# POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN ROMANIA: A CONSENSUAL APPROACH TO MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

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*T*his paper explores through a consensual approach the extent and dimensions of material deprivation in Romanian society in the early 2010s. First, we provide an overview of poverty and inequality issues in Romania since 1990, focused on the structural causes and the profile of the population facing the risk of poverty. The second part of the paper deals with material deprivation and the use of the consensual method in its measuring. We begin with the AROPE indicator and the British Social Exclusion Matrix, which feature the consensual approach in measuring material deprivation. From this, we briefly look at different methodological approaches in academic research on the issues of poverty and social exclusion in Romania. The survey data is then used in a consensual approach towards measuring material deprivation in Romania.

*Keywords*: poverty, inequality, material deprivation, social exclusion, social policy, consensual approach, Romania.

## INTRODUCTION

The overall picture of social needs, their specific content and the level at which they have to be fulfilled to attain individual and social wellbeing have been the subject of numerous theoretical and methodological debates. Social needs are relevant for many areas of social research, regardless of being implicitly or explicitly referred to. In quality of life research, social needs feature as criteria for the evaluation of the way of life (Zamfir, 1984). In the research on poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, the consensual approach, based on socially perceived needs, offers an alternative, broader perspective to the one based only on income thresholds. In other words, poverty means more than lack of or a precarious income (Townsend, 1979)[1].

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Individual or community wellbeing is the result of fulfilling the human needs for a better, accomplished, decent life, according to societal standards. This is why the public's perspective, of the society as a whole, is as legitimate as the one of welfare experts.

This paper explores the issue of material deprivation in Romania through a consensual approach, based on what Romanians see as essential needs for their life. The empirical data from a 2013 nationwide survey is put in a larger context. First, we provide an overview of poverty and inequality issues in Romania since 1990, focused on the structural causes and the profile of the population facing the risk of poverty. The second part of the paper deals with material deprivation. We begin with the AROPE indicator and the British Social Exclusion Matrix, which feature the consensual approach in measuring material deprivation. From this, we briefly look at different methodological approaches in academic research on the issues of poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and material deprivation in Romania. The survey data is then used in a consensual approach towards measuring material deprivation in Romania.

## METHODOLOGY

The empirical data used in this paper is from a survey conducted in 2013 based on a probabilistic, multi-stadial, stratified sample of 1,227 subjects, representative for Romania's population. The sample has a margin of error of +/– 2.8% at 95% level of confidence. The electoral roll was used as sampling base. Interviews were carried out face to face, at the subjects' home, which were selected using a (modified Kish) contingency table method. The survey was a part of the Inclusive-Active-Efficient project, co-ordinated by the Research Institute for Quality of Life (RIQL) and financed by a CNCSIS Parteneriate grant no. 216/2012.

## POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN ROMANIA: AN OVERVIEW

In this section, we will explore several key facts and trends regarding poverty and income inequality in Romania, with an emphasis on the long-term and structural causes and features.

A Southern Central and Eastern European country with a population of less than 19 million as of 2016, Romania is one of the least developed member states of the European Union (EU). Its Human Development Index (HDI) value based on 2014 data places Romania in the high human development category, ranked 52nd overall in the world. Moreover, Romania and Bulgaria are the only EU member states not in the top category of very high human development, although Romania is ranked higher than Bulgaria and any other non-EU former Eastern Bloc countries in the region (United Nations Development Programme, 2015).

Romania is not just one of the least developed countries in the EU, but also one of the most unequal. One way of looking at the uneven development in the European Union and the gap between the poorest and richest member states is by using the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). In 2014, Romania had a GDP per capita (PPP) of 21,403 USD or around 19,184 EUR (World Bank, 2016). Comparing with other EU member states through the purchasing power standard, as an index expressed in relation with the EU-28 average set to equal 100, the GDP per capita in Romania is at 55 per cent of the EU average. That places the country second to Bulgaria (47 per cent of the EU average) as the least developed EU member state, just short of Croatia (59 per cent of the EU average), which became an EU member state in 2013.

*Graph 1*

**GDP per capita (PPS) and share of population at-risk of poverty in the EU in 2014**
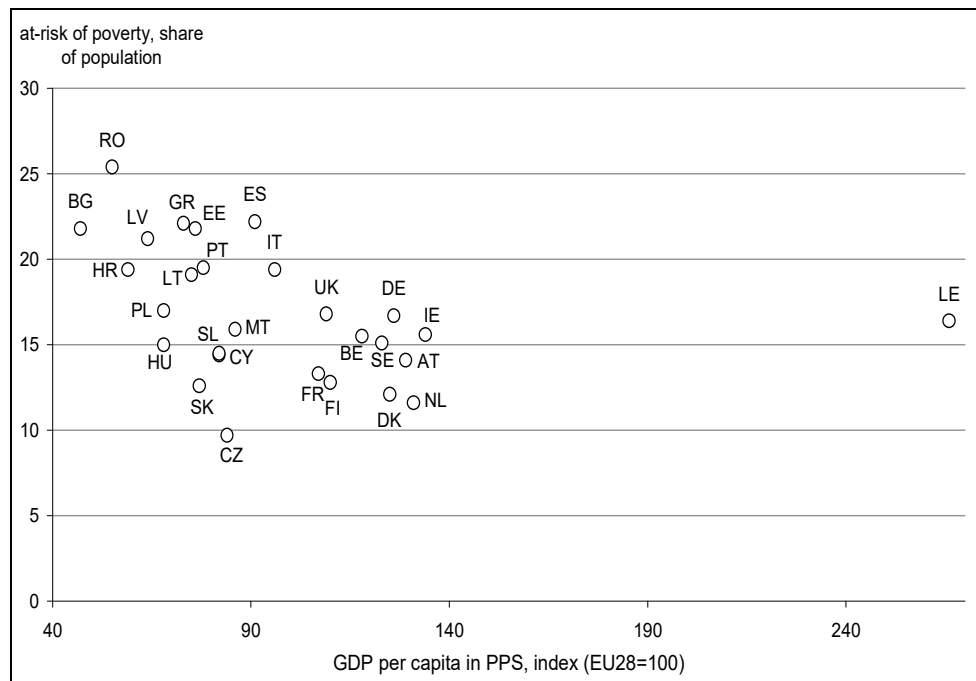


*Source*: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/income-and-living-conditions/data/database, 22.02.2017.

