

QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE PERFORMANCE OF LPA MANAGEMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA WITH A VIEW TO BRINGING INTERNAL RESERVES INTO LINE WITH THE IMPERATIVES OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Lately, the academic world is increasingly concerned with improving the performance of LPA management, which would certainly contribute to improving the quality of life in rural areas. However, in order to improve the quality of an indicator, we first need to know its current level. This article aims to identify and apply in practice a series of qualitative indicators designed to assess the current level of LPA management performance with a view to identifying and aligning internal reserves with rural imperatives. At the same time, the article proposes that this evaluation should be carried out by the final beneficiaries of public services, i.e., directly by the inhabitants of rural localities - this will undoubtedly increase the credibility of the evaluation.

Key words: *evaluation, management, performance, public administration, services*

INTRODUCTION

The trends of modernization of LPA management imposed by major changes in society and new approaches to public management require public authorities to implement performance measurement procedures in order to ensure continuous performance improvement. „Numerous efforts have been and are still being made to achieve performance in the public sector in order to improve the quality of services provided to citizens” [9, p. 139], ensure a healthy and safe living environment and the sustainable development of administrative-territorial units. But many of these efforts have not been successful.

In the Republic of Moldova, public administration at all levels, as stated by researcher Dinu Manole in one of his works „shows relatively low performance: it holds the first places in the size of the underground economy, infant mortality, population exodus and poverty rate, these indicators being directly correlated with the quality of public policies” [6, p. 112]. We cannot lay all the

blame on the poor quality of public policies, but we have to admit that in the Republic of Moldova the process of public administration reform is a difficult and lengthy one.

The question arises as to why the process of public administration reform in the Republic of Moldova is going so slowly or, better said, is stalling? What are the barriers to the implementation of the Public Administration Reform Strategy 2016-2020? We risk assuming that, in addition to the quality of public policies, the implementation of the Strategy has also met with resistance from the conservative mentality of the civil servant who is still „marked by old traditions, leading to a lack of flexibility and imagination. The literature is difficult to access, and analyses in the field are still timid. Even if more advanced technological facilities exist at some levels, „the knowledge and expertise needed for effective use is often lacking” [1, p. 230]. Legislation in the field often finds administrative staff completely unprepared and unable to implement it effectively, and there is a lack of effort at managerial level to

introduce new thinking into decision-making” [3, p. 141-142].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the performance of the LPA management, especially the attitudes of the final beneficiaries of the services provided by the LPA – the rural population. For this purpose, quantitative research was used to describe the behavior of a population in relation to the subject studied, using methods of quantification and statistical analysis in interpreting the results. Quantitative research can also be described as „a survey of results, based on representative samples, a numerical evaluation of variables and methods of statistical analysis, and the findings obtained can be used to recommend a final course of action” [7]. The assessment of the employee's performance is done by filling in an evaluation sheet in which the employee's skills and competences are rated with points from 1 to 4 by the superiors according to the following criteria:

- knowledge and experience;
- complexity, creativity and diversity of activities;
- conceptualization and decision-making responsibility;
- leadership, coordination and supervision;
- communication;
- volume, quality and efficiency of tasks performed.

At the end, the assessment average is calculated and the assessment grade is determined on the basis of this accumulated average score. Please note that the maximum bonus of 10% is awarded for a „very good” grade (final score 3.51-4.00 points) and a slightly lower bonus, set by the institution, for a „good” grade (final score 2.51-3.50 points). The other two grades, i.e., „satisfactory” (final score 1.51-2.50 points) and „unsatisfactory” (final score 1.00-1.50 points) do not imply performance and, for these reasons, do not provide for any bonus. The period of application of this performance appraisal procedure for public sector employees has demonstrated the ineffectiveness of this

