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QUALITY ASSESMENT OF SOCIAL PUBLIC SERVICES

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Abstract

The article investigates a less approached domain in the theoretical papers and in the research field, namely the quality of social public services. In the first part we present some characteristics of social public services and their importance within the public budget construction and for the local communities. Starting from the identified characteristics we made a research focused on quality assessment in social public services. The initial step was made considering the processes administration approach, because an efficient administration leads to an increased efficiency, efficacy and finally to a better quality. The basic assumption is that, within the assessment process, assessing the quality for the supplier is essential. Moreover, quality should be related to process and to organizational structure from which it derives. The research covers the Public Services of Social Assistance (PSSA's), the selection of investigation units was made by the three administrative-territorial levels and using the questionnaire as data collecting technique. Data interpretation was made both for regions and areas of residence, using techniques of descriptive statistical analysis. The results reveal significant quality differences between regions and also between areas of residence, concerning the following issues: organisational structure, human resources, the existence of a social services developing plan, partnerships concluded with civil society organisations, social needs uncovered and barriers to access to social public services.

Keywords: social public services, public administration, organizational management, quality assessment, assessment methodology

JEL Classification: H83, L38

Introduction – Why quality in social public services?

Social services are a special category of public services and „represent a complex set of measures and actions realised in order to answer to the social needs of persons, families, groups or communities, to prevent and overcome difficulty, vulnerability or dependency situations, with the purpose to increase the quality of life and promoting social cohesion.” (article 5, letter d, from Law 47/2006) [11]. Social public services are provided by *Public*

Services of Social Assistance (PSSA's) organised within the counties, municipals and communes public administrations. Social services' role in preventing and diminishing the exclusion and marginalisation significantly increased in the last time, as a result of growth and diversification of social risks connected to economical insecurity, ageing population, weakening of family ties, growth of drugs and alcohol abuse, etc. The main target groups of social services are children, young people in difficulty and juvenile delinquent, disabled persons, elderly persons, drugs, alcohol and other toxic substances dependent persons, family violence victims, persons and families without incomes, some categories such as refugees, immigrants, roma people, etc.

For the Romanian public administration and mainly for the social public services, achieving the quality is a new trend, within the framework of defining concepts, principles and functions have been taken from the commercial field and adapted to the features of public domain. [3] Issues related to social public services quality were taken into account by the Romanian legislature which defined the types of social services, the categories of beneficiaries, the providers, together with the conditions of accreditation and the quality standards that must be fulfilled, inclusively a distribution of responsibilities between public authorities at central and local level. [9] - [13]. The existing standards are nothing more than a certainty that social services are provided with a minimum level of quality. The quality seen as a compliance of the service with the standard rules, rejoins the classical view of the concept. The modern conceptions include the standards in a system of total quality, in which the supplier follows the continuous satisfaction of the clients – citizens' requirements. (Dobrin, 2005) For the providers, quality standards include also the requirements for permanent improvement in the filed by: initial and continuing training of the staff, adopting a marketing and communication adequate strategy, diversification of services suitable to the community needs, developing partnerships, increasing accessibility for users to these services.

1. Quality assessment in social public services

The researches undertaken so far indicate that social services are in a continuous process of transformation, constituting a major economic and social priority for the governments of many countries. At European level, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions drafted in 2004 a report which analyses the health and social services, showing a number of pessimistic trends regarding the possibilities of member states to meet the costs related to the financing and supply of such kind of services. There are several ways to measure the quality in social services, important being the permanent assessment and monitoring of their efficiency and efficacy. For the social services, quality assessment is a very difficult and complex approach, which implies observation, measurement and analysis. **Planning, measurement (control) and quality improvement**, known as **Juran Trilogy**, are considered basic activities destined to increase the quality in social services, because it is essential to measure in order to plan and to improve decision-making process necessary to develop quality services. In addition, the present social services systems must consider an increased number of clients, higher demanding for the quality of the supplied social services and not least, budgetary constraints. The indicators of quality assessment of social services provided by the PSSA's pursued: the organizational method, types of provided social services, the competence of human resources, the number of personnel, uncovered social needs and the undertaken activities for the development of

social services. The chosen outcome-indicators are strongly related with the objectives of the reform programme regarding the social services system and also represent the direct and immediate effects generated by the legislative framework approved in the last years.

2. Questionnaire-based survey: efficient method for quality assessment of social public services in Romania. Analysis realised by development regions and residential areas.

The usage of quantitative and qualitative assessment indicators in questionnaire based surveys offer the possibility to quantify the social services supply process. This was also the approach used in our project financed by NUCLEU SOACT Programme. The goal of the study was to evaluate the stage of development of Public Services of Social Assistance both in urban and rural areas and also to assess the capacity of Public Services of Social Assistance in providing qualitative social services for persons and groups of persons who face difficulties in local communities.

