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The dynamics of inter-municipal cooperation: evidence from Constanța County in Romania

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine the role and significance of the inter-municipal cooperation process in Romania. The research is a pilot study conducted with the purpose of better understanding the role and importance of the inter-municipal cooperation structures, focusing on one Romanian county. The aim is to analyse the impact of the inter-municipal cooperation structures on local development, the main motivations of administrative territorial units to join in these associations, and the main problems encountered in their activities. The most relevant findings of the study indicate that: (1) the representatives of local communities affiliated with these associations report high levels of satisfaction regarding their participation in IDAs and the impact on local development; (2) the main motivations behind joining such associations are the enhancement of public services and improved access to European Union funding; (3) the primary benefit of membership is the improvement of citizens' quality of life and (4) the main obstacles facing these associations consist of complex administrative procedures and the economic and social context.

Keywords: inter-community development associations, inter-municipal cooperation, local development

JEL: R1, R5, O1

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INTRODUCTION

Across European Union member states, there was a consistent effort to merge municipalities. Less number of municipalities ensures a balance between local democratic identity and the economic efficiency of public services (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2008; Blom-Hansen, 2010; Pevcin, 2013). To achieve administrative efficiency without the political friction of full mergers, many states utilize various forms of inter-municipal cooperation (Hertzog, 2010). This strategy allows smaller municipalities to maintain their autonomy and local ties while improving the delivery of public services through shared resources (Painter et al., 2003; Kuhlmann, 2008; Constantin et al., 2013). These cooperative frameworks are diverse and generally categorized into four distinct levels: informal arrangements, weakly formalized agreements, functional "enterprises" focused on specific services, and integrated models of territorial cooperation (Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative et al., 2010; Hulst and van Montfort, 2012; Rakar, Tičar & Klun, 2015).

Inter-municipal cooperation represents a useful mechanism for smaller administrative territorial units (ATUs), which often lack the financial and organizational resources available to larger municipalities. By voluntarily allocating resources, communities can bridge the gap in infrastructure and service

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quality. This collaborative approach fosters shared responsibility and strategic vision, ensuring that all citizens receive efficient and accessible public services. Key opportunities arising from this cooperation include the enhancement of water and waste management systems, the delivery of public utilities, the expansion of transport and tourism infrastructure, and the sustainable usage of renewable energy (Kurian, Swianiewicz & Teles, 2024; Nastacă & Simion, 2025; Chenane & Hadjou, 2015; Dekanić, Nižić & Ladas, 2025; Constantin, Nastacă & Geambasu, 2021).

Inter-municipal cooperation acts as a strategic framework for local authorities aiming to optimize development, control costs, and meet rising citizen expectations. This practice is prevalent across Europe, sharing several key characteristics regardless of location. Primarily, the drive for cooperation stems from a universal need to enhance the efficiency and quality of public services while achieving the necessary demographic or territorial scale. Although the specific challenges differ between rural and urban environments, the mechanism remains effective in both. Furthermore, the scope of these partnerships often extends beyond standard municipal governance, utilizing specialized agencies or cooperatives to manage critical utilities such as energy, water, and waste (Hamm, Keggenhoff & Jager, 2017; Voroshilov, 2021; Kurian, Swianiewicz & Teles, 2024).

In Europe, inter-municipal cooperation has become a ubiquitous feature of countries' administrative landscape, though its implementation varies significantly across the continent. While countries like France boast a long-standing tradition of such collaboration, others, like Slovenia, have only recently begun to adopt these practices; nevertheless, the phenomenon is present in some form in every European state (Rakar, Tičar & Klun, 2015). The institutional design of these arrangements spans a broad spectrum, ranging from policy networks of local communities to the development of entirely autonomous organizations enriched with functions formerly managed by individual municipalities. Between these two extremes lies an intermediary level of institutionalization, typically characterized by formal agreements focused on specific service delivery or policy development (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007; Rakar, Tičar & Klun, 2015).

In this respect, the present pilot study aims to explore the role and importance of the inter-municipal cooperation structures developed in Romania, focusing on the activity of these cooperation structures in Constanța County. The study focuses only on one county because it is a pilot study that can be replicated in more administrative territorial units. In Constanța County, inter-community development associations serve as a cornerstone for local and regional cooperation. By unifying local efforts, these associations enable joint initiatives that deliver substantial socio-economic and environmental value. They are important in securing external funding and attracting investment, thereby driving sustainable growth, preserving natural resources, and elevating the standard of living for residents.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Inter-municipal cooperation refers to the association of two or more municipalities for the joint provision of public services (Swianiewicz & Teles, 2017). In the exercise of their powers, local authorities have the right to cooperate and associate with other local public authorities, under the conditions stipulated by the law, in order to conduct actions and projects of common interest. Inter-municipal cooperation is a tool for the joint provision of local public services in conditions of quality and efficiency. This ensures the necessary framework for the organization and financing of a qualitative public service, given that administrative-territorial units do not have the necessary resources (Rakar, Tičar & Klun, 2015). It can be stated that this type of cooperation between local authorities serves as a strategic response to the pressures faced by local governments, including the expanding technical scale of production, the broadening scope of socio-economic processes, and intensifying market demands (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007). Usually, small local governments do not possess the executive capacity for the effective management of public services or exercise of regulatory duties (Davey, 2004; Sedmíhradská, 2018). It is often used as a viable alternative to

mandatory, top-down territorial amalgamations (Hertzog, 2010; Obec a finance, 2016; Sedmihradská, 2018) or as a specific mechanism to bolster the administrative capacity of smaller municipalities (Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic, 2018a; Sedmihradská, 2018). When implemented successfully, inter-municipal cooperation yields collective benefits by generating efficiencies and economies of scale in service delivery while effectively addressing and internalizing spillover issues (Feiock, 2007). Inter-municipal cooperation is beneficial for different domains such as: environmental protection, tourism, culture, agritourism, education and regional education, social services, technical infrastructure, regional information and advisory centers and their organization, healthcare, wastewater treatment, municipal waste disposal (Žárska, 2018; Nemec, Jakuš, Muthová & Mikušová Meričková, 2023; Lincaru et al., 2021)