Romania has the highest share of the population at-risk of poverty in the entire EU. More than 25 per cent of Romanians find themselves in relative poverty, namely with an equivalised disposable income below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers (see *Graph 1*). Ever since gaining EU membership in 2007, Romania has been one of the EU member states with the highest rates of

relative poverty, part of a larger group including Bulgaria and the Baltic states (Precupeţu, 2013). During and in the aftermath of the post-2008 Great Recession, Romania has replaced Latvia as the EU member state with the highest income inequality starting with 2010.

The causes and conditions of poverty in Romania or at least lower economic development than most EU member states, on the one hand, and income inequality, on the other hand, are intermingled. That is to say that one causal or systemic factor that leads to poverty could also have an impact on income inequality.

When dealing with poverty, material deprivation and income inequality issues, the economy is highly relevant. During the quarter of century since the 1989 December Revolution, Romania's overall economic performance has been poor, with an average yearly GDP growth of just 1.3 per cent. No less than three recessions occurred in this time period.

The basic cause of poverty and income inequality in Romania is the size of the economy and the jobs it can provide in relation to the population. The economy never really recovered the jobs lost during in the 1990s and early 2000s during the transition from a planned, Soviet style economy, to a free market, capitalist economy. According to Zamfir (2004), poverty is a main trait of the high social cost of the transition. By 2003, the year when real GDP returned to its pre-transition level of 1989, the economy had lost millions of jobs. In that year, there were 3.5 million people fewer in employment compared to 8.1 million people in 1990. In the mid 2000s, at the end of the transition, employment bottomed out at 4.5 million people (see *Table no. 1*).

*Table no. 1*

**Read GDP growth, inflation and employment in Romania (1990−2016)**

|  | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| real GDP (%) | −5.6 | −12.9 | −8.8 | 1.5 | 3.9 | 7.1 | 3.9 | −6.1 | −4.8 | −1.2 |
| inflation (%) | 5.1 | 170.2 | 210.4 | 256.1 | 136.7 | 32.3 | 38.8 | 154.8 | 59.1 | 45.8 |
| employment (millions) | 8.1 | 7.5 | 6.6 | 6.4 | 6.4 | 6.2 | 5.9 | 5.6 | 5.4 | 4.8 |
|  | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
| real GDP (%) | 2.1 | 5.7 | 5.1 | 5.2 | 8.5 | 4.2 | 7.9 | 6.3 | 7.3 | −7.1 |
| inflation (%) | 45.7 | 34.5 | 22.5 | 15.3 | 11.9 | 9.0 | 6.6 | 4.8 | 7.9 | 5.6 |
| employment (millions) | 4.6 | 4.6 | 4.6 | 4.6 | 4.5 | 4.6 | 4.7 | 4.9 | 5.0 | 4.8 |
|  | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |  |  |  |  |
| real GDP (%) | −0.8 | 1.1 | 0.6 | 3.5 | 3.0 | 3.5 |  |  |  |  |
| inflation (%) | 6.1 | 5.8 | 3.3 | 4.0 | 1.1 | −0.6 |  |  |  |  |
| employment (millions) | 4.4 | 4.3 | 4.4 | 4.4 | 4.5 | 4.6 |  |  |  |  |

*Sources*: Romanian Statistical Yearbook 2000−2015, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/income-and-living-conditions/data/database, 22.02.2017.

Following from the legacy of the transition, a second issue is the inability of the free market, capitalist, post-transition economy to create jobs, even when enjoying an expansionary period. During almost a decade of continuous expansion in the 2000s, the economy saw a 50% growth in real GDP. However, the employment in the economy increased by only around 10%. The same pattern emerged after the economy exited the recession from 2009−2011. Real GDP increased by more than 12% during 2011−2015, but employment growth barely topped 5%.

Almost as relevant as the quantitative side of the job losses during the transition period – no less than 43% of 1990 peak value – is the qualitative side. Two thirds of the jobs in manufacturing were lost, from 4 million in 1990 to around 1.3 million in the early 2010s. In fact, in absolute terms, manufacturing suffered the greatest loss with 2.7 million jobs gone. The job losses in manufacturing point not only of a decline in above average paid jobs in the economy, but also to a quantitative and qualitative decline of a highly skilled workforce (Zamfir, 2011: 8).

The structure of the economy is in itself a cause of poverty and income inequality in Romania.

According to the second highest official of the National Bank of Romania, First Deputy Governor Florin Georgescu (2015), the Romanian economy features a low gross value added contribution across all sectors. In turn, this is caused by a poorly equipped agriculture sector, low intensity manufacturing and over-tertiarization. Added to this is a lower gross added value per employee in services compared to manufacturing. One effect of this economic structure is the lag between GDP and job growth. This is seen in the jobless recovery after the recession from 2009−2011, as noted above. By 2014, the economy returned to its pre-crisis level in terms of GDP. However, only half the number of jobs lost during the recession was recovered.

Another side to this structural issue is the share of the employees' compensation in GDP or, in other words, the breakdown between labour and capital of economic gains. Unlike most EU member states, Romania features a much lower share of labour revenue in GDP. In fact, during the 2009−2011 recession and the subsequent recovery, the employees' compensation in GDP declined from the high thirties to the low thirties. This worsening of the distribution between labour and capital, argues Georgescu, leads to an increase in inequality. Another source for the lower share of the employees' compensation in GDP is union decline and low bargaining power of employees, especially regarding collective bargaining (Dumitru, 2015: 218). This development was the result of changes made in 2010 to the labour code and union laws.

The overall structure of the economy, dominated by low gross values added activities, is reflected in the labour market. Romania has a segmented labour market, dominated by low skill and low pay jobs. A peculiarity is that the public

sector is the main employer for people with an university degree, while the great majority of private sector employees are low skilled and low paid. Inside the private sector there is a small core of urban, high skilled, high paid jobs, mainly in the service sector. At the other end of the pay scale, retail workers are the single largest category of private sector employees. These and other service sector employees form the bulk of low paid workers (Stănescu, 2013: 85−86).

