

MEASURING THE SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF URBAN COMMUNITIES: THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES*

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Abstract

The paper explores the topic of social sustainability which in the last years has attracted interest from both the academia and political decision-makers and analyzes emerging issues on the social sustainability agenda such as urban governance, citizens' empowerment and participation, sense of place, urban livability etc. The article focuses on how social sustainability of a community can be evaluated: it looks at existing methodologies, metrics and tools and uses the indicators from the Egan report (UK) to illustrate the shifts currently taking place in the realm of sustainability assessment. The empirical research strives to determine whether public servants working in urban planning or in other areas that are closely related to planning are in favor of introducing at the local level a sustainability assessment system (research carried out in medium and large municipalities from the North-Western region of Romania). The main conclusion which can be derived from both literature and practice is that the themes under the umbrella of social sustainability are changing and that sustainability assessment is currently in the process of being better understood and used at the local level.

Keywords: social sustainability, evaluation, Egan report, Romania, livable communities.



1. The social dimension of sustainable development

Over the last two decades the concept of sustainable development has emerged as a new development paradigm, combining social, economic and environmental aspects. There is however a general consensus that the three pillars of sustainability have not been given the same weight by decision makers. The same can be said with regard to the academic literature on the topic of sustainable development. Environmental and economic concerns dominated the sustainability agenda in the late 1970s and 1980s; social concerns have been integrated only starting with the 1990s (Colantonio, 2007, p. 3). In addition to the social dimension, there are authors who discuss about other dimensions of sustainability such as the moral, the technical, the legal and the political dimension (Pawlowski, 2008, pp. 81-83). Very often authors acknowledge the existence of a hierarchy among the proposed dimensions: the moral issues rank highest (in short the humankind's responsibility for nature), followed by the traditional pillars economy, environment and social equity, and finally by the technological, legal and political dimensions (Pawlowski, 2008, pp. 81-83). Despite the fact that integration of these dimensions is needed, most authors recognized that this is extremely difficult to achieve in practice.

1.1. Definitions of social sustainability

There is limited literature that focuses specifically on social sustainability, which is seldom, if ever, defined as an independent dimension of sustainable development. OECD (2001) states that social sustainability is often associated with the social implications of environmental politics while Metzner (2000) contends that numerous social research studies and policy documents have been developed without or with little regard for the sustainability perspective. A broader literature exists on the overlapping concepts of social capital, social justice, engaged governance, social cohesion, social inclusion and social exclusion etc. (Dempsey *et al.*, 2011, p. 290; Cuthill, 2010, p. 363).

Polese and Stren (2000, pp. 15-16) offer one of the most complex definitions of social sustainability: 'development (and/or growth) that is compatible with harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population...'. This definition highlights the interdependence that exists between the different pillars of sustainability (economic/development and social integration and civil society participation). Biart (2002, p. 6) states that sustainability 'aims to determine the minimal social requirements for long-term development (sometimes called critical social capital) and to identify the challenges to the very functioning of society in the long run...'. It is interesting to note in this definition the interpretation attributed by the cited author to the concept of social capital. An interesting definition of social sustainability is offered by Bramley *et al.* (2006, p. 5) who state that there are two overarching concepts at the core of the notion of social sustainability, namely social equity (which centers upon distribution fairness) and sustainability of the community (refers to the viability and health of society as a whole).

There are other authors, who, without explicitly defining social sustainability, point out key elements that are usually associated with social sustainability. The most frequently mentioned are: equity or equitable access to resources and public services (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Sachs, 1999), livelihood (Chambers and Conway), basic needs (Baines and Morgan, 2004), employment and income (Omann and Spangenberg, 2002; Sachs, 1999). In addition to these key traditional themes others are emerging as well: pride and sense of place, cultural and social diversity, empowerment and participation.

Dempsey *et al.* (2011, p. 291) also distinguish between non-physical themes/factors and predominantly physical factors. The first category includes education and training, social justice (inter- and intra- generational), employment, mixed tenure etc. The latter includes items such as urbanity, attractive public realm, and walkable neighborhoods: pedestrian friendly etc.