Firstly, cooperation is distinguished as either 'pure' or 'mixed'. Pure cooperation focuses on coordinating policies and providing large-scale services directly between local governments. In contrast, regarding mixed forms, the authors note a specific absence of permanent public law organizations that jointly house municipalities and private commercial entities for service provision (Hulst & Van Montfort, 2007). Secondly, cooperation is defined by its legal regime. In public law models, predominant in Spain, France, and Portugal, these benefit from strong democratic legitimacy. They operate under strict legislative frameworks that clearly define management structures, delegation limits, and mechanisms for financial and legal control. In private law models, common in Sweden and Poland, these frameworks prioritize flexibility and the efficient delivery of public services (Hulst & Van Montfort, 2007). Another criterion for distinguishing different forms of inter-municipal cooperation is related to the tasks involved in the cooperation process. Municipalities can cooperate either for delivering services or for policy coordination and planning (Hulst & van Montfort, 2011). Soguel (2006) distinguishes between single and multi-purpose inter-municipal arrangements. Other authors (Ferreira et al., 2020) distinguish between different forms of inter-municipal cooperation based on: the form of commitment, management complexity, the degree of institutionalization, the type of collaboration, and representation. Also, analysing inter-municipal cooperation in different environments, it can be observed that in EU countries, it is more formal and legally regulated (Hulst & Van Montfort, 2007; Lago-Peñas & Martinez-Vazquez, 2013; Mishchuk et al., 2023; Nemec, Jakuš, Muthová & Mikušová Meričková, 2023), while in the USA, the process is based mainly on voluntariness (Feiock, 2007).

Cooperation between administrative territorial units is primarily achieved through associative frameworks driven by the shared interests of local authorities at the same administrative level. However, the scope of association extends beyond this to include regional partnerships and multi-level cooperation between different levels of government. Prominent examples of such diverse structures include administrative unions, district associations (as seen in Germany), and associations of local communities dedicated to promoting common interests (as seen in Spain) (Dušek, 2024; Profiroiu, Nastacă & Brișcariu, 2025, OECD; 2024, Apostolache, 2023, Kurian, Swianiewicz & Teles, 2024, Papadaskalopoulos & Nikolopoulos, 2018). The national legislative and institutional framework serves as the primary determinant for the structure of inter-municipal cooperation (Apostolache, 2023). Variables such as the hierarchy of administrative levels, the decentralization of responsibilities, and the degree of local autonomy directly shape the characteristics of these associations. Fundamentally, the imperative to cooperate arises from a disequilibrium: it becomes necessary when local authorities are burdened with extensive mandates yet lack sufficient financial and technical capacity to execute them independently (Silva, Teles, & Ferreira, 2018).

Intermunicipal cooperation serves as a strategic alternative for small municipalities aiming to achieve cost-efficiency in public service provision. While the definition of a 'small' municipality is fluid, ranging from a few hundred to several thousand inhabitants, these entities face a common structural deficit: the obligation to provide essential services without the fiscal or technical capacity to do so efficiently. Cooperation mitigates this by aggregating demand; the resulting increase in scale and bargaining

power allows these combined entities to negotiate significantly more favorable contracts with external service providers (Struk & Bakoš, 2021).

Through the advantages of inter-municipal cooperation, the first advantage is its role in achieving economies of scale (Agranoff, 2004; Bel et al., 2013; Raudla & Tavares, 2018; Nemec, Jakuš Muthová, & Mikušová Meričková, 2023). By increasing the volume of production, the average cost of public service delivery decreases (Hefetz, Warner & Vigoda-Gadot, 2012). Beyond cost savings, these arrangements can streamline process coordination and enhance the overall quality of services. Very small municipalities often face disproportionately high direct and indirect costs, and their lack of financial and personnel resources can lead to a diminished scope and quality of services. Consequently, forming partnership agreements and establishing functional inter-municipal cooperation is a highly beneficial strategy for small local governments to overcome the limitations of territorial fragmentation (Nemec, Jakuš Muthová & Mikušová Meričková, 2023). Other benefits may include an improved credit rating for municipalities, which helps in attracting external investors and securing funding (De Sousa, 2013).

Another advantage of inter-municipal cooperation is related to ensuring the sustainability of the areas part of this cooperation mechanism by developing collaborative governance, improving service delivery, supporting inclusive urban development, and sustainable local management. One example would be the fact that cooperation between administrative units can contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially to targets related to SDG 11: T11.1: *"By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe, and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slum"*; T11.3: *"By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated, and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries"* or T11.6: *"By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management"* (European Commission, 2023).

2. INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION FORMS IN ROMANIA

Inter-municipal cooperation is a means for administrative territorial units to collaborate with each other in the provision of local public services and for implementing different development projects. The low administrative capacity of small administrative-territorial units to manage public services of local interest or public utilities is due to the limited technical and political skills of local leaders in managing local development strategies. The differences between administrative territorial units are obvious in terms of local infrastructure. Thus, the development of the inter-community development associations comes as a solution to the establishment of the reform of the administrative-territorial system in Romania (Radu, 2019; Hoffman, 2020) or a functional substitute for territorial consolidation (Kopric, 2012).

Two or more administrative-territorial units, within the limits of the powers of their deliberative and executive authorities, may cooperate and associate, under the conditions of the law, for the purpose of establishing inter-municipal development associations whose purpose is the joint provision/supply of community public utility services and the establishment, modernization, and/or development, as appropriate, of the related public utility systems (Romanian Parliament, 2013). The inter-municipal development associations whose object of activity is public utility services are cooperation structures with legal personality under private law and public utility status recognized by law, intended for the joint exercise and implementation of the powers of local public administration authorities relating to the provision/delivery of public utility services, established as their responsibility in accordance with the provisions of Law No. 215/2001, republished, with subsequent amendments and additions, and the Framework Law on Decentralization No. 195/2006 (Romanian Parliament, 2013).