method, in that all employees are rated „very good” by their superiors in order not to deprive them of that „performance bonus” and not to create a negative image in their eyes. Here we must mention that we do not consider the methodology irrelevant, we just consider the evaluation procedure subjective, which leads to the inefficiency of the procedure. However, the performance of LPA management is not limited to the performance of human resources, and their subjective evaluation does not contribute to the development of rural areas. In this context, taking into account the tasks and mission of LPAs to promote the general interests of the inhabitants of an administrative-territorial unit, we believe that the performance of LPA management should be evaluated by the beneficiaries of the services provided by them, i.e., the inhabitants of the administrative-territorial unit. This will ensure better credibility and objectivity of the evaluation results, increase the trust of the population in local elected officials and strengthen the transparency of decision-making. In order to assess the performance of the LPA management in order to identify its weaknesses, we have „resorted to the actual questionnaire of the inhabitants of rural localities in the Republic of Moldova” [11, p. 73]. The questionnaire was designed in digital format, using the Google Forms application. It should be noted that initially the questionnaire was designed for a proportionally stratified sample of 15 people from 10 rural localities, divided into 3 age categories as follows: 5 young people aged 18-25 years, 5 adults aged 26-60 years and 5 elderly people over 61 years. But in the process of distributing the questionnaire things got out of hand, as the people involved in the questionnaire, showing an enormous desire to help and support, randomly forwarded the questionnaire to relatives and acquaintances in several rural localities. Thus, we have to admit that the questionnaire was applied to a simple random sample of 250 respondents of different ages, all of whom met the basic sampling criterion of being inhabitants of rural localities in the Republic of Moldova.

The questionnaire contains 10 questions, the first question being an open-ended question, with the aim of specifying the rural locality, the other questions being closed questions, both single-answer and attitudinal scales. When establishing the attitudinal scale, semantic differentials were chosen, based on the legally prescribed ratings („Very good”, „Good”, „Satisfactory”, „Unsatisfactory”), to ensure comparability of the data and Linkert's scale („Total agreement”, „Partial agreement”, „Partial disagreement”, „Total disagreement”).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Republic of Moldova has taken „the first steps towards the implementation of performance management in the public sector” [8, p. 105] with the adoption of the Regulation on the evaluation of the professional performance of civil servants, annex no. 8 to the GD on the implementation of the provisions of the Law on civil service and the status of civil servants [4]. Subsequently, the concept of performance bonus was introduced, with the aim of motivating and stimulating staff in budgetary institutions and directing them towards continuous improvement of their individual performance. The evaluation criteria and the method of establishing the final score were described in the Framework Regulation on the method of establishing the performance bonus for staff in budgetary units approved by the Government Decision for the implementation of the provisions of the Law on the Unified Salary System [5]. The first question in the questionnaire asked about the level of development of the respondent's rural locality (Fig. 1) in order to subsequently determine the impact of LPA management performance on it. Thus, of the 250 respondents, the majority say they live in a developed municipality - 36.4% and fairly developed - 35.2%. 24.4% of respondents said they live in a poorly developed municipality, followed by those who say they live in a highly developed municipality - 3.6%.

What is the level of development of your village/commune?

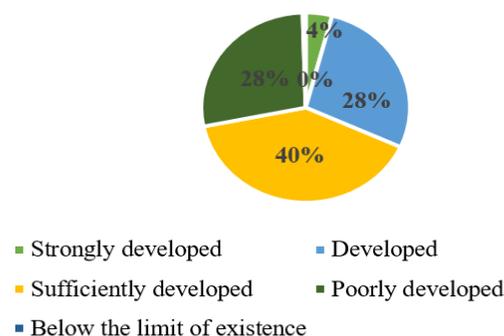


Fig. 1. Assessment of the level of development of rural localities in the Republic of Moldova
 Source: Own determination.

From the sample that participated in the questionnaires, only one person claims to live in a rural locality that is below the level of development. Next, we aim to quantify the responses by applying the score from 1 to 4 and determining the final score.