Survey methodology: We used a questionnaire based survey applied in 404 local commune, municipal and town councils (192 in urban area and 212 in rural area) from 41 counties. The questionnaire was applied face-to-face, respondents were persons with responsibilities from Social Services Directions/Services/Departments from 404 localities. Survey period: 26 September - 15 October 2008. We used a probabilistic stratified sample composed of layers obtained from the intersection of the 41 counties with three types of urban and rural areas: municipalities, cities, communes. The exclusion of Bucharest was made at the request of the direct beneficiary of the study results, the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection. Selection of localities was established randomly, based on a table with random numbers. Survey data are representative for the Romanian structure of local councils, municipal and town for year 2008, according to the National Institute of Statistics - Register of Territorial - Administrative Units – SIRUTA, margin of error being + 4.5%, for a confidence interval of 95%. Data storing and data processing were carried out in SPSS 15 program and the analysis and interpretation of the data were made using the un-weighted database. The quality of the data collection and the reliability of interviews completion were conducted using the method of checking logical connections between variables.

The survey was based on the following dimensions: identification of organizational level and of duties from the organizational structures of PSSA's; evidence of social services developed until September 2008 compared to year 2004; the number and level of qualification of employees with responsibilities and duties in the social assistance field in accordance with the existing work volume and with the social needs of the community; initiatives conducted in order to develop social services uncovered by the existing network (from public and private sector); the situation of concluded partnerships; strategies adopted in order to finance social public services from extra-budgetary funds in period 2004 - 2008; strategies used to manage current and future personnel deficit; the level of materials endowments in accordance with needs for optimal conditions development of social services activities; the access to social services provided by social public services from local communities. In the following, we present the main survey's results.

3. Organizational dimension of PSSA's

Organizational dimension of PSSA's reflects the complexity and diversity of social services activities, social services that may be provided by local public administration. According to the Law 47/2006 social services can be provided by Social Assistance Service/Direction/Department, structures better organized and highlighted particularly at urban level, unlike rural areas, where social activities are provided by employees with individual employment contract and with duties in the field of social assistance. According to paragraph 1, article 33, Law 47/2006, local councils and commune mayoralities which don't have the capacity and necessary resources to set up a service, direction or department of social assistance, may hire personnel with competences in social assistance field with individual employment contract. Social services - more complex organizational structures in the local councils, are well represented in the Centre - 63%, West - 58.8%, South East - 56.5% and North-East - 41.4%. Regarding the types of social services provided in specialized units of social assistance being in subordination of PSSA's, there is both a growing number of such centres, but also a diversification of the profile of these centres in accordance with different types of social needs. The most numerous, both in urban and rural areas, are placement centres. Due to the reform aiming at transforming placement centres in the day-care centres, we find both in urban and rural areas, the day-care centres on first place in the total number of centres for children separated or being in risk of separation from parents. Mainly in urban areas there are placed centres for the elderly, centres for family violence victims (their number increased during the reference period took into account) and centres for the protection of the homeless. Care centres for persons with disabilities are more numerous in rural areas. It should be noted that for the victims of trafficking and for the immigrants and refugees the survey did not register data. Also, services for drugs, alcohol and other toxic substances dependent persons were found only in South-West Oltenia development region, from which, in rural areas, was only one social rehabilitation centre found for this people.

4. Management of human resources with responsibilities and duties in social assistance field

4.1. Educational level and degree of professionalization of specialists from social assistance field

A main role in assuring quality in social services provided is due to the employed personnel with tasks in this field. Efficiency and efficacy of social services depend in a great measure on the professionalism, level of qualification and instruction of the personnel involved in social assistance field. We choose to use as a reporting indicator for the answers to the question regarding the number of employees of PSSA's "*the regional average number of employees*" (*urban, rural areas*) for each of the two categories of employees included in our analysis: *public functionaries* and *personnel with individual employment contract*. The results show that the average number of personnel with individual employment contract is strongly over the average number of public functionaries in all development regions, no matter if we talk about urban or rural areas. Regarding educational level, during 2004 - 2008, the number of employees with medium education level who obtained a specialization diploma in social assistance field (post high school education) has increased mostly in urban area. The number of employees with higher education in other fields than social

assistance who follow post-university studies in social assistance field is also growing in this period. The highest increase was registered in *urban area*, in the North-East development region, and in *rural area* in Centre development region. The preoccupation for increasing the degree of professionalization of personnel who activates in social services field depends in equal measure on the interest of managers for permanent training of employees through proper *programmes, in order to improve and update their knowledge in social assistance field*. Data gathered show that in period 2004 - 2008 the majority of training courses organized, both in urban and rural areas, were *training courses for improving the knowledge in social assistance field*. In *urban area* training courses for improving the abilities to work with informatics equipments were mostly mentioned in South-West Oltenia development region and less mentioned in West development region. Training *courses in project management* obtained the highest mentioned percentage in North-West and less mentioned percentage in South Muntenia development regions.

