

INTRODUCING A MODEL FOR SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM IN ROMANIA*

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Abstract

Social impact assessment (hereafter, SIA) is a specific type of evaluation extremely useful in public management, a research technique and a public policy instrument successfully used all over the world by those responsible with institutional and organizational management, with the coordination of projects and programs financed from public or private funds. Governments use the SIA in order to notice, in time, the effects of the interventions they implement or they intend to implement. The aim of a model for social impact assessment of public administration reform is to observe over time and mitigate the unwanted effects of public administration reforms on the groups of people, on communities and on society, as well as to encourage the positive elements of the impact. In short, social impact assessment of public administration reform can be used in order to minimize losses and maximize the benefits of the reform interventions upon small or large social groups.

Keywords: evaluation, Romania, social impact assessment, reform, public administration.

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1. The problem addressed

The main problem addressed by the present article is the weak data support regarding the social impact assessment of the public administration reform programs in Romania. This is an issue that may have a crucial long-term influence on the quality of public administration reforms. One of the great problems of public administration reform in Romania is the lack of experience in treating citizens as customers, regarding this aspect, the social impact assessment research can have a positive impact. Another problem addressed refers to the data gap concerning the past, present and future effects of reform programs upon population and communities, and, in this respect, the weak data support for the decision-making process concerning the future reforms. One of the expected results of a model for social impact assessment of public administration reform is to support public policies and decision-making process for central and local governments in order to minimize losses and maximize the benefits of reform programs upon small or large groups of people and communities.

The main difficulty of the problem at hand consists in the lack of a coherent and systemic monitoring system in public administration reform programs and, consequently, the gaps in empirical data collected over time. Most gaps can be covered by a complex data collection process both retrospectively and in real-time. The present project proposes an elaborate indicator system that can be used both as a monitoring system and for the future evaluation studies of the social impact assessment of public administration reform programs.

2. Necessity and opportunity

The main limit of existent approaches, in the current state of art in the field, is the fact that the social impact assessment model that we design and develop will have a national focus as the impacts of public administration reform program are considered in the Romanian social, economic, organizational and cultural framework. But this limit is going to be irrelevant as a strong component of benchmarking and comparative perspective can be used in the design of the social impact assessment methodology as well as in the presentation of the results of the impact evaluations carried out with the help of this model. Becker and Vanclay (2008) and Esteves, Franks and Vanclay (2012) propose some of the most recent and comprehensive typologies regarding impact assessment models. Researchers such as Barrow (2001; 2003), Vanclay and Esteves (2012), Becker (1997), Burdge (2003) and many others promote the study of SIA theoretically and practically through the many publications in the field, through the IAIA-International Association for Impact Assessment, and inside this, through numerous activities such as teaching, organising workshops, conferences, discussion lists, editing professional publications, and through permanently updating the domain web site (www.iaia.org). A special feature of recent contributions is the stress placed on the practical applicability of the information proposed. That is why a good part of the newly-appeared publications focus on definitions and justification; such studies come with methodologies that, followed step by step, lead to the practical implementation of SIA. An example in this

way is the book of Christopher Barrow: 'Social Impact Assessment: An Introduction', published in 2004 at Oxford University Press. Endowed with more practical aims than theoretical ones, SIA has at least three generally accepted objectives: (1) to inform about changes in norms, beliefs, perceptions, values and their effects, (2) to anticipate possible impacts of actions both negative and positive and (3) to suggest which development alternatives must be avoided. In short, it is meant to reduce or mitigate problems and maximize benefits (Barrow, 2004, p. 3).

Frank Vanclay is situated in the same paradigm. Together with other authors from IAIA, he published 'The International Handbook of Impact Assessment' (2003, reprinted in 2008). "Today, the objective of SIA is to ensure that the developments (or planned interventions) that do occur maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of those developments, especially those costs borne by the community" (Vanclay, 2003, p. 1). He mainly refers to externalities, costs that are not properly taken into account and which decision makers, regulatory authorities and developers fail to consider, partly because they are not easily identifiable and quantifiable (Vanclay and Esteves, 2012).

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3. The concrete objectives of building a model for the social impact assessment of reform programs in public administration

1) Performing the evaluation of the public administration reform programs, from the social impact perspective.

2) The possible use of the social impact assessment model developed in the evaluation of the impact of a public administration reform program in the 1990-2012 period (retrospective/ex-post social impact assessment).

