

Links between the Educational System and the Labor Market (Case Study – Edinet District)

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The process of eliminating restrictions inherent to the totalitarian system that has caused major metamorphoses in the post-soviet area and specifically in the Republic of Moldova did not automatically lead to overcoming all the barriers to economic development and to an increase of the population's standards of life. Throughout the last decade, the experience related to these issues was more of a negative one.

The problems that have appeared immediately after initiating the reforms, connected to stopping hyperinflation and the sudden decline of industrial production, practically have been solved. Conditions for privatizing state enterprises, for developing the private sector and the entrepreneurial domain also have been created. Economy benefited from the first foreign investments.

In the same time the long-term problems related to creating a true market economy and a stable democratic society have proven to be more difficult to solve. Unemployment has emerged, initially in the latent form and then becoming more and more open. A large share of the economically active population has moved to spheres of economic activity of lesser productivity (agriculture, commerce, services, etc.) that are less pressured by international competition. Another share has chosen to migrate to work abroad. According to some estimations, hundreds of thousands of citizens of the Republic of Moldova currently work illegally or semi-legally abroad in countries like Russia, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, etc. Because of this phenomenon, the depopulation of the country and the loss of human resources occur. At this stage, it becomes obvious that these economic and social problems will not be fleeting phenomena. Taking into account the fact that no comprehensive actions in the domain have been taken until now, the Government and the local public administration will need to identify in the near future the most efficient ways to overcome the negative phenomena existent in the economic and social domains without jeopardizing the progress on the macroeconomic level.

In this study, the author will attempt to present some ideas on the relations between vocational education and training, and the labor market in the Republic of Moldova in the context of social-economic development at national and local levels. The Edinet district has been selected as the study's object, but the majority of problems discussed and recommendations brought forth are more general in character and could be applied in the Republic of Moldova and each of the administrative territorial units.

I. PRELIMINARY ISSUES. REFERENCE SETTINGS AND RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC.

Vocational education and training of staff is one of the social sphere's domains that have been affected in the most severe way. Starting with the beginning of political and economic reforms, this domain has experienced double pressure from internal and external factors. The first category of factors refers to the fall of ex-Soviet Union and the transition

from the economic model based upon collective property and centralized planning to the one based upon private property and market economy. The second category of factors refers to the changes in the labor fields of all countries, determined by globalization, rapid progress of new informational technologies, the transition of some developed countries to the postindustrial level, etc.

During the Soviet period, a period of gigantic industrial enterprises, a labor force with specific qualifications, oriented towards employment in a certain job position contributing to mass production, was needed in the Republic of Moldova. The vocational education and training systems of the period were respectively adapted to this scheme. Every five-year plan established the personnel necessities together with the major indicators of economic growth. The economic development was extensive, unemployment was practically non-existent and the vast majority of enterprises were permanently facing the problem of insufficiency of personnel. In order to solve this problem, they got involved in the training process, being also interested to participate in developing vocational curricula. Thus, there was a strong link between the labor field and the vocational education and training system of the period.

After the fall of Soviet Union and the transition to the market economy, the majority of large enterprises in Moldova became insolvent. One of their first reactions to the new circumstances were conserving and then reducing the number of employees, transitioning from hiring labor force to mass dismissals. Evidently, their active participation in training staff was no longer a priority. The educational system has become the only provider of such educational services, and the vocational schools' labs equipped with outdated equipment – the only places where students could receive the necessary practical training. The link established between the labor market and the vocational education and training system was compromised.