Another highly relevant fact regarding the structure of the economy, and causal factor of poverty and income inequality in Romania, is the high share of population residing in rural areas. In the quarter of century following the fall of the Communist regime, the share of the rural population has been relatively constant around 45% of the total population. This is very high compared to other countries. The main economic challenge for rural residents is the chronic lack of job opportunities. Under these circumstances, subsistence farming, day labour, the grey economy, or dropping out of the workforce altogether were the main options. By 2002, 42% of the rural population were under the relative poverty threshold and the rural residents' share among the poor was 67% (Teşliuc et al., 2003: 33). With visa free travel to Western Europe since 2003 and free movement in the European Union from 2007, labour migration became a viable alternative. By 2014, 38% of the rural population was below the relative poverty line, while the share of the rural population among the poor climbed to 78% (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2015).

In addition to the structure of the economy, the taxation system is another cause of income inequality in Romania. In 2005, the tax code experienced a massive overhaul. In terms of income taxation of natural persons, progressive taxation was axed and a flat tax of 16% was introduced. At the same time, corporate tax was cut from 25% to 16%. Various other rules kept a low tax regime for capital earnings. In addition to all that, Romania has no wealth tax, while property taxation is low. The outcome of the Romanian experiment with flat taxation is unsurprising: it further increases income inequality in two ways. First, there is the effect of flat taxation: 10% of total employees received 40% of the gains from the introduction of the flat income tax (Voinea and Mihăescu, 2009). Secondly, with the change in overall taxation from income to consumption, the value added tax (VAT) is the main revenue source. As an indirect tax, this is actually a regressive tax (Zamfir, 2011: 24).

The net effect of the both the structure of the economy and employee compensation, on one hand, and the post-2004 taxation system, on the other hand, is that income inequality actually increases while the economy is expanding (see *Table no. 1* and *Table no. 2*). Indeed, there is no trickle down effect. On the contrary, the resumption of growth following the 2009−2011 recession was both sluggish in terms of job creation and unequal in terms of income growth, with more Romanians below the at-risk of poverty threshold than before or during the recession.

*Table no. 2*

**Poverty in Romania 1990−2015, percentage of total population**

| | **1990** | **1991** | **1992** | **1993** | **1994** | **1995** | **1996** | **1997** | **1998** | **1999** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| absolute poverty | 8.0 | 5.7 | 10.7 | 12.8 | 20.0 | 28.2 | 25.4 | 20.1 | 30.3 | 30.8 |
| | **2000** | **2001** | **2002** | **2003** | **2004** | **2005** | **2006** | **2007** | **2008** | **2009** |
| absolute poverty | 33.2 | 35.9 | 30.6 | 28.9 | 25.1 | 18.8 | 15.1 | 13.8 | 9.8 | 5.7 |
| relative poverty, no self-consumption | | 17.1 | 17.0 | 18.1 | 17.3 | 17.9 | 18.2 | 18.6 | 18.5 | 18.2 |
| relative poverty, with self-consumption | | | | | | | | 24.8 | 23.4 | 22.4 |
| relative poverty, Eurostat | | | | | | | | 24.6 | 23.6 | 22.1 |
| | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | | | | |
| absolute poverty | 4.4 | 5.2 | 5.0 | 4.2 | 4.3 | 3.8 | | | | |
| relative poverty, no self-consumption | 17.5 | 17.2 | 17.9 | 16.6 | 17.8 | 18.4 | | | | |
| relative poverty, with self-consumption | 21.1 | 22.2 | 22.6 | 22.4 | 25.4 | | | | | |
| relative poverty, Eurostat | 21.6 | 22.3 | 22.9 | 23.0 | 25.1 | 25.4 | | | | |

*Sources*: Zamfir et al. (2010: 28), NIS (2016a: 62) (2016b: 272), Eurostat http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/
en/web/income-and-living-conditions/data/database, 22.02.2017.

In the study of poverty, material deprivation and income inequality issues in Romania, another relevant element is the high share of consumption, particularly foodstuff, in the household budget. On the one hand, this is somehow to be expected, considering the share of people in poverty. As of 2014, more than 62% of the households' total expenditure was spent on consumption of goods and services. The share of foodstuff consumption in the household budget declined from around 55% in 2001 to around 42% in 2014 (National Institute for Statistics, 2016b: 99).

A look at the profile of the poor in Romania reveals that except for one group, it has remained the same since the end of the transition in the early 2000s.

*Household size/ child poverty*. As of 2014, "at-risk-of-poverty rate increases with the size of the household, the increase being higher if the household has several dependent children" (National Institute for Statistics, 2016b: 108). For instance, the poverty rate for households with no dependent children was 15.7%, compared to 73.1% for households of two adults and three or more dependent children. Back in 2002, 64% of families with three or more children faced the risk of being poor (Teşliuc et al., 2003: 26). *Child poverty* is of particular concern. The at-risk of poverty rate for the 0−17 age group increased steadily from 32.8% in 2007 to 39.4% in 2014.

"*The risk of poverty decreases with age*" (National Institute for Statistics, 2016b: 108), to the extent that seniors are the only group that has crossed the poverty threshold since the 2000s. Back in the mid 1990s, the 65 and over age

group was hit particularly hard by the economic downturn of the transition period. Up to 35 per cent of seniors were below the poverty threshold in the late 1990s (World Bank, 2003: 11). Pension reform and subsequent increase in the social security budget allowed for real increase of seniors' income. The at-risk of poverty rate of seniors declined to just 14.1% in 2011, but has been creeping upwards since yet another pension reform in 2010 aimed at cutting the pension bill.

*Education* is one of the best proxies for better employment, higher income, and lower risk of poverty in the developing world (Sen, 1999). For Romania, this has been constant throughout the transition period (World Bank, 2003: 12) and beyond. As of 2014, the risk of poverty was around 50% for the persons with lower education compared to well below 4% for persons with higher education (National Institute for Statistics, 2016b: 108).

*Employment* is highly relevant when it comes to earnings and has an obvious link with being above or below the poverty line. In 2014, 71.1% of households with employees as household head were able to meet their needs with their disposable income. This is in stark contrast with households with an unemployed as household head. Only 27.3% of these households were able to meet their consumption needs (National Institute for Statistics, 2016b: 104). Persons out of employment or out of the workforce, having quit looking for jobs, face a very high probability of being poor. 55% of the unemployed and 42% of adults out of the workforce, but not pensioners, were below the at-risk of poverty threshold in 2015 (National Institute for Statistics, 2016a: 17). Data from the early 2000s is similar. Back in 2002, 51% of the unemployed, 61% of farm self-employed, 50% of the non-farm self employed, and 47% of housewives were below the poverty threshold (Teşliuc et al., 2003: 30).