3) The implementation of the social impact assessment model developed in the evaluation of the social impact of a public administration reform programs that are in the implementation stage (Interim social impact assessment).

4) The implementation of the social impact assessment model developed in the evaluation of the social impact of a public administration reform program that is going to be implemented in the future (Ex-ante social impact assessment).

5) The possibility to elaborate packages of public policy proposals based on social impact assessment results in order to diminish negative social impacts of the public administration reforms and to encourage positive social impacts.

The degree of originality and innovation of a social impact assessment of public administration reform is high to extremely high. At present, no methodological tool for impact assessment study of reform programs adjusted to the Romanian institutional realities exists. In the impact assessments performed by international organizations in Romanian institutional environment the use of a methodology that is insufficiently adjusted to the institutional environment could have distorted the results. The Romanian public institutions have benefited so far by a weak methodological toolkit that could help in designing and implementing social impact assessments.

A model for social impact assessment of public administration reform involves the design of extremely useful methodological tools for the impact assessments of public administration reforms in the Romanian institutional environment. This will give the Romanian decision-makers responsible with the design and implementation of public administration reforms the opportunity to calculate more accurately the impact assessment of programs and projects supported from public money. The new model would offer the public officials and the citizen an accurate image and idea of the potential and actual success of certain investments or investment opportunities from public money. As a consequence, the intuitive factor in the decision making process in public administration reform would significantly decrease.

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The element of originality and innovation brought by the present project is the creation of a methodology that can be used for the social impact assessment at the level of complex reform programs. Some elements of the proposed model have already been included in several studies regarding public administration or public services reform by Mora and Țiclău (2012), Antonie (2012), Hințea (2011) and Țigănaș *et al.* (2011), but a consistent social impact assessment model for the public administration reform is still missing from the literature.

The social impact assessment of public administration reform would significantly influence the scientific field by introducing, developing and applying a social impact assessment model and methodology especially designed for the evaluation of public administration reform programs in the context of the Romanian socio-economic and cultural environment. This new concept and approach will definitely open new themes and research directions, especially towards the social impact assessment of reforms in other domains and towards the use of social impact evaluation findings in policy-making process - which is an approach quite new to the Romanian practice, especially due to the lack of evaluation culture and capacity.

The potential impact of the model for the scientific environment consists in: the possible use of data collected with the help of this model by other members of scientific community, the multiple possible use of the results of ex-ante, interim and ex-post social impact assessment of large-scale programs such as public administration reform in comparative studies by scientists from Romania and from abroad, the use of the social impact assessment model created in order to evaluate new possible or effective impacts of complex programs in other fields, the potential multiplier effect (eventually, new impact assessment models will be developed for assessing other complex program) The public awareness of the actual social impacts of the public administration reform programs in Romania is another potential impact, along with the possibility to design packages of public policy proposals in order to diminish negative impacts of public administration reforms implemented so far and to encourage and accentuate the positive impacts at social, economic and cultural level.

4. Methodology

Concerning the technical issues (the methodology used), there is a certain agreement among professionals. social impact assessment involves the use of program evaluation methodology and that of sociological research methods, both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (observation, interview, case-studies, etc).

For social impact a varied methodology was developed, according to the socio-economic, cultural and organizational context, according to the nature of the intervention, the variables that need to be measured, the budget available, according to the research capacity and a series of other factors involved.

From classical sources (Backer, 1997; Rossi, Freeman and Lypsey, 1999) and of the most recent publications in the field: Esteves, Franks and Vanclay (2012) and Vanclay and Esteves (2012), numerous research designs for impact assessment can be used, according to the intervention assignment, the type of controls used, and the data collection strategies. Therefore, we can use simple analysis before and after intervention, cross-sectional studies for non-uniform programs, panel studies: several repeated measures for non-uniform programs and time-series (many repeated measures). Simple before-and-after studies have non-random and uniform intervention assignments, the targets are measured before and after intervention, while the output is measured on exposed targets before and after intervention. Cross-sectional studies for non-uniform programs have a non-random and non-uniform intervention assignments, the targets are differentially exposed to the intervention compared with statistical controls. As for data collection strategies, after-intervention output measures and control variables are used. For panel studies, several repeated measures for non-uniform programs have a non-random and non-uniform intervention assignment where targets are measured before, during and after intervention. For the time series (many repeated measures), the intervention assignment is non-random and uniform, there are large aggregates compared before and after intervention. For data collection, many repeated before and after intervention output measures on large aggregates are applied.