Major changes have occurred in practically the same period in the labor field of many countries of the world. Starting with mid 70s in Western Europe and the 90s in Eastern Europe, the need to change the ways of organizing labor arose due to the automation that has penetrated every branch of industry and due to the tough international competition. A change of attitude and the transition to another meaning of the definition of enterprise success was needed besides simple technical or functional adjustments. The market became very unstable and the enterprise needed to react promptly to demand fluctuation. Profit stopped being the only measure of the company's success, immaterial parameters like the knowledge capital of the company have moved forefront. Without such capital achieving the long-term objectives of the company becomes problematic. More examples of horizontal organizations, where autonomous production units and the partnership between them are promoted arise in these new circumstances, when bureaucratic hierarchical organization prevails in the industrial society. Job positions and attributions were considered basic units in industrial organizations; in modern businesses, labor is organized around processes and projects, functional integration rather than functional concentration being promoted. Thus, production processes become more dependant on knowledge (subsequently, on communication). In order to survive, each company is permanently forced to face the contradiction between operating with sufficient flexibility (the productive aspect of organization) and maintaining the motivation of employees at a high level (the social aspect of organization). The solution resides in developing and implementing a new vocational instruction and training policy for all workers. The goal of this policy is to assist employees in facing the uncertainties of modern production processes in a creative and

responsible way. The employees have to display two qualities: firstly, knowledge of the basic vocational activity and, secondly, adaptability to rapid changes (in equipment, materials, situations, organizational ways, etc). Enterprises need highly qualified employees that would be able to adapt continuously to developing technologies. In order to keep his job, the employee needs to be able to work in a team and to have sufficient flexibility to adapt to changes.

These new elements cause the revising of notions of “specialization” and “job position”, driving them towards the notion of “professional knowledge” that is to be applied by workers in changing and progressively more complex work situations.

The evolution of labor field and the new essence of professional knowledge impose new requirements on professional development. The activity of the professional development system needs to cover the entire professional domain. The vocational education and training process needs to ensure the development of all knowledge related to vocational activity in the relevant domain, together with creating abilities of adaptability and self-improvement on the workplace and developing high vocational mobility. The vocational education and training system has to be able to elucidate all issues from the vocational field that the student or pupil will be pursuing in future. When training specialists in these conditions, the vocational field they will pursue has to be considered. The existence of the following conditions is necessary in this context:

- developing professional knowledge;
- creating professional culture;
- preparing for professional self-improvement.

1) *Developing professional knowledge.* Performing a professional activity does not resume to learning tools and methods of work. There is also an organizational and communicative aspect to the work system that constitutes elements that determine:

- organization: the work process becomes more and more open; collective work, cooperation processes and organizational flexibility become general rules.
- relationships: professional activity requires the ability to work in a team on a permanent basis, to work for internal and external clients.

The concept of services becomes a key element in the professional domain.

2) *Creating professional culture.* Professional integration or improvement in a specific domain also requires taking into account its professional culture and distinctiveness: knowing the social-economic background, specifics of the enterprise and the domain of activity, general rules of professional behavior. Professionalism develops by assimilating such professional culture.

Consequently, a growing number of people will have to accept the idea and undertake the responsibility for reconstruction of their own “human capital” throughout their life. The major changes necessary in the vocational education and training of the Republic of Moldova have to contribute to the creation and promotion of a more inventive culture oriented towards self-training and development throughout life and towards a more mobile professional life. At the national level, this objective could be reached only through close cooperation between the Ministries of Education, of Economy, of Labor and Social Protection, and of Finances, and at the district level – between providers of vocational education and training services, enterprises, placement offices and local public administration that constitute the so-called local social partnership.

2. REGIONAL AND LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

As a general rule governments use macro-economic instruments like gross domestic product (GDP), balance sheets, external commerce or unemployment data to verify economic policies.

Being national indicators, these numbers do not take into account regional or local differences. Average numbers per country can hide substantial differences between different districts or regions of the country. Due to these reasons, sufficient consideration given to local and regional development is essential for promoting economic development. Considerable disparities in development rates have appeared on a differentiated basis in the majority of countries with economies in transition. Simultaneously with economic boosts in certain regions, usually concentrated in the capital of the country, other regions experience severe economic recessions, unemployment, decreased life standards, lack of finances needed for maintaining social services etc.

Though the economic success of prosperous regions influences to some extent the other regions, this positive influence is rarely sufficient. Due to these reasons, the central government has to choose between this model of spontaneous development and another one, based upon the promotion of a conscious policy oriented towards stimulating economic growth throughout the country. In the same time, it should be mentioned that the majority of governments in the world have given up the traditional simplistic approach to regional development through reallocation of funds between different regions – the costs of such activity are considered to be too large. As an alternative, governments need to assist the regions in the optimal use of own resources. The levers of local economic development cannot be handled efficiently from the center, but close partnership relations between the central government and the local public administration authorities are essential in achieving this goal.