Table 1. Determination of the final score to assess the level of development of rural areas in the Republic of Moldova

Options offered by the attitudinal scale	Number of respondents	Option score	Total accumulated score
Strongly developed	9	4	36
Developed	91	3	273
Sufficiently developed	88	2	176
Poorly developed	61	1	61
Below the limit of existence	1	-1	-1
Total:	250	*	545
Final score: 2,18 points		Qualifier: Satisfactory	

Source: Own calculation.

Interestingly, despite a significant share of options for developed and highly developed, the rural area still gets a „satisfactory” rating. The next question comes to give a rating to the contribution of the LPAs to the development of the locality; thus, the contribution of the municipalities was appreciated in part with the rating „Good” - 140 answers or 56% and satisfactory - 62 persons or 24.8% (Fig. 2). Thus, applying the same procedure for determining the final score, we establish that the contribution of LPAs to the development of rural localities in the Republic of Moldova

is appreciated by community members with the rating „Good”, final score 2.82 points.

At this stage, can the contribution of the municipality to the development of the rural locality in which you live be assessed with a grade?

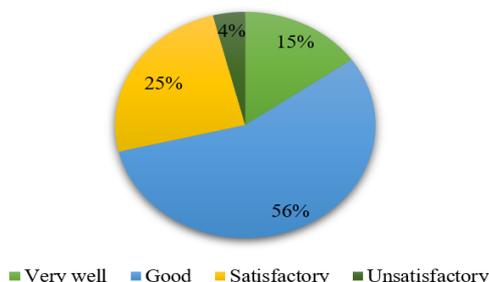


Fig. 2. Appreciating the contribution of LPAs to the development of rural localities
 Source: Own calculation.

This result leaves room for controversy in the context that the level of development of rural localities is satisfactory and the contribution of the municipality in this respect is appreciated as good. This speaks of the fact that the population of rural localities has not definitively lost confidence in local elected representatives and is aware of the considerable contribution they make to the development of rural localities. The series continues with the question, which aims to assess the performance of LPA management in rural localities at the perception level, without applying specific evaluation criteria. The authors included this question in the questionnaire with the aim of establishing the subjectivity of the assessment based on mere perception (Fig. 3).

Are you satisfied with the current performance of the management of your village municipality?

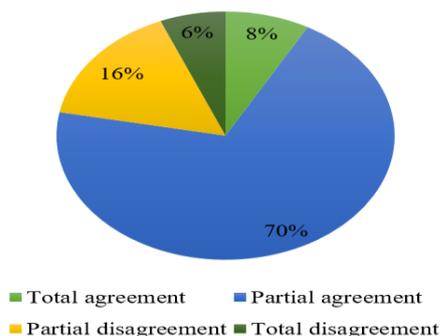


Fig. 3. Assessing community perceptions of LPA management performance
 Source: Own calculation.

Analyzing the responses, we find that the vast majority of respondents are partially satisfied with the performance of the LPA, with the option „Partial agreement” being selected by 156 respondents (62.4%). We note that out of the total number of respondents 14 respondents are not satisfied with the performance of LPA management, which is 4 more than the number of respondents who said that the contribution of LPA to rural development so far has been unsatisfactory. Under these circumstances, we find that at the perception level, the performance of LPA management is rated as „Good” (final score 2.93 points) by the community as the final beneficiary of public services.

The survey of rural community members continued with a series of single-answer matrix questions, formulated taking into account the LPA management performance assessment criteria shown in Fig. 4.



Fig. 4. Qualitative criteria for assessing LPA management performance
 Source: Own calculation.