However, waged work is not, in itself, a guaranteed way out of poverty. Romania has had a deep problem of a high share of workers whose incomes fall below the poverty line. In the mid 2010s, the share of the *working poor* held steady between 18 to 19 per cent. There is also a gender difference: one in five employed men were at-risk of poverty compared to one in seven employed women (National Institute for Statistics, 2016a: 16−17). The problem seems to be deep seated and getting worse over the years. Back in 2002, just 14% of employees were below the poverty line (Teşliuc et al., 2003: 30).

The *Roma/Gypsy* is one of the two main minority ethnic groups in contemporary Romania, along the Hungarians. Back in 2002, Romas/Gypsies were 2.7 times more likely to be below the poverty line compared to the rest of the population (Teşliuc et al., 2003: 12). While data on poverty according to ethnicity is lacking in the official reports of the mid 2010s, there is data on the share of households with utility bills arrears. In 2014, Romas/Gypsies were around two times more likely to be in debts with their gas or electricity bills compared to ethnic Romanians and some five times more likely compared to Hungarians (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2015: 29−30).

Romania features a strong link between poverty and *urban/rural residence*. Since the late 1990, there has been a high discrepancy between urban and rural areas in terms of incidence and number of persons at-risk of poverty. In economic terms, the reasons are straightforward. The great majority of jobs and seniors covered by the public pension system are in urban areas. In 2002, the poverty rate was 18% in urban areas and 42% in rural areas, which is more than double. In addition, 67% of the total poor were residing in rural areas (World Bank, 2003: 13−14). In 2014, 9.2% of urban residents were at-risk of poverty, compared with 38.3% of rural residents. This means that poverty remains a predominantly rural phenomenon, with close to 88% of people at-risk of poverty being rural residents (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2015: 42).

The pattern of the regional dimension of poverty is linked to urban/rural residence and follows the urban/rural breakdown of the population. More urbanised regions, such the capital, Bucharest, and its surrounding county, and the regions in Transylvania, feature the lowest risk of poverty. Conversely, the regions with the highest share of rural population, which are located in Moldavia, in the northwest, and in the three regions in southern half of country, feature the highest risk of poverty. Back in 2002, just 11% of the Bucharest region population were below the poverty line, compared to a high of 43% in the Northeast region, which covers most of Moldavia (World Bank, 2003: 13). In 2015, the share of the population at-risk of poverty in Bucharest region had declined to just 5.9%. However, the risk of poverty remained above 30% in the four more ruralised regions, with a high of 35.9% in the Northeast region (National Institute for Statistics, 2016a).

The multidimensional and deep roots of poverty in Romania are revealed not only by the correlation of certain variables – education, household size, age, urban/rural residence and region of residence − with the risk of poverty, but also by the links betweens these variables. An individual could be part of more than one of these social groups or categories and thus increase hers or his probability of being poor. For instance, large households are more likely to be found in rural areas, more likely to be found in certain regions of the country, regions which also feature lower economic development and a less educated workforce.

One last note concerns the difference between national and EU-level data. National level statistics also include data on poverty with household self-consumption, which leads to a difference of some 4−5 percentage points for the at-risk of poverty (relative poverty) rate compared with the household data without self-consumption (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2015: 34−35). The other, perhaps more serious difference, concerns the slightly different values of this indicator provided by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), on one hand, and Eurostat, on the other hand. The value should be the same, since it is based on raw data collected and a statistic computed by the former with the methodology from the latter. In practice, this difference is less than one percent. Nevertheless, one still needs to pay attention to this issue as well (see *Table no. 2*).

## A CONSENSUAL APPROACH TO MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

### At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) indicator

The European Union introduced the At-risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion (acronym AROPE) indicator as a statistical tool for monitoring the attainment of the goals regarding social inclusion set in the Europa 2020 strategy.

Taking into account the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon in the design of the indicator, a person is defined as being at-risk of poverty or social exclusion if she or he is at least in one of the following:

- below the poverty line set at 60% of the median equivalised disposable income;
- in severe material deprivation;
- living in a household with low work intensity.

The severe material deprivation rate indicator measures the percentage of the population that can not afford at least four of the following items:

1. to pay their rent, mortgage or utility bills;
2. to keep their home adequately warm;
3. to face unexpected expenses;
4. to eat meat or proteins regularly;
5. to go on holiday;
6. a television set;
7. a washing machine;
8. a car;
9. a telephone.

The multidimensional nature of material deprivation is explored through other indicators on several strains or dimensions: economic, durables, and housing. Each strain comprises 5 problems or items, some of which are part of the consolidated material deprivation indicator (Eurostat, 2017).

In 2015, 37.3% of the population in Romania was at at-risk of poverty or social exclusion. The breakdown in the three categories was as follows: 25.4% of the population was at-risk of poverty, 22.7% faced severe material deprivation, and 7.9% were living in households with low risk intensity. In 2014−2015, Bulgaria and Romania were the top two countries in the EU regarding the risk of poverty or social exclusion (National Institute for Statistics, 2016a, Eurostat). In comparison, the EU AROPE average stands far lower at 24.4%.

### The Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix: the consensual approach to measuring poverty and social exclusion

Contemporary British research on poverty and social exclusion draws inspiration from the seminal work of Richard Townsend. According to Townsend (1979: 32), "individuals, families and groups can be said to be in poverty when

they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least are widely encouraged and approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities".

Levitas (2005) views this explanation of poverty as a redistributive model of causality, in which lack of material resources is presumed as the root cause.

The techniques first used by Townsend in the design of a relative deprivation scale were further developed in the 1980s. Mack and Lansley (1985) developed the "consensual" or "perceived deprivation" approach to measuring poverty. The methodology "aims to identify a minimum acceptable way of life (…) by *reference to the views of society as a whole*. This is, in essence, *a consensual* approach to defining minimum standards" (Mack and Lansley, 1985: 42). "This concept is developed in terms of those who have an enforced lack of *socially perceived* necessities. This means that the 'necessities' of life are identified by public opinion and not by, on the one hand, the views of experts or, on the other hand, the norms of behaviour *per se*. (Mack and Lansley: 45; emphasis in original). In essence, the consensual approach entails the definition of poverty "from the public's perception of minimum need" (Pantazis et al., 2006: 6).