This phenomenon is even more important in the Republic of Moldova, where the regional institutional background – public administration authorities in districts, municipalities, local nongovernmental organizations, other agencies for local development, are still in the process of being constituted and launched. The evolution of these local development agents will probably last for years, but this process could be sped up or hindered by the support or, respectively, by the lack of interest on the behalf of central institutions in the fate of administrative territorial units.

3. THE SOCIAL-ECONOMIC SITUATION IN EDINET DISTRICT

The administrative structure of the Edinet district contains a total of 157 towns, including the Edinet municipality, another 7 towns, 131 villages united in 50 communes and 26 separate villages.

Out of the district's large enterprises, 65 are production enterprises, while 63 are performing services. Out of this total, 9 production enterprises and 7 services enterprises are no longer functioning.

A total of 4575 enterprises and natural persons activate in small businesses, 755 out of them acting based on licenses, 2666 based on patents, and 1432 – as legal entities.

The district's infrastructure comprises 1529.8 km of roads, out of them 806.7 km are asphalt, 246.0 km are covered with gravel, 279.0 km constitute railroads, and 198.1 km constitute other roads.

The results of economic activity in the Edinet district in year 1999 denote that the majority of the district's enterprises have been affected by the regional financial crisis that began in autumn 1998. Thus, the total volume of production has constituted 116.1 million lei in the prices of last year, or only 72 % compared to 1998, the public, private and combined shares being equal to 32%, 66% and 2%, respectively. In the agricultural sector, the number of animals has declined drastically, a growth of 21% being observed only where birds are concerned. The production of main industrial products has registered a decline on all denominations, with the exception of constructions and reinforced concrete, meat as industrial production and farinaceous products. The retail sales volume in 1999 has constituted in current prices only 70% of the respective volume in 1998, and the volume of paid services performed for the population has registered an increase of 33%, this even actually reflecting price increases for these services.

The volume of loads transported on auto transportation means of specialized enterprises constituted in 1999 62% of the respective volume in 1998, the absolute number being around 36 thousand tones.

The external commerce has registered a positive balance of \$3371 thousand, the export constituting \$6423 thousand, the import - \$3052 thousand.

The volume of investments in fixed assets declined in 1999 to 17380 thousand lei that represent only 50% of the respective number for last year. We should mention that the shares of various financing sources have registered substantial changes. Thus, investments from the republican budget constituted only 27% compared to 1998, from the local budgets – 578% (this number reflects the changes in the administrative territorial structures), from own means of enterprises – 49%, and the foreign investments have registered a small increase up to 2363 thousand lei, 2% up than last year.

The low level of taxes payable to the budget, of fees and other formal collection, the same as the incomes in the local budget can be explained by the difficulties in creating the respective organs immediately after the administrative territorial reform was launched.

The decrease of debts of enterprises and budgetary institutions at the end of 1999 could be mentioned as a positive element, debts constituting 91% of the total amount of debts at the end of last year.

4. THE STRUCTURE OF THE DISTRICT EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN EDINET AND THE CORRELATION BETWEEN LEVELS

Grades

Family Education

Kindergarten (K)

Mandatory Preparation for School (MPS) + K

Primary School (PS) + MPS + K

PS + MPS

PS

Gymnasium (G) + PS + MPS

G + PS

G

High School

Lyceum

Lyceum + G

Lyceum + G + PS

Trade School

1st level PPS(professional

polyvalent school)

2nd level PPS

The structure of the district educational system in Edinet

The institutional background of the district educational system in Edinet contains 6 colleges, 5 professional polyvalent schools, 1 vocational school, 13 lyceums, 48 high schools, 74 gymnasiums, 2 primary schools, 2 boarding schools, 5 sports schools, 107 kindergartens. There are 3 more young technicians' centers and 7 creation clubs for children.

The social infrastructure also contains 103 cultural clubs, 31 clubs, 132 libraries, 10 musical schools, 4 fine arts schools, 5 museums. There are 862 shops, 295 canteens, 76 service centers, 11 hospitals, 4 clinics, 5 ambulatories, 30 medical consultancies and 102 pharmacies.

