of working-age individuals to other regions or abroad remain among the most serious challenges. Therefore, it is essential to develop reintegration policies for young people and returning migrants, which should include requalification programmes, support for starting businesses in rural areas, and integration pathways into the local labour market. Such policies can reverse depopulation trends and reactivate communities affected by ageing and economic decline.

Finally, combating informal employment, especially in agriculture, is a prerequisite for the modernisation of the rural economy. Fiscal and administrative policies must be simplified so that small and medium-sized employers can legally hire without excessive bureaucratic burdens. At the same time, expanding social protection for informal and seasonal workers is crucial to ensure access to health services, pensions, and occupational safety.

Overall, public policies must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and adopt differentiated strategies that reflect the economic, demographic, and geographic diversity of the South-East Region. Only in this way can the foundations for sustainable and inclusive rural development be laid, built on the effective use of local human capital.

Table 1. SWOT Analysis – Rural Labour Force in the South-East Region

Strengths	Weaknesses
High agricultural potential and rural economic traditions	Low levels of formal education and qualifications
Still significant active population in counties like Buzău and Constanța	Youth emigration and ageing of the workforce
Proximity to maritime and river ports (Constanța, Galați, Brăila)	Prevalence of informal labor and lack of social protection
Existing network of vocational schools and technical high schools	Limited access to vocational training in rural areas
Local craftsmanship traditions with economic potential	Poor transport infrastructure and regional isolation
Opportunities	Threats
Available EU funding (PNRR, FSE+, AFIR)	Continued emigration and loss of human capital
Public-private partnerships in skills development	Economic instability and low local investment
Digitalization of vocational education	Widening regional disparities
Reskilling in emerging sectors: green energy, tourism, logistics	Weak coordination between local and regional institutions
Growing demand for local products and services	Resistance to change in rural communities

Source: author, data processing based on (ADR SE, 2021)

The analysis of the rural labour force in Romania's South-East Region reveals a combination of structural vulnerabilities and untapped potential. The workforce is marked by low qualification levels, limited access to

vocational education, a high prevalence of informal employment, and pronounced demographic pressure caused by youth migration and population ageing. These challenges have a direct impact on the region's ability to attract investment, modernise its economy, and ensure inclusive development.

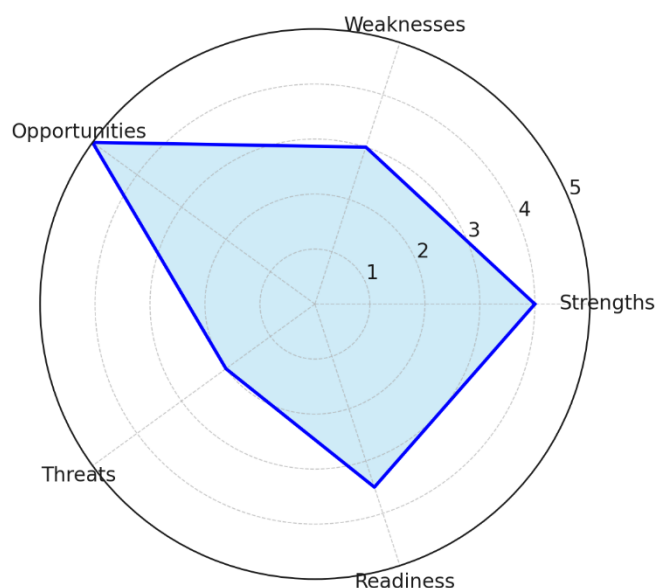


Figure 3. SWOT Profile of the Rural Labour Market – South-East Region

Source: author, data processing based on (ADR SE, 2021)

This radar chart provides a visual summary of the strategic profile of the rural labour market in Romania's South-East Region. The chart evaluates five key dimensions on a scale from 1 to 5:

- ✓ Strengths (e.g., agricultural potential, existing educational infrastructure),
- ✓ Weaknesses (e.g., low qualification levels, ageing population),
- ✓ Opportunities (e.g., EU funding, digitalisation, local entrepreneurship),
- ✓ Threats (e.g., emigration, regional disparities),
- ✓ and Readiness (institutional capacity to act).

The chart suggests that while the region has strong potential and strategic opportunities, it faces moderate weaknesses and significant threats. Institutional readiness is evaluated as average, indicating the need for capacity building and better coordination between local actors.

At the same time, the region possesses significant opportunities for revitalisation, particularly through European funding mechanisms, local development partnerships, and the digitalisation of training systems. With targeted and coherent public interventions, the South-East Region can begin to reduce territorial disparities and support sustainable economic recovery in rural communities.