Mack and Lansley's consensual approach methodology was replicated and widely adopted in a long list of British and Western European surveys. Included here are the British Millennium Poverty and Exclusion Survey (Gordon et al., 1999), and the European Community Household Panel Survey (Gordon et al., 2000), the precursor of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey, the results of which form the basis for the AROPE indicator.

Gordon et al. (2000: 72) provide an overview of the consensual approach advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include the democratic selection of socially perceived necessities, instead of "elite" experts. On the disadvantages side, the method is as yet not used routinely in government surveys. In addition, the list of items and activities is chosen by the researcher. However, Gordon et al. argue that this is not an important criticism due to the high reliability of the measurement of deprivation.

Returning to the relationship between poverty, social exclusion and material deprivation, Levitas (2007: 86) defines social exclusion as "a complex process operating across several dimensions or domains. It involves both the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole." Levitas notes that the operational issue that follows from the definition is the identification of dimensions or domains. There are 10 such domains put forward, consolidated in three broad groups: resources, participation, and quality of life. Together, all these

categories cover the full Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix. Levitas et al. (2007: 119−120) argue that "income poverty and material deprivation constitute a driver for most other domains of exclusion".

## Romanian research on poverty, social exclusion, and material deprivation

In this section we will provide a brief outlook on Romanian research on poverty, social exclusion, and material deprivation, focused firstly on the chronological developments since 1990, and secondly on a review of alternative methodological approaches.

Following a review of the scientific literature regarding poverty in Romania from 1990−2014, Briciu (2015) puts forward a time frame comprising three periods.

The first, labelled *Accumulation of expertise at national level with a divergence of methodologies and approaches*, covers the first decade (1990−2000) after the Romanian Revolution of December 1989. The period features several concurring research strains. Academic research centred on the Research Institute for Quality of Life (RIQL). Citing sources, Briciu (2015: 4) lists no less than 71 scientific contributions from RIQL during 1990−2001, including the first large nationwide study on poverty (Zamfir, 1995). In addition, RIQL initiated the multiyear program *Quality of Life Diagnosis*, which was based on a nationwide representative survey conducted yearly during 1990−1999, and in 3 waves during the 2000s (Mărginean and Precupeţu, 2011). Institutional research providing official data was conducted by the National Institute for Statistics (NIS), first through a panel research program, the Family Budget Survey, followed by the Integrated Household Survey (AIG) from 1995−2000. The latter was developed with technical support from the World Bank. This introduces the third strain, research conducted under programs initiated by international institutions, the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The deliverables of these programs were published either under the aegis of the international institution (World Bank, 1998a, World Bank, 1998b) or the Government of Romania (United Nations Development Programme, 2003).

The second period, labelled *The adoption of the absolute poverty line: 2001−2006*, covers the end of the transition period up to Romania's EU accession on January 1, 2007. During this period, the research methodology focused on absolute poverty reaches its maturity. Promoted by the World Bank, it was implemented under an improved methodology by a consortium comprising government institutions − the Poverty Alleviation and Social Inclusion Promotion Commission (CASPIS), a unit functioning under the Office of the Prime Minister akin to the British Social Exclusion Unit under the Cabinet Office, an academic institution − RIQL, and the official statistics institution − NIS. Leading reports of the periods were the two World Bank Poverty Assessments (2003), (2007). In parallel, the methodological approach focused on the relative poverty rate (or "at-risk poverty" rate in EU terminology) was in the first stages of development, boosted by technical assistance

provided by the EU Statistics Office, Eurostat, to NIS and CASPIS. For instance, the anti-poverty and social inclusion national plan of 2002 issued by CASPIS, also used the relative rate of poverty (Romanian Government, 2002).

The third period, under a rather long label *The official alignment to the relative poverty measurement approach together with a new mix of perspectives on the study of poverty: a social development-oriented approach concurrently with the study of poverty and extreme poverty at the territorial and community level: 2006−2014*, covers the period since Romania's 2007 EU accession. The relative poverty approach becomes dominant in public documents issued either by the Ministry of Labour (2013, 2015) or NIS (2016a, 2016b).

Briciu (2015: 7) also notes that the absolute poverty approach is in decline due to "the fact that some elements of the methodology have become obsolete [, which] may induce a partially false image of the real extent of absolute poverty in Romania. Absolute poverty is reported to have dropped to extremely low levels".

In addition to Briciu's observation, we notice the decline in academic output on poverty and quality of life issues, which was centred on RIQL (Dumitru, 2011). For instance, the last wave of the Quality of Life Diagnosis was in 2010. This phenomenon could arguably be linked to a "crowding out" effect stemming from the very active role, especially in social policy, of international institutions in Romania, first of all the World Bank, but also UNICEF. While issued under the aegis of the Romanian government, some major policy documents, such as the National Strategy on Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion (Ministry of Labour, 2015) outsourced to the World Bank, or the strategy 2016−2020 strategy on persons with disabilities (National Authority for People with Disabilities, 2016), outsourced to UNICEF, were drafted by international institutions using Romanian academics as subcontractors.

Our brief overview of the alternative methodological approaches regarding the measurement of poverty, social exclusion, and material deprivation in Romania is largely based on the classification of approaches put forward by Gordon et al. (2000).

The consensual approach featuring social indicators and subjective measures of poverty is heavily featured in academic research, of which the RIQL's *Quality of Life Diagnosis* program is the foremost example (Mărginean and Precupeţu, 2011, Dumitru, 2011). In addition, with the advent of the AROPE indicator, the measurement of material deprivation is a main feature of the Romanian EU-SILC survey run by NIS.