General Education

In the year 2000 in the secondary educational institutions from the Edinet district, 3948 pupils have graduated medium school (gymnasium, 9 grades), 1074 pupils – general secondary (11 grades), and 134 pupils – lyceums (12 grades). Out of this number, the following will be enrolled: 420 – in trade classes based on gymnasial education (10.64%); 350 – in polyvalent professional groups based on gymnasial education (8.87%); 210 – in trade classes based upon secondary or lyceum education (17.38%)

Secondary Vocational Education

According to the data from 01.08.2000, 5 polyvalent professional schools and 1 trade school function in the Edinet district.

During the academic year 1999 – 2000, 1347 pupils have studied 15 professions (trades) in these secondary vocational education units.

The 1347 student were distributed as it follows:

- in polyvalent professional classes based on gymnasial education (9 grades) – 624;
- in trade classes based on gymnasial education (9 grades) – 330
- in trade classes based on secondary or lyceum education – 182;
- in groups getting secondary education (last year) – 211.

More than 80% from the number of students in these educational units are graduates of schools from the Edinet district.

During the academic year 1999 – 2000, 883 pupils have graduated secondary vocational education institutions, 980 were enrolled at the beginning of the new academic year.

Staff distributed as it follows implements the educational and instruction process:

- 48 – teachers in general education subjects;
- 49 – teachers in specialized courses;
- 50 – master-instructors
- 35 – social staff.

Out of the 180 teachers from secondary vocational education institutions, 85 have didactic titles, including:

- 32 – teachers in general education subjects;
- 33 – teachers in specialized courses;
- 34 – master-instructors;
- 35 – social staff.

During the instructive-educational process, pupils use 87 classrooms; 3 computer science classes equipped with computers; 27 labs; workshops with 24 sections equipped with lathes and specific equipment; didactic agricultural centers on 64 ha of arable land; 30 tractors; 44 cars; 4 combines; 4 tracks; 6 canteens sitting 724 persons; 1624 places in dorms, etc.

Pupils receive training for 15 professions (trades) in these educational units, which constitute 17.6% of the total number of professions (trades) that can be obtained through vocational education and training in the Republic of Moldova (85).

5. THE LABOR MARKET IN THE EDINET DISTRICT

The number of the district's population is 300.7 thousand people. The economically active population is 118 700 persons, the number of employees being 48 413 working in the following domains:

industry	6707,
agriculture	19032,
commerce	2072,
transportation	2838,
education	8766,
medicine	4889,
culture	630,
other domains	1690 persons.

The unemployment rate is currently 4466 persons, this constituting a relatively low level of unemployment of 3.76%. This situation, which seems positive but is not exactly accurate, can be explained as it follows.

With the exception of several urban centers like the Chisinau and Balti municipalities and a couple of district centers, the remaining territory of the Republic of Moldova has a low degree of urbanization. Due to this reason, natural economy is predominant in the existent economic model. The majority of the rural population adopts life standards that rely on strictly necessary alimentation, energy, clothes, etc needs for survival. A permanent source of income from wages is not imperative in the conditions of an underdeveloped market economy where there is no acute competition between individuals. A large number of people earn the financial resources they need practicing seasonal work that is difficult to include in official statistics. The informal economy represents an impressive share, providing a considerable part of the economically active population with workplaces, but not being able to function openly due to legislative imperfections. Due to the reasons mentioned above, the pressure on state agencies responsible for social assistance of those unemployed is less than expected.

The Moldovan society is far from the so-called consumer's society from Western Europe or North America. The socialist model of organizing agriculture promoted equality of all members of local communities more than in any other economic domain. When this model became obsolete, the equality principle was reconfirmed by the share distribution. An exaggerated number of small agricultural centers where a large share of the

economically active population is involved represent the status quo (this fact is not really indicated in the official statistics). In the Edinet district, 16% of the economically active population are involved in agriculture. This number is already very high when compared to the majority of economically developed countries from Western and even Central and Eastern Europe. We suppose that this number is even higher in reality (about 3 – 4 times higher). Subsequently, we have extremely low productivity in the agricultural sector, which is mainly oriented towards local consumption rather than producing goods.