Inter-community Development Associations (IDAs) are cooperative entities with legal personality, established under private law yet recognized as having public utility. Founded by administrative-

territorial units, their primary mandate is the joint implementation of regional and local development projects and the shared provision of public services (Law no. 51/2006; Păceșilă, 2016, 2025). Currently operating under the Administrative Code (Government Emergency Ordinance No. 57/2019), IDAs are funded through local budgets and external sources. Their governance structure is twofold: the General Assembly, namely the supreme leadership body, composed of representatives from all member units, responsible for electing the association's President and the Board of Directors, the executive body, comprising the President and at least four other members elected from the General Assembly (Romanian Government, 2019; Soare, 2022).

Unfortunately, the data regarding the number of inter-community development associations is not up to date. In Romania, in 2015, there were 391 IDAs set up by the administrative-territorial units to conduct projects of regional interest or for the joint provision of public services such as: sanitation services, water supply and sewerage services, local public transport, public lighting, public and private domain administration (Romanian Government, 2026).

Another form of inter-community association in Romania is the development of metropolitan areas (Murphy & Ghencea, 2023). According to Law No 246/2022 on metropolitan areas, in order to develop the territory of the Bucharest municipality area and the county-resident municipalities, territorial administrative units may be associated to establish metropolitan areas (Romanian Parliament, 2022). These associations are constituted as legal persons of public utility, without patrimonial purpose, according to Government Ordinance no. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code, as subsequently amended and supplemented, and are registered in the Register of Associations and Foundations (Romanian Government, 2019). These inter-community development associations have different strategic objectives such as: (1) to increase the pace of economic development for each of the metropolitan partners, (2) to develop the public utilities infrastructure, (3) to increase the efficiency of public services, (4) to develop the cultural identity of the member communities, (5) to develop the educational and health infrastructure and (6) to provide public services of local interest (Article 10 of Law No 246/2022) (Romanian Parliament, 2022). According to the World Bank (2019), Romania has 22 functional metropolitan areas.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research is a pilot study conducted with the purpose of better understanding the role and importance of inter-municipal cooperation in Romania, focusing on the activity of inter-community development associations (IDAs) in one Romanian county, namely Constanța County. The main objectives of the study are: (1) *To investigate the activity of inter-community development associations in Constanța County;* (2) *To identify the main reasons that motivated the administrative-territorial units from Constanța County to enter into a inter-community development association or a metropolitan area association;* (3) *To analyze the factors that limit the inter-municipal development capacity;* and (4) *To analyze the intentions of the local authorities to be involved in other inter-municipal cooperation forms in the future.*

The study started from the following hypothesis:

H1: The impact of the involvement of administrative-territorial units in inter-community development associations was an increase in citizens' quality of life.

H2: The main motivation for an administrative territorial unit to involve into a inter-community development association is the opportunity of access to European funds.

H3: The most important factors limiting the capacity of ATUs to be involved in IDAs are the governmental policies and regulations, as well as the socio-economic context.

H4: The increase in the incentives offered by the state to local authorities to participate in the development of inter-municipal cooperation structures would lead to an increase in their number.

The research is based on a mixed methodology, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. A research method used was the case study in order to analyse the main inter-community development associations in Constanța County. A limit was the fact that not all the inter-community development associations under the study had updated information about their activity.

Then, an opinion survey was conducted in the administrative territorial units from Constanța County, involved in a form of inter-municipal cooperation. The survey was based on a questionnaire designed by the authors that was applied in the mayor's office in 3 cities, 8 towns, and 59 communes. The questionnaire comprised questions meant to identify the main motivations for joining an IDA, the satisfaction of the local authorities with the participation in an IDA, the factors limiting the capacity of ATUs to join IDAs, and the main impact of IDAs on local development. The sampling method was the exhaustive one. Half of the administrative territorial units had less than 5,000 inhabitants, 40% had a population between 5,000 and 15,000 inhabitants, and 10% were localities with more than 15,000 inhabitants. All the administrative territorial units in the study were involved in at least 1 inter-community development association (IDA). 23.4% were part of IDA Metropolitan Area Constanța, 78.7% of IDA Dobrogea, 63.8% of IDA Water- Sewer, 6.4% were part of IDA ITI Danube Delta, and 2.1% was part of IDA South-East Emergency Situations.

4. MAIN RESULTS OF THE STUDY

4.1 Case study on inter-municipal cooperation in Romania, Constanța County

In order to reduce the development disparities between the administrative territorial units and implement joint projects for the integrated development of the area, 19 inter-community development associations were set up in Constanța County (Constanța County Sustainable Development Strategy 2021-2030). Out of the associations the County Council is a member of, the most important ones are: **(1) Constanța Metropolitan Area association, (2) Dobrogea inter-community development association, (3) Water-Sewer association, (4) ITI Danube Delta, and (5) South-East Emergency Situations.** They are all "pure" forms of cooperation, created for delivering services, implementing projects, and policy coordination.

a. Constanța Metropolitan Area

The inter-community development association Constanța Metropolitan Area was created in 2007, being the first administrative structure of this type in Romania. The population of the metropolitan area is about 500,000 inhabitants, representing 65% of the total population of the county, concentrated on an area of only 30% of the territory of the county. During the balneo-touristic season, the average population number is one million people. The association has its own legal personality, being a non-governmental organization of public utility (Constanța Metropolitan Area, 2025a).