The income thresholds approach is the main one in terms of usage, as it has been used as the basis of official data regarding poverty. In the 1990s, "the 1/2/4/ dollars per day per capita at purchasing parity power thresholds used by the World Bank and the United Nations organisations system were gradually implemented in Romania but they were considered inadequate for the particular situation of Romania" (Briciu, 2015: 5) in the early 2000s. This was followed in the early to mid-2000s by the absolute poverty approach, advocated by the World Bank. This method was based on the consumption patterns of the poorest deciles (first, or first

and second combined) or of the poorest 30% of the population. As noted above, since 2007 this approach has entered a decline. The obsolescence is observable in the embarrassingly low levels of absolute poverty in the official reports (see Table 2). Chronologically last, but the most enduring, is the relative or at-risk of poverty approach, disseminated by Eurostat, and the current method of choice of NIS. According to Briciu (2015: 6), some critics argue that relative poverty measures inequality rather than poverty itself.

The budget standards approach or normative method was developed by RIQL in the early 1990s (Mihăilescu, 2014, 2016). The method is based on a budget template for the main family types with the most frequent sources of income (i.e. one or two adults working for the minimum or the average wage with one or two children, one or two retired). Gordon et al. (2000: 75) note that, although labour intensive, the main advantage of this approach is transparency.

Another approach is based on macro-level, ecological indicators. Usually dealing with rural poverty, this approach entails deprivation aggregated indexes regarding local infrastructure and utilities, occupational structure, demographic indicators, and other indicators (Sandu, 1999).

In addition to the abovementioned categories, there is also an approach thematically focused on deep poverty and social exclusion, which features territorial or issue-focused research, primarily relying on qualitative methods. Just a few examples of such research topics include homelessness (Briciu, 2014), poverty programs impact evaluation at national and local levels (Cace, 2005), and the Roma/Gypsy community (Zamfir and Preda, 2002).

### Towards a consensual approach to measuring material deprivation and poverty in Romania

In the Inclusive-Active-Efficient survey, a range of goods, services and activities were subject to the public's evaluation – whether people do or do not need them. The list included food, shelter, durable goods in the household, clothing, free time and financial security. The survey's questionnaire featured a question with 21 items referring to needs, about which the subjects were asked to answer whether:

(1) they have them,

(2) they do not have them, but do not need them, or

(3) they do not have them, need them, but can not afford.

The 21-item design (see *Table no. 3*) was based on the consensual approach to measuring material deprivation featured in the 1999 British Millennium Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (Gordon et al., 1999, Levitas et al., 2007), and the Eurostat methodology used in the pan-European survey on income and living conditions EU-SILC for measuring material deprivation (European Commission, 2012).

*Table no. 3*

**Public evaluation of material needs in Romania**

| No | Needs | Do want (percentage) | Do not have, but do not need (percentage) |
|---|---|---|---|
| (1) | TV | 98.9 | 1.1 |
| (2) | refrigerator | 98.6 | 1.4 |
| (3) | two hot meals a day | 98.0 | 2.0 |
| (4) | keeping the home adequately warm | 97.3 | 2.7 |
| (5) | cable or satellite TV | 95.3 | 4.7 |
| (6) | a washing machine | 93.9 | 6.1 |
| (7) | heated water, shower, sanitation | 92.6 | 7.4 |
| (8) | a meal with meat or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day | 92.4 | 7.6 |
| (9) | fixed or mobile phone | 92.2 | 7.8 |
| (10) | a sum of money put aside for unexpected expenses | 90.5 | 9.5 |
| (11) | an amount of money for personal needs, not part of the family budget | 89.6 | 10.4 |
| (12) | at least two pairs of all weather shoes | 89.5 | 10.5 |
| (13) | a savings account | 88.8 | 11.2 |
| (14) | an outfit to wear for special occasions, such as a party, wedding, or job interview | 87.5 | 12.5 |
| (15) | new, not second-hand, clothes | 87.1 | 12.9 |
| (16) | getting out once a month in the city or to the nearest city for shopping, relaxation, meeting friends and relatives | 84.8 | 15.2 |
| (17) | one week annual holiday away from home | 83.3 | 16.7 |
| (18) | a car or bike | 75.9 | 24.1 |
| (19) | a PC, laptop or tablet | 71.4 | 28.6 |
| (20) | daily access to the Internet | 69.9 | 30.1 |
| (21) | a bicycle | 57.1 | 42.9 |

A majority of Romanians view all the 21 goods, services and actions as necessary for a decent life in society to a varying degree. More than nine in ten persons reported the need for adequate food (two hot meals a day, a meal with meat or fish every second day), shelter (an adequately warm home with running hot water) and a series of durable goods (TV, refrigerator, cable TV, washing machine, phone). Other goods and services, although viewed as necessities by the majority of Romanians, do not enjoy the same levels of social support. For instance, the bicycle was reported as a necessity by young or middle aged persons, rather than persons aged 50 and over; men rather than women and those that live in rural areas rather than those based in urban areas. Daily access to the Internet, having a car, a holiday away from home and getting out in the city are regarded as necessities mainly by young people, by persons with higher education, over average income or urban residents. Having a computer, laptop or tablet and daily access to the Internet are perceived as necessities by more than 9 din 10 people under 35. In the future, the generational shift will lead to a higher level of social consensus regarding these needs.

The degree of fulfilment of the needs perceived as necessary for a civilized life varies across the Romanian society. Over 90% of the population have two hot meals a day, an adequately warmed home; own a TV and a refrigerator. At the opposite end, less than 30% enjoy basic financial security (via a savings account), financial autonomy in the household or a week of vacation away from home.

The persons that do not have the goods and services perceived by society as the standards of a decent life are divided in those that do not need them and those that deem them as necessary, but can not afford. This is an enforced deprivation, determined by lack of income. Only people in the latter category experience material deprivation. Most Romanians lack financial security and autonomy and could not afford a vacation. Other deprivations affect variable segments of the population. For instance, almost one in two do not have the car or bike they desire; over a quarter have a home without running hot water and sanitation; more than 16% lack a meal with meat or fish every second day, etc.