The experience of countries that have undergone through similar situations years ago or even recently shows that this is a stage of transition to capitalist agriculture, where productivity is high and a small number of economically active population is involved (for example, about 1% of population from North European countries produce sufficient food for the whole country and for export).

It also should be mentioned that the official statistics related to unemployment use a definition of unemployment different from the one promoted by the International Labor Organization, leading to underestimating the real situation.

6. PROFESSIONAL DYNAMICS IN A MARKET ECONOMY

The so-called level quota model is a relatively simple model of prognostication of labor force demand for medium terms. According to this model, the development tendencies of the national labor market are estimated based on data about dynamics of labor force engaged in certain domains of economic activity in a number of countries from a reference group. It would be helpful if the reference countries had undergone similar transition some time before. When selecting reference countries, the comparability of initial country data has to be taken into account, together with the possibility to obtain concrete information on the given countries. Transition in each country could have its own pace, and last for a shorter or longer period, this being a disadvantage of the method.

The following countries could be selected as reference for the Republic of Moldova due to similarities in their historical industrial structures and Moldova's current structures, all being dominated by the agricultural sector and processing industry: Romania, Poland, Greece, Ireland, Denmark, and Netherlands.

We suppose that Moldova's economic development and demand for qualified labor force will follow the tendencies experienced by the better-developed economies of the above-mentioned countries. Currently, Moldova's economic structure is dominated by the agricultural sector, the services sector being underdeveloped.

Statistical data on the dynamic of the agricultural, industrial, constructions, commercial, transportation, public and private sectors throughout the period starting with late 80s and ending with early 90s indicate that the agricultural and industrial sectors have been declining in the majority of these countries, while the commercial, public and private services sectors have gained grounds. Transportation and construction remained stable in all countries from the reference group.

Thus, a medium-term recommendation could be organizing professional training in agriculture at district level due to the need of applying intensive production technologies in this domain. In addition, a large number of adults could be dismissed from the agricultural sector due to an increase in the average territory of private agricultural centers and of labor productivity. These people will need professional training in order to facilitate their integration in other activity domains.

7. LINKS BETWEEN THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM AND THE LABOR MARKET

In order to ensure this link between the education and staff training system and the labor market it is imperative to achieve maximum transparency of the labor market for all categories of interested people, or the so-called commissioners: students, decision-makers from the educational domain, workers, employers, and placement offices.

Better transparency is especially needed in the conditions of an imbalance between supply and demand on the labor market, either demand on behalf of enterprises or labor force supply being excessive. Transparency in the first case will orient students towards activity domains where they could seek employment upon graduation. In the second case, students can identify domains where employment is problematic. In both cases, the message from the labor market can be extremely useful to decision-makers at the national level and, in the near future, at district level, who are in charge of developing or seeking approval of enrollment plans.

Labor market transparency can also contribute to the settlement of another type of problems. Like in many other European countries, vocational education and training in the Republic of Moldova is organized according to certain educational standards, called standards for vocational education and training. These standards have several compartments like profession-gram or description of occupational field covered by this certain profession, curriculum, minimal prerequisites for admission, means of certifying the obtained qualifications, etc. Ideally, the respective standard should take into account all recent changes that have occurred in the respective domain. Consequently, the standard should undergo permanent renewal in order to adapt it to new technologies and new conditions on the labor market. It is evident that this phenomenon can no longer be planned by central decision-makers, the only solution being collecting relevant information. The Ministry of Education establishes the general requirements related to the structure of standards for vocational education and training at the national level.

Respective standards determine the contents of vocational education and training. The development of new standards and update of the existent ones cannot be performed at the right pace in the Republic of Moldova due to the absence of a specialized institution engaged in the detailed creation of standards for vocational education and training. Due to this reason, secondary vocational education institutions are responsible for the largest share of activities oriented towards determining the contents of vocational education and training. This is true also in the case of various courses offered by state or private providers of educational services.