The main objectives of the association are following: (1) the sustainable development of the entire metropolitan area and of all the administrative territorial units in the association, (2) the development and improvement of the transport, telecommunications and energy infrastructure; (3) the development of public services; (4) integrated economic development; (5) the development of tourism and tertiary sector; (6) the development of new residential areas; (7) the development of human resources and human capital; (8) new investments and access to European funding (Constanța Metropolitan Area, 2025a). The medium and long-term aim of the metropolitan area is to ensure a functional metropolitan space that provides optimal living conditions for its inhabitants and generates opportunities for them, but also for other people who want to settle here. One of the goals is to increase the population in the area, stimulating the attraction of highly qualified young people. Another aspect regarding the development of the metropolitan area is the use of new technologies in the life of the city, stimulating progress and pursuing the implementation of the Smart City concept (Constanța Metropolitan Area, 2025b).

Since its development, the association implemented 25 projects financed with European funds, such as: Tomis Centre of Excellence in Tourism and Services; Increasing the touristic attractiveness of the Constanța Natural Sciences Museum Complex; Eforie Nord tourist promenade; Recreation park in Ovidiu city; The Multifunctional Educational Centre for Youth "Jean Constantin"; Expansion of the Agigea Medical-Social Assistance Unit by setting up a care center for people with Alzheimer, PORTIS-Port cities, innovation for sustainability (Constanța Metropolitan Area, 2025c).

It is worth mentioning that Constanța Metropolitan Area focuses on port-specific activities and tourism. The geographic position gives the area important opportunities in terms of the exploitation of hydrocarbon resources in the Black Sea basin, as well as the wind energy potential of the area. An important role is played by the agri-food industry because the Metropolitan Area is located in an important agricultural basin and represents, during the summer season, an important market, but also a gateway for the export of these products to other markets (Constanța Metropolitan Area, 2025c).

b. Dobrogea inter-community development association

The association was established in 2010, and the founding members of the association are Constanța County Council and 57 administrative-territorial units (2 cities, 6 towns, and 49 communes). The purpose of the association is to ensure an integrated waste management system in the county, as well as the joint implementation of investment projects to ensure the modernization of the sanitation system up to standards compliant with EU legislation in the environmental sector (Inter-community Development Association Dobrogea, 2025a). The main objective of the association is to improve the living standards of the population and the environmental standards. Thus, the aim is to reduce the amount of waste landfilled, increase the amount of recyclable and recoverable waste, as well as the number of citizens collecting selectively, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Inter-community Development Association Dobrogea, 2025a).

The major investment project conducted by the association is the Integrated Waste Management System in Constanța County, aiming to close non-compliant urban waste landfills in five localities and at building a new landfill, sorting plant and mechanical biological treatment plant in Tortoman locality; to construct transfer stations in two localities and a sorting plant for recyclable waste and a mechanical biological treatment plant in the municipality of Ovidiu (Inter-community Development Association Dobrogea, 2025b). Also, the sanitation service is entrusted to one or more operators under a delegation contract. The contract is awarded by public tender in the name and on behalf of the administrative-territorial units that are members of the IDA Dobrogea (Inter-community Development Association Dobrogea, 2025c).

c. The Inter-community Development Association Water-Sewer

IDA Water-Sewer was established in 2009, aiming to set up, organise, finance, operate, and manage jointly the water supply and sewerage service within the area of competence of the member administrative-territorial units jointly. The association jointly carries out public investment projects of area or regional interest aimed at modernising or developing public utility systems related to the water supply and sewerage service. IDA is made up of 54 administrative-territorial units from Constanta County. The association also has as members the counties of Ialomița, Călărași, Ilfov, Dâmbovița, Brașov, and Bacău. The delegation of the management of the water supply service was directly attributed to the Regional Operator RAJA SA. The operator's share capital is fully owned by the administrative-territorial units that are members of the Association. The operator supplies water in 164 localities and collects, transports, and discharges wastewater in 47 localities. The length of the water distribution network is 3,479.75 km, and the sewerage network is 2,133 km. The supply network is 763 km. The population connected to the water network is 755,329 inhabitants, with a 100% connection degree, and the connection degree to the sewerage network is only 72% (The Inter-community Development Association Water-Sewer, 2026).

The objectives of the association are: economic efficiency by achieving the performance required by consumers at minimum costs for them; development, modernization and improvement of services by modernizing the water infrastructure for the benefit of the population, expand the area of operation, diversify the services provided to customers and increase their quality by using new technologies; customer orientation by increasing customer confidence and providing services in line with European standards; environmental care by rationally managing the natural resources and decrease of carbon footprint; caring for the population' health by monitoring the quality of drinking water (The Inter-community Development Association Water-Sewer, 2026).

d. The inter-community association ITI Danube Delta

ITI Danube Delta is an association with legal personality of private law and public utility, established in 2014, comprising 40 associates, respectively, administrative-territorial units, of which 4 administrative-territorial units are from Constanța County: Constanța County Council, Corbu commune, Mihai Viteazul commune, and Istria commune. The Association was established for the purpose of implementing the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) mechanism included in the Danube Delta Integrated Strategy for Sustainable Development (Inter-community association ITI Danube Delta, 2026).

The main objectives of the association are: (1) to ensure economic and social development of the Danube Delta area; (2) to reduce disparities between localities; (3) to access European funds; (4) to develop the transport infrastructure of the administrative-territorial units in the association; (5) to develop tourism; (6) to attract private investments for the sustainable development of the administrative-territorial units within the Danube Delta area; (7) to develop, modernize, and improve public services, healthcare infrastructure, and educational infrastructure, as well as the restoration of historic buildings (Inter-community association ITI Danube Delta, 2026).

An important investment of ITI Danube Delta was the construction of the bridge over the Danube, the Tulcea-Brăila bridge. Another important infrastructure project is the construction of the Brăila-Tulcea-Constanța express road for quick access to the port of Constanța (Inter-community association ITI Danube Delta, 2026).

e. The inter-community association South-East Emergency Situations

The Association was founded in 2010 by legal entities of public law, namely the counties of Constanța, Buzău, Brăila, Galați, Tulcea, and Vrancea, through their deliberative authorities. The Association was created to plan and implement the project "Procurement of specialized equipment to improve the capacity and quality of the emergency response system, the provision of emergency medical care, and qualified first aid," hereinafter referred to as "the Project," under the 2007–2013 Regional Operational Program, Priority Axis 3 "Improvement of Social Infrastructure," Key Area of Intervention 3.3. The main objective is to improve the infrastructure of public safety services in emergencies. The main purposes of the association are: (1) to improve the emergency response capacity in the South-East region by reducing response time and provide qualified first aid; (2) to improve the capacity and quality of the emergency response system, providing emergency health care and qualified first aid; (3) joint procurement of emergency response equipment; (4) to purchase specific equipment for the development of the regional operational base; (5) to increase the safety of the population and receive qualified emergency aid as soon as possible (Constanța County Council, 2026).