The investigation in the area of social impact assessment of public administration reform has to integrate the newest approaches regarding methods and tools from program evaluation and social sciences research. From the social sciences research methodology, the multimethod paradigm is the most appropriate. Specifically, the methods that can be used are: (1) analysis of documents (the document population consists in: documents and reports related to the public administration reform from Romania and from abroad; the research instrument will be the document analysis grid), (2) secondary data analysis, in order to analyze the public administration reform programs, (3) and the interview (with the interview guide as instrument) applied to reform programs responsables (present and former ministeries, secretaries of state in the Ministry of Administration and Interior, public officials at local level and other important actors responsible with the reform of public administration. The evaluation types that can be used are ex-post evaluation of the social impact, interim evaluation of the social impact, and ex-ante evaluation of the social impact. From the program evaluation toolkit, a

wide variety of evaluation models, methods and instruments could be used: results models, program-theory model, process models, system models and one of the most recently debated in the scientific literature and in the evaluation practice at the level of the European Union, namely the counterfactual evaluation model. Along with the social research methods mentioned above, where necessary, the researchers can also use the social survey with questionnaires and the interviews, to make sure the existent data gaps do not influence the results of the project. A survey can be conducted for each of the ex-post, the interim and the ex-ante evaluation of social impact. The population targeted for the social impact assessment of public administration reform would be: (1) the personnel involved in the development of the public administration reform programs at central and local level and (2) the citizens from across the country. The sample would be a random stratified one. The stratification variables that can be used are: the administrative region (for the investigations performed both on citizen and on public clerks and public officials responsible with reform; North-East, South-East, South Muntenia, South-West Oltenia, West, North-West, Center, Bucharest-Ilfov) and the institution type (used only for the responsible with the design and implementation of public administration reform; Central government, Prefectures, City Halls, General Directions of Public Finances, Work and Social Protection Directions, Prefectures, County Councils). Beside these, according to the concrete reform domain, some other stratification variables might be used as well. Documents' analysis, secondary data analysis, outputs resulted from other research studies and the methodology specific to public policy proposals can also be used for the accomplishment of the social impact assessment of public administration reform.

The steps involved by the model for social impact assessment of public administration reform in Romania include:

1. The analysis of the social impact assessment models used in the assessment of complex reform programs in public administration.
2. The analysis of the public administration reform programs from 1990 until 2012.
3. The analysis of the public administration reform programs from 2013 and of the intended public administration reform programs for the future.
4. The development of a social impact assessment model and methodology fit for the evaluation of public administration reform programs.
5. Testing the model developed at step number 4.
6. Methodological design of the research (sampling, questionnaire and interview guide construction and testing) for the investigation of the social impact assessment of public administration reform.
7. The collection and analysis of empirical data regarding the ex-post social impact assessment of the reform program in public administration from the 1990-2012 interval.
8. Methodological design (sampling, questionnaire and interview guide construction and testing) for the investigation of the interim social impact assessment of a public administration reform program that is in the implementation stage.

9. The collection and analysis of empirical data regarding the interim social impact assessment of a reform program in public administration that is in the implementation stage.
10. Methodological design (sampling, questionnaire and interview guide construction and testing) for the investigation of the ex-ante social impact assessment of a public administration reform program that is going to be implemented.
11. The collection and analysis of empirical data regarding the ex-ante social impact assessment of a reform program in public administration that is going to be implemented.
12. The development of recommendations and policy proposals based on the results of the analysis of the social impact assessment studies performed.

5. Conclusions

Scientifically, the problem is highly important as the developers of public administration reform programs could use the results of a social impact assessment of past, present and future reform programs in order to make data-based decisions. Technologically, the issue is highly significant as it develops a new social impact assessment methodology fit for the evaluation of the impact of public administration reform programs. From the socio-economic and cultural point of view, the SIA methodology presented is extremely relevant as it brings into focus the socio-economic and cultural impacts of the public administration reform programs. Even more, with the help of this methodology, the decision-makers responsible with the reform in public administration can elaborate public policy proposals in order to diminish the negative social impacts of the public administration reform programs and to encourage the positive impacts.

The main potential risks are related to: the data quality and data gaps regarding the public administration reform programs; approaches for mitigation: collecting primary data, where possible, and signaling the gaps in data interpretation process where necessary.

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