In order to assess the quality of services provided by rural municipalities, the authors went along three dimensions, namely:

1. Quality of municipal services.
2. Quality of social services.
3. Quality of administrative services.

In assessing the quality of municipal services, the types of municipal services assessed were sewerage, gas, water, sanitation, public transport, street lighting, road maintenance and green space management. It should be noted that this criterion scored the lowest, with an average of 2.66 points, which still allows it to be rated „good” (Table 2). Analyzing the accumulated scores by types of communal services provided to the

inhabitants, we find that the worst quality is provided by the sewerage services, which accumulated a score of 2.32 points, giving it the rating „satisfactory” - this being the only criterion rated by the community members with this rating. The quality of sanitation scored low, with a score of 2.54 points, and the quality of road maintenance scored 2.58 points. The other criteria such as gas supply, water supply, public transport and management of green spaces scored between 2.69 and 2.71. Here we would like to mention that street lighting was rated by the rural community with the highest score - 3.02 points, a score which however did not allow it to be rated „very good”. We can assume that thanks to the projects implemented for this purpose, the villages of the Republic of Moldova can boast of a well-developed street lighting system, which can even be considered as performing, given that it has accumulated the highest score, and performance, in fact, implies a clearly superior result compared to another score (Table 2).

Table 2. Final community score for the quality of municipal services in rural areas

No.	Intermediate evaluation criteria	Score
1.	Sewerage	2.32
2.	Gasification	2.70
3.	Water	2.71
4.	Sanitation	2.54
5.	Public transport	2.69
6.	Street lighting	3.02
7.	Road maintenance	2.58
8.	Green space management	2.70
Final average score:		2.66

Source: Own calculation.

However, it is important to note that the quality of municipal services is an important indicator when assessing the level of sustainable development, as it directly influences the quality of life in rural areas, which is why it is necessary for local public authorities to pay greater attention to the capacity and quality of municipal services provided in order to improve it. In order to assess the quality of social services in rural localities, ten priority areas were established, including education, health, culture, social services, etc. Analyzing the quality of social services (Table 3), vulnerabilities were established in the areas of activity of

community development centers, such as museums, cultural centers (score 2.52 points), social protection services (2.63 points) and social welfare services (score 2.67). The score for these services falls into the „good” category, but compared to the other results they are the worst, so municipalities have some work to do on these criteria. It is indeed sad to see these results, especially for the reason that it is the community development centers that are the promoters of our age-old values and traditions, and the elderly, the people who know our traditions and customs best, do not receive sufficient support to enable them to secure a decent old age. Less satisfied is the rural population and the greening of localities (score 2.60 points), a criterion which, in the context of promoting sustainable rural development, should be improved. Also, in this context, there are reservations about the enhancement of historical monuments, parks and nature reserves (score 2.69), which could be achieved through community involvement, given that the community gives the quality of youth-oriented services and sport a score of 2.70 points. Involving young people in actions to green the countryside could achieve performance on two criteria through a single action. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, a pandemic that has focused our attention on making health services more efficient, the score of 2.81 points for these services is explainable. A reasonably good score of 2.85 points is also attributed to cultural events organized by town halls, such as festivals, celebrations etc.

Table 3. The final score given by the community to the quality of social services in the localities

Intermediate evaluation criteria	Score
Early education	3.28
Education (schools, high schools)	3.12
Youth and sport	2.70
Culture (organisation of festivals, celebrations, promotion of national values)	2.85
Activity of community development centres (museums, houses of culture)	2.52
Health	2.81
Social services for the protection of children, the disabled, the elderly, etc.	2.63
Social welfare services for the elderly, disabled people	2.67
Enhancement of historical monuments, parks, nature reserves	2.69
Greening of the locality	2.60
Final average score:	2.79

Source: Own calculation.