4.2. Satisfaction regarding the number of personnel with duties in providing social public services

The degree of satisfaction regarding the number of personnel employed in social public services departments was measured through direct reporting to existing work volume and social needs of communities. We used a question with closed answers. In graph bellow (fig. no. 1) is presented the cumulative percentage of those “*very satisfied*” and “*satisfied*” with the number of involved personnel from social services department. The most satisfied were those from West region, fact that correlates with distribution registered for indicator “*average number of personnel involved in social services process*”.

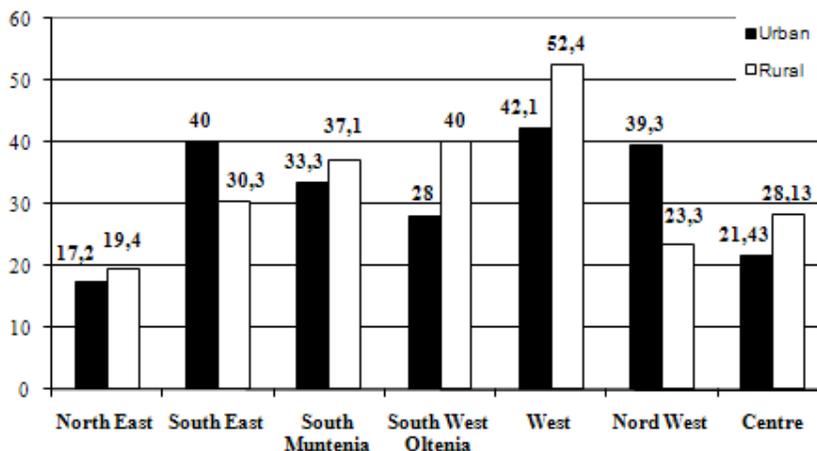


Fig. 1 Cumulative percentage of personnel “very satisfied” and “satisfied” with the number of involved personnel from social services department.

4.3. Personnel deficit and necessity of an efficient administration strategy regarding the management of personnel shortages

All PSSA’s included in the survey consider necessary to implement *strategies for managing the current and future personnel deficit in social services*. The same tendency is also manifested regarding the training personnel strategies and the process of personal

motivation. At national level, according to the obtained results from this survey, the highest personnel deficit was registered in units from urban areas. The main reasons mentioned as important for unoccupied jobs at the time of the survey were *impossibility of finding qualified personal and salary*.

5. Management development of social public services

5.1. Social needs uncovered by the social services

The quality of social services depends largely on an appropriate planning of local needs, on the allocation of budgetary resources and on the ability to attract extra-budgetary funds. The PSSA's which identified the existence of social needs still uncovered by the existing social services in their community mentioned these deficiencies, by taking into account also the social services developed by the private sector. Most frequently mentioned as a development necessity were the *social services for elderly*, both by the respondent units from rural and urban areas. Other services frequently mentioned as being needed have been those regarding the *support of disabled people or people with other health problems, those regarding child support and those regarding the support of persons who have been victims of family violence*. Generally, the same uncovered social needs have been mentioned as being necessary both in units from rural and urban areas and this trend maintained also inside each development region.

5.2. Community Plan for social services development

According to the National Strategy for social services development approved by Government Decision no. 1826 from 12.22.2005, city mayoralties are obliged to elaborate a community plan for social services development. However, the survey results show the fact that the degree of elaboration of such a plan is extremely reduced (60% of the PSSA's do not have a plan yet, not even a plan which is in preparation). Inside each development region, the share of localities which did not elaborate a plan is significantly larger than that of localities which did elaborate such a plan or which are in preparation of such a plan. At urban level, the share of localities which elaborated a plan is of 41.1% in urban level comparing with 12.7% at rural level. In the process of plan elaboration it has been taken into account, generally, the existing information in the database of the survey respondent units, information regarding the volume demands and also the identified needs for certain categories of people, as a result of analysis made together with local partners. The plan elaboration is less based on periodical studies of social risk evaluation for certain people or certain groups of people. Is noteworthy the fact that, both at rural and urban level, there is not, yet, a large practice regarding the substantiation of social services development plan at local level based on periodical studies in order to assess the social risk degree of certain groups of people. In exchange, regarding the degree of taking advice from local partners from governmental and non-governmental sector in the process of preparing the plan, it has been remarked, at least at declarative level, both in urban and rural, a sustained concern of local councils.