*Table no. 4*

**Material deprivation in Romania – unfulfilled social needs**
**(the share of those that have a need, but can not afford it)**

| No | Needs | Do not have, but can not afford (percentage) |
|---|---|---|
| (1) | TV | 2.1 |
| (2) | refrigerator | 4.2 |
| (3) | two hot meals a day | 5.1 |
| (4) | cable or satellite TV | 5.2 |
| (5) | keeping the home adequately warm | 6.2 |
| (6) | fixed or mobile phone | 9.6 |
| (7) | a meal with meat or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day | 16.5 |
| (8) | a washing machine | 16.7 |
| (9) | an outfit to wear for special occasions, such as a party, wedding, or job interview | 19.4 |
| (10) | at least two pairs of all weather shoes | 23.5 |
| (11) | heated water, shower, sanitation | 26.4 |
| (12) | new, not second-hand, clothes | 26.7 |
| (13) | a PC, laptop or tablet | 32.2 |
| (14) | daily access to the Internet | 33.5 |
| (15) | a bicycle | 34.3 |
| (16) | getting out once a month in the city or to the nearest city for shopping, relaxation, meeting friends and relatives | 44.2 |
| (17) | a car or bike | 47.3 |
| (18) | one week annual holiday away from home | 65.9 |
| (19) | an amount of money for personal needs, not part of the family budget | 67.8 |
| (20) | a sum of money put aside for unexpected expenses | 70.6 |
| (21) | a savings account | 76.9 |

Individual wellbeing varies according to the degree social needs are fulfilled. Very few of Romanians posses all the goods and have access to all the services that they regard as necessary for their life. The others lack one or more goods or services. On a scale from 0 (all needs are fulfilled) to 21 (no need is fulfilled):

- 16.6% have between 14 and 21 needs unfulfilled;
- 40.1% have 7−13 needs unfulfilled;
- 43.3% have 0−6 needs unfulfilled.

In comparison to the abovementioned data, official statistics for 2012 point to a level of relative poverty of 16.6% with the inclusion of self-consumption from household resources (subsistence farming), according to official data from the Ministry of Labour (2013). The percentage of population in relative poverty increases to 21.5% without self-consumption and is very similar to the share of 21.6% in the population of people with at least 13 needs unfulfilled.

*Table no. 5*

**Multi-dimensional material deprivation**

| No. of unfulfilled needs | Percent | Cumulative percent | No. of unfulfilled needs | Percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 21 | 0.3 | 0.3 | 10 | 7.1 | 39.6 |
| 20 | 0.7 | 1.0 | 9 | 6.0 | 45.5 |
| 19 | 1.0 | 2.0 | 8 | 6.2 | 51.7 |
| 18 | 1.5 | 3.5 | 7 | 5.0 | 56.7 |
| 17 | 1.5 | 5.0 | 6 | 6.8 | 63.5 |
| 16 | 2.9 | 7.9 | 5 | 8.6 | 72.1 |
| 15 | 3.6 | 11.5 | 4 | 6.9 | 78.9 |
| 14 | 5.1 | 16.6 | 3 | 5.7 | 84.6 |
| 13 | 5.0 | 21.6 | 2 | 6.2 | 90.8 |
| 12 | 5.4 | 27.0 | 1 | 3.8 | 94.5 |
| 11 | 5.5 | 32.5 | 0 | 5.5 | 100 |

The needs, as consensually defined by people, do not hold the same relevance for the quality of life. Some reflect the social circumstances in which people live and what kind of lives they value. These vary from one society to another and evolve in time under pressure from new technologies, socialization, media and advertising, and new consumption patterns. What is a luxury today, tomorrow becomes something ordinary and necessary. Complying with the standards of wellbeing facilitates social inclusion and participation in community life.

Other needs are fundamental, essential for survival, for a long and healthy life, for the ability to work and earn income. Food is a problem for an important share of the population: 16.5% of Romanians could not afford a meal with meat or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) once every second day; more than 5% do not have two hot meals a day. Over a quarter of the population does not have heated water

and sanitation, and more than 6% can not afford to adequately warm their homes. For individuals living in certain households, there is no washing machine (16.7%) or refrigerator (4.2%).

The abovementioned six items of fundamental material needs could be aggregated in an index of deep material deprivation, as a complementary measurement of poverty and social exclusion in Romania. Statistical arguments – the number of persons that experience deprivation in one area or another – constrain us to retain for analysis three deprivation items, which refer to:

● Food: a meal with meat or fish (or equivalent for vegetarians) once every second day;

● Housing: heated water, shower, sanitation;

● Durable goods: washing machine.

However, it should be noted that the abovementioned index of deep material deprivation should be regarded as a work in progress. It is further necessary to check that its components are additive. According to Gordon et al. (Gordon et al., 2000), this could be achieved by examining the results of all possible second order interaction results between the components and using a dependant variable. Usually, this should be equivalised income as a continuous variable. However, the dataset features income as a categorical variable. In addition, further test should be conducted on the reliability and validity of all 21 items.

In 2013, the year of the survey, some two million Romanians experienced serious material deprivation, with none of the three abovementioned basic needs fulfilled, due to low income. Some other 14% had just one of the three abovementioned basic needs fulfilled. Together with the former category, this amounts to 23.5% of the population that has at most one of the three abovementioned basic needs fulfilled. This is very close to the official at-risk of poverty rate of 23.0% in 2013, without self-consumption (National Institute for Statistics, 2016a: 66). For 2013, the official severe material deprivation rate in Romania was 29.8% (National Institute for Statistics, 2016a: 72).

In a previous section, we have looked at several variables that describe the profile of the people in Romania that were facing the risk of poverty. At this stage, we are able to compare it with the profile of those that in 2013 were experiencing deep material deprivation – having at most one need fulfilled out of a meal with meat or fish (or equivalent for vegetarians) once every second day; housing with heated water, sanitation; owning a washing machine. For this, we used the chi-square test. Urban/rural residence, employment, education, and age were entered as independent variables. Each of these variables had two categories. For three of them we recoded the source variables as follows: for employment in employed (employees, business owners, self-employed) versus unemployed or underemployed (registered and unregistered unemployed, day labourers, self-employed farmers); for education in elementary or no school versus secondary (high-school equivalent, vocational) and tertiary education (university degree); for age in 18−34 age group versus 35 and

older. As dependent variable, we created a dummy categorical variable, comprising those that were experiencing deep material deprivation as defined above versus the rest of the sample.