More and more forms of cooperation can be identified between secondary vocational education institutions and various types of enterprises, leading to the correlation of the vocational education and training process to the labor market demand. Firstly, internships with enterprises should be mentioned, these being the product of negotiations between the school and the enterprise's administration. This communication between the system of professional molding and the labor sphere allows:

- studying the technologies currently used by enterprises, and also the tendencies and perspectives of development of these technologies in the near future;
- evaluating the current and the perspective personnel needs of these enterprises;

- establishing informal relations between the school instructors and the production personnel.

A form of communication between educational institutions and enterprises recommended by international experts, including those from the European Union, is the inquiry. Enterprises are contacted by competent personnel from the education units and inquiries are made according to a questionnaire that has been developed previously. Contacts between educational services providers and eventual beneficiaries become more formal, sometimes communication difficulties arising as a result. However, a compromise could be identified in the majority of the cases. The representatives of educational units need to convince employers of mutual benefits that could be obtained if schools train workers that are qualified for the real needs of the labor market.

8. CURRENT LEVEL OF SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Social partnership in Moldova could be defined as a system of relations between employers (administration), workers (trade unions), and public authorities. It represents the coordination of vital interests of social partners, protection of their rights and guarantees in the labor and social relations domains based upon negotiations, consulting and mutual agreements. The goal of the social partnership is to develop and implement special measures that would contribute to the civic conciliation in the society, to balancing interests of participants in social dialogue and to social harmony.

Social partners on territorial levels (district, municipal levels) are represented by territorial trade unions and territorial public administration authorities. Employers' territorial organizations have not yet reached a sufficient level of development, but they could be represented in settling certain issues by the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, their network being in the incipient phase of establishment in the new administrative territorial units.

On territorial levels, social partners can examine the following problems of vocational education and training:

- studying the local labor market to determine the short-term and medium-term personnel and qualification needs;
- elaborating admission plans for different specializations for the next academic year;
- allocating financial means from the local budget for needs of the territorial vocational education and training system;
- organizing student internships;
- ensuring the quality of vocational education and training through participation at graduation and certification exams.

Currently, the social partnership's role in problem solving in this domain is not implemented to its full potential. More efforts are needed in order to make it a regulating force that could lead to better social protection of labor force and a better balance between labor market demand and personnel offered by the vocational education and training system.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS ON ORGANIZING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EDINET

1. *Developing an informative database.* This will ensure availability of quantitative and qualitative information for:

- monitoring the professional education system and labor market and the link between the two. *We believe this to be the responsibility of district Education, Youth and Sports Directions, and particularly of units responsible for secondary vocational education.*

- Estimating the needs of labor markets for qualifications, and respectively for professional development services. *This activity could be initiated with the support of experts from the Ministry of Education, on district level the Economic Analysis, Prognoses and Reforms Section being competent in cooperation with local secondary vocational education institutions. Actions consolidating this type of expertise are needed from central authorities.* These actions include:

- *training professionals capable of performing such investigations in higher education university institutions;*

- *developing methodology for monitoring the labor market, professional development and the interaction between the two.*

2. Consolidating partnerships. This includes:

- developing cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Economy and Reforms, and the Ministry of Labor, Social Protection and Family for determining the optimal parameters of the vocational education and training system;

- establishing partnership relations between vocational education and training institutions and enterprises on national level and district / local level;

- engaging social partnership in settling problems related to organization of professional development at all levels;

- organizing a modern system of professional orientation and consulting in career planning problems.

3. Optimizing the organization of the district vocational education and training system.

The following action should be taken for implementation of these objectives:

- *creating a district Coordinating Council to guide the local professional development system;*

- *allocating additional means for developing a professional polyvalent school chosen as district methodic center for implementing educational innovations;*

- *specializing schools according to the accumulated experience, to the necessities and possibilities to implement new specializations, new courses, etc., taking into account their geographical location;*

- *granting facilities to state and private educational services providers in order to diversify the spectrum of educational services for adults.*

Allocating additional means for supplementing and updating the technical-material foundation of secondary vocational education institutions (with computers first) will contribute to a better reputation of this educational domain. Locally, this could lead to a decline in the youth migration to the capital and to an amelioration of the demographic situation.

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