5.3. Committing partnerships with NGO's for providing social services

One important element in the process of public social services development is represented by committing partnerships between the public and non-profit sector (PSSA's and non-governmental organizations). In the period 2004 - 2008, most of the developed partnerships were developed in urban areas. (fig. no. 2).

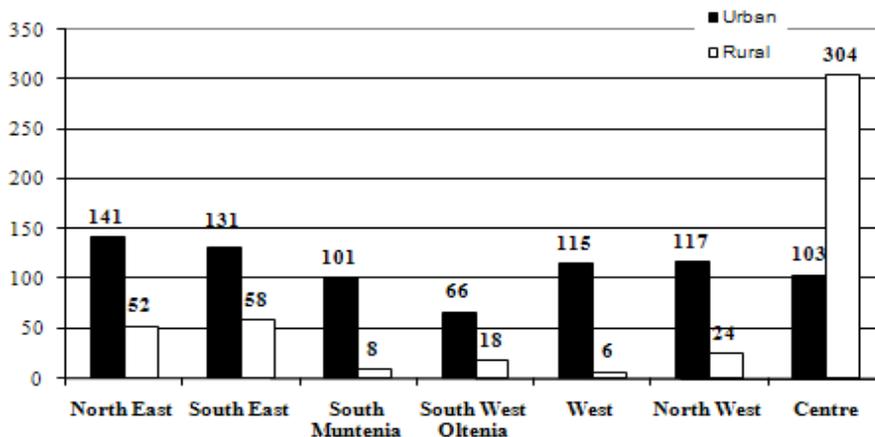


Fig. 2 The number of committed partnerships by the survey units with NGO's between 2004 and 2008

5.4. Development of strategies in order to attract extra-budgetary funds

Taken into account the budgetary restrictions that local councils are often facing, PSSA's can apply various strategies designed to supplement the budget for the development of social services. In addition to developing partnerships with civil society organizations, attracting extra-budgetary funds can be achieved through projects financed by national and international funds, as well by sponsorships. In this respect, in urban areas, there is noted a more important concern than in rural areas. The main reason affirmed by the PSSA's for the involvement absence is the poor experience in terms of project management. This relates with poor training on this subject of personnel.

6. Barriers which limit the access at social services provided by the public responsible institutions

The quality of social services may be limited by the existence of some barriers which may limit the access of the beneficiaries to these services. The PSSA's included in the survey consider as main factors that limit the access to social services: *the lack of information caused by the citizens' unconcern* regarding the social services offer (trend maintained both at regional and residential level); *the incoherent/incomplete legislation and regulations* (generally, the PSSA's from urban area consider this aspect as being a barrier); *the*

extremely large bureaucracy in drawing the files and granting the services (trend maintained both at regional and residential level); the lack of professionals/personnel (accused especially in rural and in development regions such as South and South West). Other mentioned barriers were: the lack of accessibility for the disabled persons at social services provided by PSSA's and insufficient funds.

Conclusions

In the social services field, in the recent years, it has been developed a sustained activity in order to regulate the issues related to organization, development and quality assurance of social services. The survey undertaken on a large number of local municipal councils, town and communes, emphasised a series of aspects, both positive and negative, related with the implementation of the reform in this domain. Undoubtedly, we notice a trend of improvement of the process quality in this field, firstly through the existence of a legal framework which establishes benchmarks to which the public providers must relate. As positive aspects, we must remark the improvement of the quality of the offer, through the diversification of social services types, through the existent preoccupation of the PSSA's to elaborate plans in order to develop the offer of social services and in order to improve the management of human resources as well as through the existent preoccupation to attract extra-budgetary funds in order to increase the quality of the services. The analysis by regions of development and residence areas emphasised a number of weaknesses in the provision of social services that have an impact on quality: poor organization and lack of qualified personnel in rural areas, insufficient social services in number and coverage capacity in comparison with the demand (especially for the elderly, for the victims of trafficking, drugs, alcohol and other toxic substances dependent persons), insufficient human resources. In order to improve the quality of social public services, the permanent assessment and the monitoring of their activity is a useful step for the public bodies responsible for activities in the field and also for beneficiaries. The availability of fine social services accessible to all, the support of the vulnerable and the creation of equal opportunities for all are essential requirements for implementing the European social model. Today we are the witnesses of a transition from a social policy based on minimizing the negative social consequences, occurred together with structural changes, to a policy centred on quality, in order to closer european social systems. Therefore the quality increase of social public services is an important step in order to promote social inclusion and quality of life improvement.

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