The results are featured in *Table no. 6*, including the percentage of people from each subcategory that were in deep material deprivation, the values of the chi-square statistic with its associated the degrees of freedom (df) and significance value. Also included are the Cramer's V value, which measures the strength of association between two categorical variables in an interval from 0 to 1, and the odds ratio. Results show that there was a significant association between urban/rural residence, employment, education, and age, on one hand, and whether or not a person is in deep material deprivation. All results were statistical significant at $p > .001$ (too small to report the exact *p*-value). Based on the odds ratio, the odds of a person to experience deep material deprivation is 8.17 times higher in rural than in urban areas, 9.1 times higher if he or she is unemployed or underemployed rather than employed, 5.67 times higher if a person has just elementary or no school education compared to a person with secondary or tertiary education, and only 0.43 times higher if a person is aged below 35 instead of 35 and older. With the partial exception of age, employment, place of residence, and education are highly significant in the profile of persons experiencing serious material deprivation. This leads to the rather unsurprising conclusion that the profile of material deprivation and the profile of poverty in 2013 in Romania have a lot in common.

*Table no. 6*

**Association between urban/rural residence, employment, education, age vs. material deprivation**

| variable | percentage in material deprivation | $\chi^2$ statistic | df | significance value | Cramer's V | odds ratio |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| urban/rural | | 187.6 | 1 | 0.000 | 0.391 | 8.17 |
| urban | 7.9 | | | | | |
| rural | 41.1 | | | | | |
| employment | | 92.4 | 1 | 0.000 | 0.403 | 9.1 |
| employed | 6.6 | | | | | |
| unemployed, underemployed | 39.3 | | | | | |
| education | | 157.3 | 1 | 0.000 | 0.360 | 5.67 |
| elementary or no school | 45.5 | | | | | |
| secondary, tertiary | 13 | | | | | |
| age | | 20.4 | 1 | 0.000 | 0.129 | 0.43 |
| 18−34 | 13.4 | | | | | |
| 35+ | 26.5 | | | | | |

*Table no. 7*

**Index of deep material deprivation**

| No of fulfilled needs | Percentage | Cumulative percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 9.6 | 9.6 |
| 1 | 13.9 | 23.5 |
| 2 | 20.9 | 44.4 |
| 3 | 55.6 | 100 |

As we have seen, there are segments of the population that experience multiple and deep material deprivation. For these people, there is a significant association of unfulfilled primary needs as a consequence of lack of money. Lack of food is the main trait of poverty. Most people that could not afford a meal with meat or fish once every other day also do not have running hot water and sanitation in their housing (more than two thirds) and do not own a washing machine as well (more than half). The most important factors in the variance of the multi-dimensional material deprivation are income (contingency coefficient 0.533), employment and labour market participation (99.2% of those living in poverty are not employed), education and urban or rural place of residence. Living in poverty or deep material deprivation occurs more frequently for the unemployed, day labourers, and housewives. Nine out of ten persons that experience multiple and deep material deprivation reside in rural areas. Poverty is an important factor in general life dissatisfaction, suffering and unhappiness.

## DISCUSSION

This paper explored the issues of poverty, inequality, material deprivation, and social exclusion in Romanian society. In the mid 2010s and some ten years following its EU accession, Romania stands as the second poorest and the most unequal member state. The causes of poverty and inequality are structural and run deep in time. Most of them stem from policy decisions and outcomes of the transition period during 1990−2005, from which the current shape of the Romanian economy and society emerged.

Of particular concern is that we are witnessing an increase of inequality since the end of the recession from 2010−2011, despite overall economic growth. The structure of the economy, coupled with economic and social policy, foster a long-run trend of persistently high, even marginally increasing, inequality. In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the profile of the poor has remained the same since the early 2000s, with only one, albeit major exception − pensioners.

Material deprivation adds to the understanding of poverty and social exclusion in Romania. International data reveals Romania in the top two in the EU in terms of share of population at-risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE indicator). One of the main sources of this ranking is the high level of material deprivation in

Romania. Concerning the measuring of material deprivation, in addition to the EU-sponsored AROPE we have also looked at the British Social Exclusion Matrix.

Romanian research of poverty and social exclusion is diversified. In terms of methodological options, most academic research follows the consensual approach, while institutions − public statistics office and international institutions − are more in favour of the income threshold approach. Other approaches, such as the budget standards or issue focused approaches are also present.

Using survey data from 2013, the outcome of our analysis of material deprivation through the consensual method showed similar results with official data from that time period that were based on the income threshold or the consensual approach. There is a large consensus among Romania's population regarding the prevailing decent standard of living. This includes not only the fulfilment of primary needs, that would insure survival, but also more sophisticated needs, such as giving a car, a computer, laptop or tablet, affording a vacation, and financial autonomy. These standards are socially constructed and evolve over time.

Material deprivation is multi-dimensional and varies across Romania's population, including larger or smaller segments of the population. Deprivations that affect primary social needs, like food, housing quality, and the possession of durable goods offer another insight on poverty as a multi-dimensional and deep phenomenon, as well as on the consequences for social inclusion and participation. The empirical data showed that an index of multiple deprivation based on social needs is a complementary method in measuring poverty and social exclusion.

The population's perspective on social needs is certainly more wide-ranging than the one made available through this research. Further research – quantitative and, especially, qualitative – focused on social needs, as they are defined by the Romanian society as a whole, will support to explain and understand the dynamics of poverty, inequality, material deprivation and social exclusion, with important benefits as well for the design and evaluation of social policies.

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*S*tudiul de faţă explorează prin abordarea consensuală amploarea şi dimensiunile deprivării materiale în societatea românească la începutul anilor 2010. În prima secţiune sunt prezentate elemente principale privind sărăcia şi inegalitatea în România de după 1990, cu accent pe cauzele structurale şi profilul populaţiei cu risc de sărăcie. A doua secţiune a studiului vizează deprivarea materială şi utilizarea metodei consensuale în măsurarea acesteia. Indicatorul AROPE şi Matricea Bristol a Excluziunii Sociale sunt prezentate pentru a ilustra utilizarea abordării consensuale în măsurarea deprivării materiale. De asemenea, sunt examinate pe scurt diferitele abordări metodologice în studiul ştiinţific al sărăciei şi excluziunii sociale din România. Date de sondaj sunt apoi folosite într-o abordare consensuală în vederea măsurării deprivării materiale din România.

**Cuvinte-cheie**: sărăcie, deprivare materială, excluziune socială, politici sociale, abordare consensuală, România.