Table 1. Strengths & weaknesses of inter-municipal cooperation in Constanța County

Strengths	Causes	Effects
A high number of Administrative-Territorial Units that are members of at	Joint management of public services.	Access to quality services for all citizens.

Strengths	Causes	Effects
least one inter-municipal cooperation structure.		
Adequate environmental infrastructure regarding water supply and wastewater treatment.	Access to European non-reimbursable funding programs to modernize the water and sewage network.	A high number of households are connected to the water and sewage system.
Integrated waste management.	Implementation of the Integrated Waste Management System project at the IDA Dobrogea level.	Increased public awareness regarding the importance of the environment.
Upward trend of investments in the Constanța metropolitan area.	Well-founded projects developed by the IDA	Developing the smart city concept.
A high number of ATUs have a development strategy.	Involvement of authorities in long-term development.	Decrease in the discrepancies between rural and urban areas.
Weaknesses	Causes	Effects
Large quantities of non-recycled waste.	High number of tourists during the summer season.	Polluted areas.
Lack of transparency regarding information from the Water-Sewer IDA.	Low involvement of the personnel responsible for communicating information.	Citizens are poorly informed about the association's activities.
Insufficient financial resources for the development of infrastructure projects.	Reduced capacity for collecting local taxes and fees required to co-finance European projects.	Underdeveloped areas; economic and social discrepancies between rural and urban environments.
Professional training of IDA personnel.	Lack of investment in the training and professional development of IDA personnel.	Lack of qualified staff in fund management.

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

After analysing the activity of the five inter-community development associations in Constanța County, based on the available information that was insufficient, some strengths and weaknesses of the inter-municipal cooperation process were identified and presented in the table above. From the analysis, it can be stated that inter-municipal cooperation in Constanța County led to a significant increase in the investments in the area and improved delivery of public services. Despite the positive impact, the IDAs should improve the transparency process and make more information available for citizens. Also, they should invest more in the professional training of their personnel.

4.2 The main findings of the opinion survey regarding the role and importance of inter-municipal cooperation

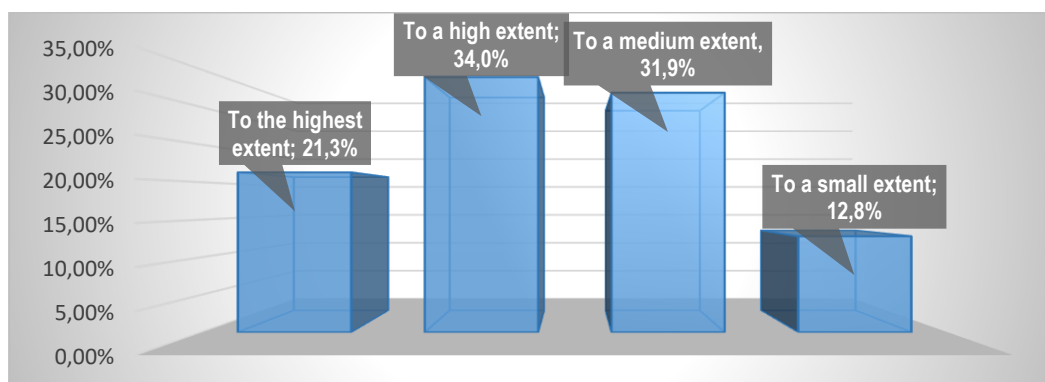


Figure 1. Overall degree of satisfaction regarding the involvement in an inter-community development association

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

Most of the respondents involved in the pilot study, more than half, presented a high degree of satisfaction regarding the involvement of the administrative territorial unit in an inter-community development association. They were satisfied with the activity of the IDAs, the projects implemented by the IDAs, and the outcome of being involved in this form of association.

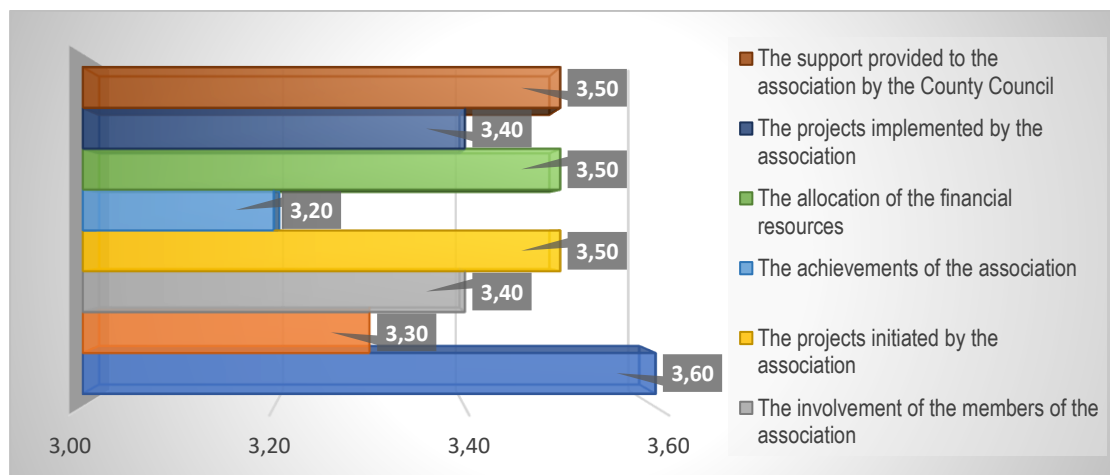


Figure 2. Administrative territorial units' satisfaction regarding different aspects related to affiliation into an inter-community development association

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

The respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1- to the smallest extent and 5- to the highest extent) their degree of satisfaction regarding a series of aspects related to affiliation into an inter-municipal cooperation structure. The average of the responses was 3.3, showing a medium degree of satisfaction. They rated all the mentioned aspects with scores more than 3, showing that there was no reason for dissatisfaction. The highest degree of satisfaction (3.6 score) was related to the projects implemented by the IDAs, followed by the support provided to the association by the County Council, the allocation of the financial resources, and the projects initiated by IDAs (3.5 score).