One thing we are pleased about is the score for education (3.28 for early education and 3.12 for secondary education). The educational services still have some way to go to reach the „very good” rating, but the fact that they scored highest compared to the quality of other social services makes us believe that schooling in the Republic of Moldova still has a future. Discussing the value of education in the lives of rural people, we cannot overlook the statistics presented in Table 3 of this paper which show the monthly expenditure of a rural person on training and education compared to expenditure on drinking and cigarettes. Recall that the ratio was 1 to 3.5 in favor of drinking and cigarettes. Involuntarily the question arises whether the quality of education is really as assessed by the rural population or was this criterion assessed according to its valence in the list of priorities? Administrative services were assessed on the basis of the quality, timeliness and price of issuing various permits and how the LPAs manage emergencies (Table 4). The most appreciated was the efficiency of issuing certificates, permits by LPAs, score 2.92 points, as well as the way emergency management is handled, rated with a score of 2.84 points, presumably as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 4. Final community score for quality of administrative services

No.	Intermediate evaluation criteria	Score
1.	Operationality of issuing certificates, authorizations	2.92
2.	Cost of issuing certificates, authorizations	2.81
3.	Method of charging the cost of issuing certificates, authorizations	2.80
4.	Use of information technology to facilitate the issuing of documents	2.80
5.	Management of emergency situations	2.84
Final average score:		2.84

Source: Own calculation.

The population is even satisfied to a large extent with the costs charged for issuing these documents (score 2.81 points), but the level of satisfaction decreases slightly with regard to the way costs are charged and the use of information technology (score 2.8 points). We can assume that in order to achieve performance and increase consumer satisfaction, both the way of requesting the

document and the cost collection should be digitized, in this context it would be desirable either to have a bank terminal to make payments via bank card, without having to go to one of the commercial banks, or to implement a way of paying for these services via internet-banking applications.

The quality of human resources was again rated „good” by community members, with a final score of 2.80 points. It should be noted that among the qualities rated highest among the employees of the town hall and local councilors were knowledge and experience (score 3.00) and communication skills (score 2.95 points). There is still some work to be done on complexity, creativity and diversity (score 2.82), but it should be noted that sometimes mayors encounter intermediate barriers on their way to performance, which they cannot avoid (Table 5).

Table 5. Final score attributed by the community to the quality of human resources in LPA level I

No.	Intermediate evaluation criteria	Score
1.	Knowledge and experience	3.00
2.	Complexity, creativity and diversity of activities	2.82
3.	Conceptualization and responsibility, including decision-making	2.86
4.	Leadership, coordination and supervision	2.88
5.	Communication	2.95
6.	Volume, quality and efficiency of tasks performed	2.87
Final average score:		2.90

Source: Own calculation.

It should be noted here that I was right in saying that there is a small degree of subjectivity in the assessment of employees by employers on legal principles. As far as we can see, the community assesses the quality of human resources with a „good” rating, while employers, however, give a good proportion of their employees a „very good” rating. Further analyzing the criterion „financial capacity”, we find that rural residents were consistent in giving scores, thus both for the quality of management of public funds and for the capacity to generate income and attract funds a score of 2.96 points was given, the maximum score recorded for the criteria evaluated by the questionnaire. In this chapter we note that the population in rural areas showed generosity in overestimating, to some

extent, especially the capacity of municipalities to generate revenue, or this was caused by a lack of knowledge in the field or the fact that much financial-accounting information is not publishable. The same is noted in the assessment of the quality of strategic planning which the rural community rated with a score of 2.86 points. This can be explained by a lack of managerial knowledge, many people, especially the elderly, probably do not even know what an operational or strategic plan entails and what its usefulness is. Again, we consider the score for this criterion to be overestimated for the simple reason that a large number of municipalities in rural areas do not draw up strategic development plans, limiting themselves to operational plans. We would point out in this context that it would be preferable for the actions planned by the town council to be coordinated with the community through joint meetings, and for local development plans to be made public and accessible to the community at any time, as this is a prerequisite for ensuring transparency in their work. If we talk about transparency of activity, the community rates it with a score of 2.88 points, and for community involvement in the decision-making process it gives a score of 2.71 points. This is a rather high score, but compared to other results presented in the LPA management performance evaluation sheet by the inhabitants of the administrative-territorial unit we consider its level to be sufficient, especially considering that 68.8% of the respondents (Fig. 5) participate for the first time in the LPA management performance evaluation, and 25.6% - rarely. We can assume that for the rural community it is more comfortable and easier not to be involved in administrative affairs, thus the current state of affairs is described as transparent. In fact, community perceptions depend to a large extent on their expectations, considering the evaluation of the quality of communal services, services that affect them directly and from which community expectations are higher than the actual level of these services, the community was less tolerant, giving this evaluation criterion a lower score.

