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The political, demographic and ethnic composition of contemporary Europe is the result of long, complex and often also conflicting historical, social and economic developments. The protection of persons belonging to national minorities has become an inherent part of policies on human rights and social inclusion in most European countries. In recent years, particular attention has been paid to national minorities within the context of the EU enlargement to countries of Central and Eastern Europe. However, it should not be forgotten that members of national minorities live in all European countries, including Western, Northern and Southern Europe.

Information needs

Official statistics often glide over the ethnic shifts that have been underway in European countries; and for those countries where statistics do not discriminate between national groups, it is hard to find reliable figures. However, there can be no doubt that national minorities in Europe are highly heterogeneous: each has its own history and can have a very specific position within the society in general, and its social and economic development in particular.

There are several key questions to be taken into consideration when addressing the role of a national minority in the development process:

- First, it is an important precondition to action that the minority group be officially recognized as such by the country's authorities. Without this recognition, it is not possible to target the minority as a group.
- Second, reliable and relevant social and economic data must be available on the minority's actual situation and its implications for future development. Here, demographic data – on age and gender composition, household structure, geographic distribution, migration, and so on – are necessary. Data on economic activities and sources of people's livelihoods are also of central interest.
- Third, the social and economic well-being of the minority under consideration has to be identified. In this context, vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity among members of the minority needs to be monitored. Other issues deserving attention include nutritional characteristics, levels of marginalization and social exclusion, and patterns of vulnerability to economic shocks and emergency situations.

- Fourth, these findings should be compared with data on the majority population and – if applicable – on other national minorities, to see if the economic situation and vulnerability profile of the minority in question justify any specifically targeted interventions.
- Lastly, the self-administrative capacities of the minority need to be carefully assessed. Are there any representatives of the minority who are in a position to act as partners in developmental policies and programmes? If not, special efforts should be made to include members of the national minority in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of developmental interventions.

National minorities and rural poverty

Rural development is critical for reducing poverty and hunger – two extreme forms of economic vulnerability which can have dire consequences for members of national minorities. Compared with other parts of the world, European countries are favourably placed to deal with poverty and hunger. Yet significant poverty does exist in the region, and national minorities in rural settings are often more at risk than those in urban areas.

Incidents of poverty and hunger vary greatly from country to country, as well as within countries. Some of the principal reasons of food insecurity among members of national minorities are: poverty; marginalization; war and conflict (with ensuing problems of refugees and displaced persons); natural disasters; weak state institutions to ensure the safety of food supplies to national minorities; and the breakdown of social safety nets. The following groups can be assumed to be particularly vulnerable to rural poverty:

- Members of national minorities residing in upland and mountainous areas who often face severe marketing constraints because of their isolation;
- Rural wage earners who lack enough land on which to produce their own food and have limited or no opportunity to generate off-farm income.
- Rural women who are left to care for their children when male members of the families leave for other areas to work;
- Elderly and retired people who are no longer capable of farming themselves.

Growth in agricultural production and non-farm activities in rural areas can be a significant force in fighting poverty and hunger and reducing social exclusion, also among members of national minorities. Because the needs of the poor and disadvantaged are diverse, there is a need for rural development approaches to go beyond an exclusive agricultural focus. An integrated approach to rural development includes:

- Strengthening the rural economy in areas with national minorities, by developing a policy environment conducive to broad-based growth and equitable sharing of benefits, supporting non-farm activities, and providing secure access to credit, markets and infrastructural support;

- Social development in rural communities with national minorities, including dealing with unemployment, access to social services, water and sanitation, social integration and population ageing, and rural-urban migration;
- Sustainable natural resource management, including access to natural resources and environmental protection; and
- Human and social capital building which would lead eventually to the empowerment of the poor and greater participation of members of national minorities in the development process.

Right to food as a basic human right

There are various provisions in the legal and policy systems of European countries, their civil society institutions, and international bodies – the OSCE, the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United Nations system, to name just a few – that are important for national minorities and could be effectively used to further their human rights and improve their status.

A human rights approach should have an impact on our vision of development. It aims at translating people’s basic needs into fundamental rights. It further identifies the duties and obligations of all stakeholders to ensure that the basic needs are met. The value of human rights-based approach lies primarily in its potential to alleviate injustice, inequality and poverty, and to empower the vulnerable and marginalized themselves.

In this context, it is evident that the promotion of the right to adequate food, accompanied by distinct mechanisms of accountability, can contribute to protecting the rights of national minorities. In the process of implementing an empowering approach to development that views national minorities as partners in the developmental process, the first step to be taken is to ensure their right to food. This approach should lead to good governance, inclusion of national minorities and increased equality among citizens.

FAO strongly supports the rights-based approaches being pioneered in some European countries, which have held or are organizing seminars and workshops to seek ways to operationalize the right to food at the national level. Some are held by national human rights institutions, NGOs or universities, others by the governments themselves. FAO believes that such national dialogues are essential towards effective implementation of the right to food for all, which could lead to meaningful policy and legal measures. The lessons learned through these processes will be crucial for further progress in improving the well-being of national minorities.

Concluding remarks

The matter of Europe’s ethnic minorities has been neglected in research and policy debates for decades. Since the unprecedented social and economic changes following the end of the Cold War, it has become a human rights and security matter of the first degree, and the need for catching up is enormous.

Assessing the socio-economic well-being of national minorities in European countries is a complex endeavour, and generalisations are dangerous to make. While there is now a deeper understanding of the nature and extent of national minority problems in different parts of the region, it should be recognized that there are no simplistic solutions. Remedial policies must be developed by individual countries themselves, with a realistic view on the costs that can be budget for and the resources available for addressing the particular problems found in a given country.

Agricultural and rural development interventions represent a potentially powerful tool for improving the well-being and participation of national minorities located in rural areas and/or engaged in agriculture. In this way, agriculture and rural development can contribute to solving minority problems in general. Countries should therefore be encouraged to use agricultural and rural development policies to address the needs of their ethnic minorities. Likewise, countries should be supported in their efforts to integrate the right to food into national programmes to protect national minorities and promote their human rights. Far from being a matter of mere political correctness, the advancement of ethnic minorities is an important strategic issue. Countries which do not capitalize on the full potential of all segments of their societies are misallocating their human resources and compromising their competitive potential.