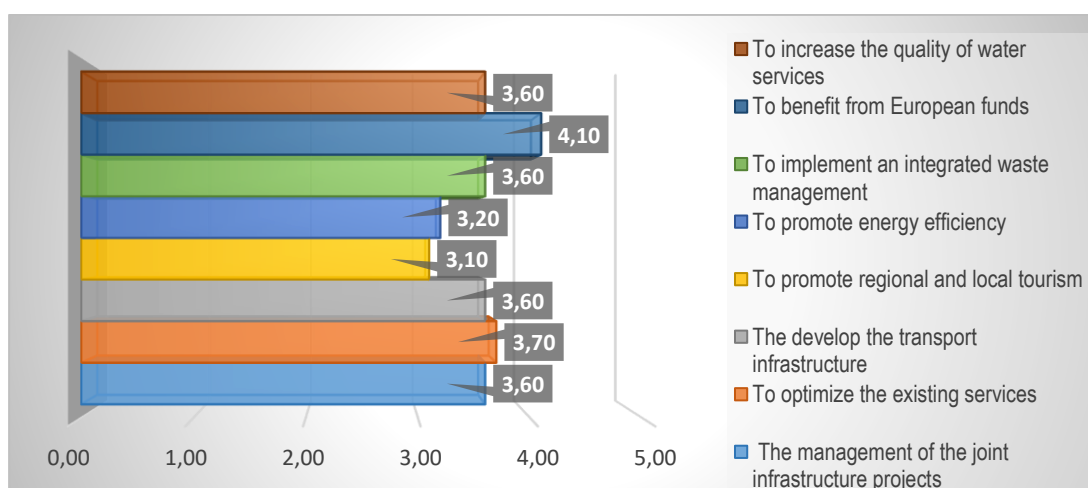


Figure 3. Administrative territorial units' motivations to be involved in IDAs

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

Then, the participants in the study were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1-at least motivated, 5- highly motivated) the main reasons that motivated the territorial administrative unit to be part of an inter-municipal cooperation structure. The main reason was the access to European funds (4.1 score), followed by the opportunity to develop the provided public services to citizens (3.7 score), the chance to develop the transport infrastructure (3.6 score), to increase the quality of the water services (3.6

score), to implement an integrated waste management (3.6 score) and to manage infrastructure projects in cooperation with other administrative territorial units (3.6 score). The responses validate the second hypothesis of the study (*H2: The main motivation for an administrative territorial unit to involve into a inter-community development association is the opportunity of access to European funds*). Also, the results show that inter-municipal cooperation helps in the sustainable development of the administrative territorial units through the projects implemented by IDAs.

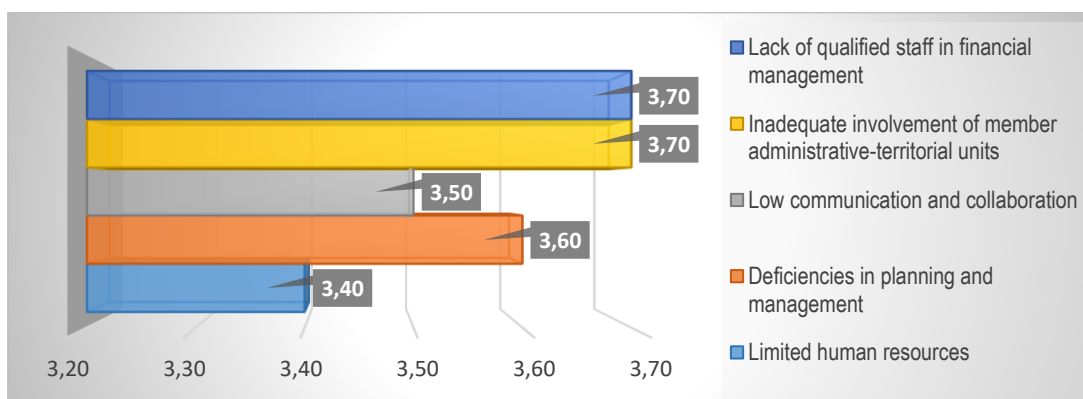


Figure 4. Influence of internal factors affecting the capacity of ATUs to participate in an IDA

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

Another analysed subject was the internal factors that might affect the capacity of administrative territorial units to join an inter-community development association. The answers were measured on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1- to the smallest extent and 5- to the highest extent). It can be noted that all the mentioned factors were attributed a medium to a high degree of importance. The most important factors were considered the lack of staff with skills in financial management and the fact that not all the ATUs part of an IDA are involved in IDA's activity in the same manner.