Strategically, it is essential to:

- ✓ channel investments toward qualifications in locally relevant fields such as modern agriculture, rural tourism, logistics, and renewable energy.
- ✓ enhance both physical and digital access to vocational training, especially for remote rural populations.
- ✓ and strengthen the institutional capacity of employment services, local authorities, and training providers to coordinate and deliver effective workforce policies.

To ensure the long-term success of these efforts, public policies must be adapted to the diversity of local contexts and prioritise human capital as a driver of rural development. Only through such a focused and inclusive approach can the South-East Region unlock the potential of its rural workforce and transition from structural disadvantage to sustainable innovation.

The conclusions of this article are aligned with the strategic directions set at the European Union level for the equitable development of rural areas. In particular, the EU Rural Vision for 2040 highlights the need to reduce territorial disparities and support human capital development in less developed regions. The South-East Region of Romania, with its identified challenges and potential, fits perfectly within this framework for action.

Furthermore, the priorities of the Social Economy Action Plan (2021–2030) advocate for investment in vocational training, inclusive employment, and entrepreneurship in structurally vulnerable areas—precisely the types of territories analysed in this study.

Lastly, initiatives under the European Green Deal and the transition to a sustainable economy provide a favourable framework for reskilling the rural workforce in green occupations—ranging from renewable energy and organic agriculture to sustainable tourism and the circular economy.

Thus, the interventions proposed in this article not only address a local need but also contribute directly to Romania's commitments as a member of the European Union, supporting social cohesion, economic competitiveness, and the green transition in rural areas.

Table 2. Mapping Local Challenges to EU Strategic Priorities

Challenge in the South-East Region	Corresponding EU Objective	Relevant EU Document
Low levels of vocational qualification in rural areas	Expanding access to education and training in rural territories	EU Rural Vision for 2040
Youth migration and ageing population	Revitalizing rural communities and making them attractive to young people	EU Rural Vision for 2040
Informal work and lack of social protection	Promoting inclusive employment and supporting the social economy	Social Economy Action Plan (2021–2030)
Overreliance on traditional agriculture	Diversifying rural economies and fostering social enterprises	ESF+, Social Economy, European Pillar of Social Rights
Poor physical and digital infrastructure in rural areas	Investing in digital connectivity and modern public services	Digital Agenda, EU Cohesion Policy
Need for professional reconversion in sustainable sectors	Supporting training in green jobs and the transition to a circular economy	European Green Deal

Source: author, data processing based on (Eurostat, 2023)

For the South-East Region to align with the European Union's strategic directions, bold policies are needed policies based on investment in people, infrastructure, and local innovation.

This article offers not only a realistic diagnosis but also a clear starting point for concrete actions that are in line with the EU's priorities for the future of rural development.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the rural labour force in Romania's South-East Development Region reveals a complex interplay between structural vulnerabilities and development opportunities. Despite the region's significant agricultural and logistical potential, it continues to face persistent challenges: low levels of qualification, accelerated youth migration, high rates of informal employment, and limited access to infrastructure and public support services.

These factors negatively affect the region's competitiveness, its ability to attract investment, and social cohesion within rural communities. At the same time, the availability of key resources—such as European funding, vocational education networks, public-private partnerships, and a growing demand for local products and services—creates real prospects for long-term transformation.

To capitalise on these opportunities, an integrated strategic vision is needed, one that focuses on strengthening rural human capital. Priority directions should include expanding vocational training in locally relevant occupations, stimulating rural entrepreneurship, improving transport and digital infrastructure, and reforming institutional mechanisms that govern employment and local development.

Public policies must also be differentiated by county and tailored to the specific characteristics of each local area. Only through such targeted interventions can the South-East Region move from a position of vulnerability toward a model of sustainable rural transition, built on skilled labour, local innovation, and equitable access to opportunity.

Further research is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of vocational training programmes in rural areas, particularly in terms of employment sustainability and economic diversification. Comparative studies between counties within the South-East Region, or between similar regions in other EU countries, could offer valuable insights into effective policy models. Additionally, there is scope for quantitative analysis of the correlation between public investment in training and rural labour retention, as well as qualitative studies on community perceptions, barriers to participation, and local institutional capacity.

Exploring these areas can contribute to a better understanding of how rural labour markets evolve under different development scenarios, and how targeted interventions can improve the resilience and adaptability of rural regions in Romania and beyond.

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