We believe, however, that community members are the right people to evaluate the performance of LPAs because they are the people who actually benefit from the services provided by the LPA, they are the people who know from the inside the problems of the rural locality where they live, they are the ones who can contribute to the diversification of economic activities in the locality, they are the ones who know the traditions and customs of the locality and can continuously promote them. For these reasons, the first level LPAs should identify levers to involve the community in administrative activities, making them understand that the quality of decisions taken by local elected representatives has a direct impact on the living standards of the population in the administrative-territorial unit.

Have you previously participated in the performance appraisal of the local municipality's management?

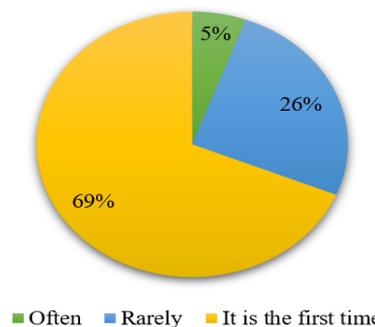


Fig. 5. Assess the degree of community involvement in LPA management performance assessment activities
Source: Own calculation.

Determining, however, the final average score given by the local community to the performance of LPA management, we find that it is rated on average for all five criteria assessed with a score of 2.86 points, a score that gives LPA management performance a „good” rating. But here we come back to performance? But does performance only mean „good”? Performance implies „a great result”, and this „good” means something common, something ordinary and nothing „special”. At international level, the quality of a country's public services is related to three things: „the level of public confidence in public administration, the ease with which

economic activities can be carried out, and the level of well-being of society” [10, p. 123]. Linking the quality of socio-economic life in rural localities analyzed above to the quality of public services, we are forced to note that local public authorities have a significant reserve in the direction of increasing the quality of LPA management in order to ensure economic prosperity, social cohesion and well-being of the population in rural localities.

CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic and unfavorable climatic conditions have demonstrated once again that the rural economy, based on agriculture and the processing of agricultural and non-agricultural products, is insufficient and in continuous decline, resulting in a marked degree of underdevelopment and a significant gap with the urban environment and the European countryside. For the Republic of Moldova, rural development is currently a priority, which aims to implement an integrated policy to harness all types of potential in rural areas: livestock farming, agriculture, processing of agricultural products, crafts, rural tourism, agricultural tourism, traditions etc. Taking into account the tasks and „mission of LPAs to promote the general interests of the inhabitants of an administrative-territorial unit” [2, p. 46], we believe that the performance of LPA management should be evaluated by the beneficiaries of the services provided by them, i.e. by the inhabitants of the administrative-territorial unit according to the following criteria: quality of strategic planning, capacity and quality of services provided, financial capacity, permeability of community involvement and transparency of the decision-making process, and, of course, quality of human resources. The performance of LPA management at level I was rated „good” by the population in rural areas, with the LPA management scoring low on the criteria related to the assessment of the quality of communal services (2.66 points), the activities of community development centers (2.52 points), the quality of social services (2.63 points) and the criterion related to

community involvement in decision-making (2.71 points). Internationally, the quality of a country's public services correlates with the level of trust people have in public administration, the ease with which economic activities can be carried out, and the level of well-being of society. Linking the quality of socio-economic life in rural localities in the Republic of Moldova to the quality of public services (the criterion that scored the lowest in the assessment - 2.66 points), we have to conclude that local public authorities have a significant reserve in the direction of increasing the quality of LPA management to ensure economic prosperity, social cohesion and well-being of the population in rural localities.

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