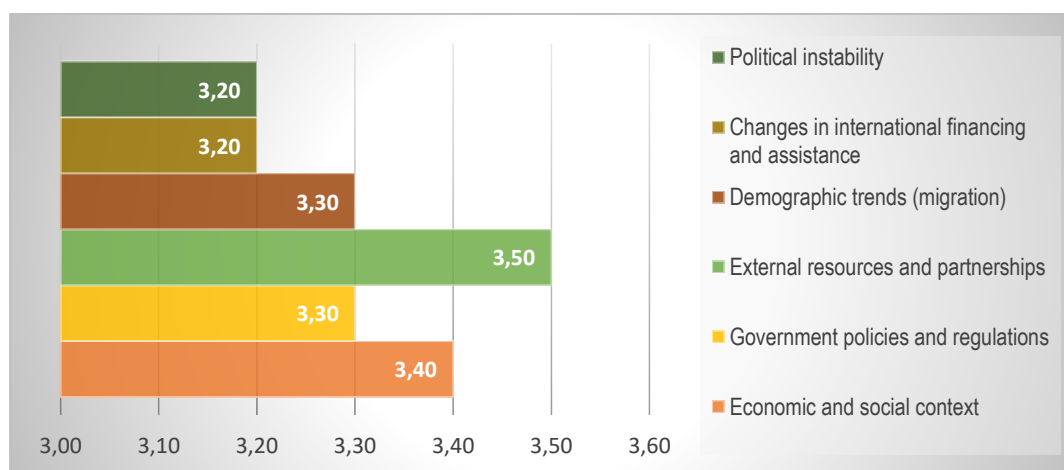


Figure 5. Influence of external factors affecting the capacity of ATUs to participate in IDAs

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

Furthermore, the study analysed the influence of different external factors on the capacity of administrative territorial units to participate in an inter-municipal cooperation structure. The answers were also measured on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1- to the smallest extent and 5- to the highest extent). It can be observed that all the factors were attributed a medium to a high degree of importance. In respondents' opinions, the main influencing factor was represented by the availability and amount of external financial resources and the capacity of establishing new partnerships (3.5 score). Another factor that could play a significant role in an ATU's decision to join an IDA was considered the socio-economic context (3.4 score), followed by governmental policies and

regulations, as well as the demographic trends (3.3 score). The results did not validate the third hypothesis (H3: The most important factors limiting the capacity of ATUs to be involved in IDAs are the governmental policies and regulations as well as the socio-economic context).

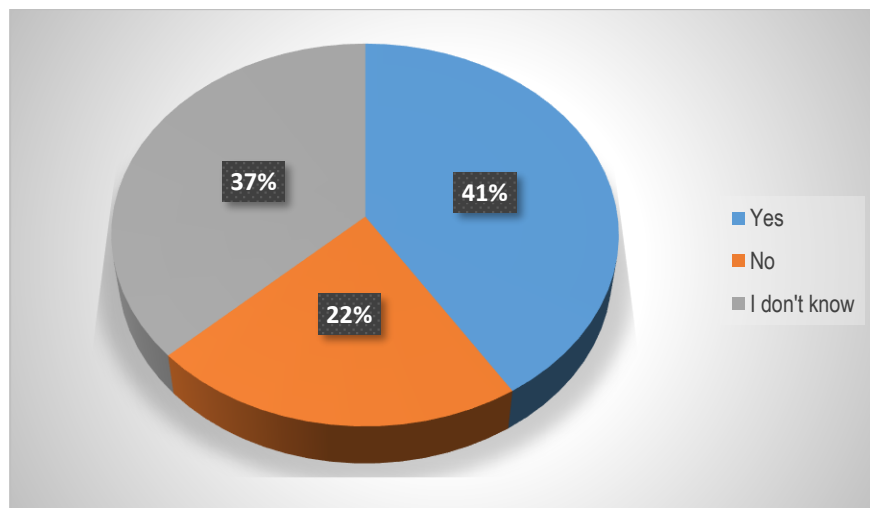


Figure 6. The impact of inter-community development associations on reducing unemployment

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

Another important aspect to be studied is the impact of being part of an inter-community association on different aspects, such as reducing unemployment in the area. The majority of the respondents (41%) believed that through the joint projects implemented in the area, being part of an IDA had an impact on reducing unemployment. Thus, the fact that almost 40% of the participants in the study said that they did not know if there was any impact on unemployment leads to the impression that the matter is not taken into consideration thoroughly, and maybe is not an objective of the IDAs.

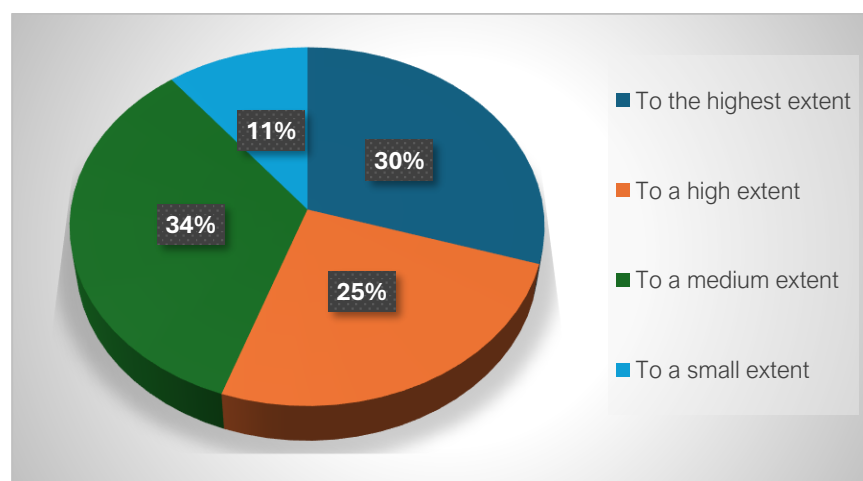


Figure 7. Respondents' opinion regarding the impact of joining an IDA on citizens' quality of life

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

The figure shows that most of the respondents (55%) believe that the involvement of an administrative territorial unit in an inter-municipal cooperation structure has as a result, an increase in citizens' quality of life. A third of the participants considered that the impact is medium, and only 11% had a negative perception related to the aspect. It is to be mentioned that none of the respondents considered that joining an IDA has no impact at all on life quality. The answers validated the first hypothesis of the study (H1: *The impact of the involvement of administrative-territorial units in inter-community development associations was an increase in citizens' quality of life*).

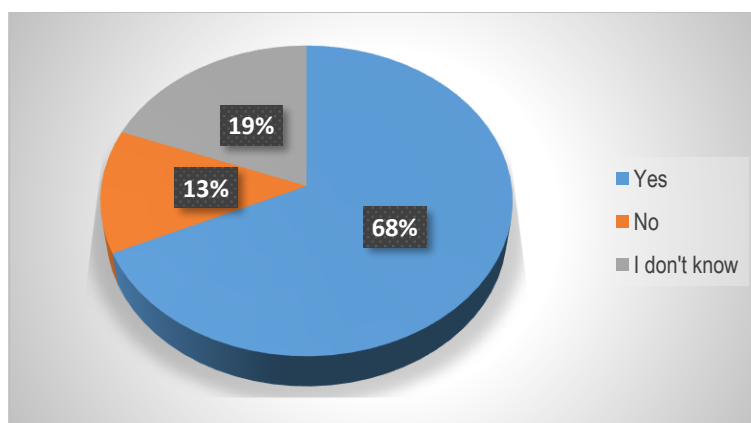


Figure 8. Negative impact of complex administrative procedures on the activities of an IDA

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

The figures display the responses to the question regarding the impact of complex bureaucratic procedures on the activities of an IDA. Most of the respondents considered that bureaucracy and the legal framework have a negative impact and slow down the activities of an inter-community development association.

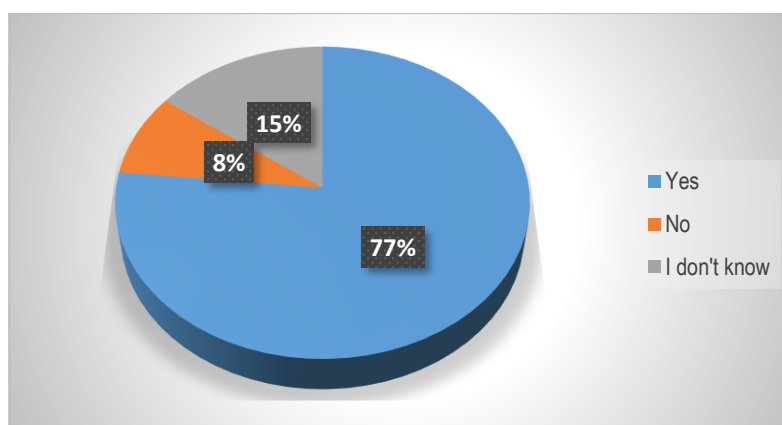


Figure 9. ATU's intention to join an IDA in the future

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

In the end, respondents were asked if they knew about the intention of the administrative territorial unit to join another IDA in the future. Most of them (77%) stated the existence of intentions, leading to the conclusion that inter-municipal cooperation has beneficial outcomes for the ATUs.

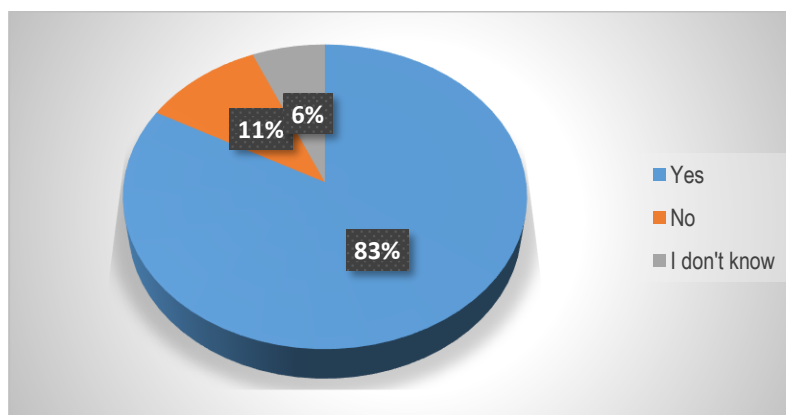


Figure 10. Attracting ATUs to join IDAs through state incentives offered to local authorities

Source: author, own interpretation, 2026

The last question focused on the impact of state incentives on attracting ATUs to be part of IDAs. It can be observed that most of the participants in the study (83%) stated that the number of administrative territorial units willing to join an inter-community development association would increase if the state were to provide incentives for this purpose. The results support the last hypothesis of the study (*H4: The increase in the incentives offered by the state to local authorities to participate in the development of inter-municipal cooperation structures would lead to an increase in their number*).

5. MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

Inter-community cooperation serves as a strategic catalyst for local development, primarily by overcoming the limitations of individual administrative capacity to unlock access to European funding programs and non-reimbursable grants. By forming associations, administrative-territorial units achieve significant cost reductions through the shared division of expenses and the efficient use of collective resources, which effectively bridges the gap between disparate communities to ensure a uniform level of service quality at balanced costs. In practical terms, this collaborative framework revolutionizes sanitation services by co-organizing the collection, selection, and disposal of waste through high-performance equipment, while simultaneously enabling the expansion of water systems into marginalized localities that previously lacked the financial capacity to develop such infrastructure. Although each inter-community development association currently operates under its own distinct strategy, the legal flexibility allowing local governments to join multiple associations, coupled with the pivotal coordinating role of the County Council, creates a robust environment where shared expertise replaces individual administrative shortcomings, ultimately guaranteeing the delivery of modern, high-quality public services to the entire region.

Because inter-municipal cooperation structures are essential in coordinating large-scale public services and projects such as water supply and sanitation, public transport and infrastructure development, waste management, and tourism. In this respect, the main recommendations for the efficient functioning of these associations and to increase their impact on sustainable development are:

1. To implement awareness-raising campaigns for tourists on the rules of good conduct regarding waste management;
2. To promote transparency about the work carried out by inter-community development associations through the publication of key documents, such as revenue and expenditure budgets and activity reports;
3. To design long-term development strategies in line with regional and national development plans;
4. To invest in the training and professional development of their personnel because a well-trained team can manage complex projects more efficiently;
5. To develop new ways of communicating between IDAs and the local communities they serve by involving citizens in providing information on their real needs.

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