1.2. Traditional versus emerging themes in social sustainability

As already seen from the definitions presented above, during the last decades there has been an ongoing change in the types of themes usually placed under the umbrella of social sustainability. In Table 1 below several of the traditional and emerging themes are presented. This shift is taking place, as described in section 3, in the context in which the community becomes the scale at which sustainability should be reached and the residents’ voice should be taken into consideration. The shift in themes under the umbrella of social sustainability goes hand in hand with a change in the assessment methodology – we are witnessing a departure from purely quantitative methods and metrics toward more qualitative ones. Colantonio and Dixon (2008) also note that in general the traditional themes can be encountered on the redevelopment agenda of ‘Southern cities’ while the Northern ones focus currently more on the ‘soft topics’.

Table 1: Social sustainability themes

Traditional	Emerging
Basic needs – housing and environmental health	Demographic change (age, migration and mobility)
Education and skills	Social mixing and cohesion
Employment	Identity, sense of place and culture
Equity	Empowerment, participation, and access
Human rights and gender	Health and safety
Social justice	Social capital
	Well being, happiness and quality of life

Source: Colantonio (undated, p. 19)

The departure from the traditional themes of social sustainability poses serious challenges for governments and policy makers. While some authors question the ability of governments to achieve social objectives such as happiness (Ormerod and Johns, 2007) others argue that governments have for long pursued this type of objectives, however without explaining it systematically and/or measuring it (Layard, 2007).

2. Social sustainability in an urban context

Some of the themes associated with social sustainability clearly show the difficulty of separating social activity from the physical setting in which it takes place (Blackman, 2006). Jenks and Dempsey (2007) argue that the concept of sustainable communities implicitly means that a territorial dimension is applied to social sustainability. The concept of sustainable communities occurred on the agenda of European urban policy in 2005, when the Bristol Accord was approved. According to this document, sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to the environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all (ODPM, 2006). A similar definition describes sustainable communities as those communities which meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contribute to a high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion and strengthen economic prosperity (Egan Review, 2004, p. 7). As it can be observed, some key words from the definitions include needs, quality of life, social cohesion etc. Generally speaking, people tend to perceive social sustainability as a positive thing. Dempsey *et al.* (2011, pp. 291-292) question this assumption and argue that it is possible for example that social cohesion can lead to communities that are insular and exclusive in their membership. Also, the cited authors argue, that it is possible that some items associated with social sustainability (cohesion, sense of place) may occur in spite of negative physical characteristics in a community (pollution).

Dempsey *et al.* (2011, pp. 294-297) argue that in their opinion the sustainability of communities mainly relates to collective aspects of social life. According to these authors, if we want to measure social sustainability at neighborhood level, we should take into consideration the following dimensions: social interaction/social networks in the community; participation in collective groups and networks in the community; community stability; pride/sense of place; and safety and security. These dimensions illustrate the shift toward soft themes under the umbrella of social sustainability. In many cases it is also a shift from the individual toward the collectivity/community.

3. Measuring the social sustainability of urban communities

Recently there has been a significant interest in developing sustainability assessment methods, metrics, and tools, prompted by the need to operationalize the somewhat fuzzy concept of sustainable development and to inform development policies. Many of the existing sustainability assessments models can be applied to social aspects as well (LUDA, 2006). They usually range from very technical and expert-driven methods (cluster analysis) to less technical, based on general methods used in social sciences (focus groups, workshops) and participatory ones (Colantonio, 2007).

Many approaches to sustainability assessment are derived mainly from environmental impact assessment (EIA) or strategic environmental assessment (SEA) which have been expanded to incorporate in addition to environmental considerations, social and economic

ones as well. It is not clear however if social impact assessment is always conducted as part of EIA. Hacking and Guthrie (2007) argue that social impact assessment (SIA) can be undertaken on its own, as a component of EIA, in parallel with EIA, or as part of an integrated S&EIA. Numerous authors critique however these 'integrated' methods mostly because the three pillars of sustainable development are regarded as separate and the inter-linkages between the three pillars are under-explored (George, 2001; Colantonio, 2007; Pope *et al.*, 2004).

Colantonio (undated, p. 16) describes the sustainability assessment (SA) that has been developed starting with the 2000s as a 'form of strategic assessment that integrates environmental, social and economic parameters and relies on the application of a variety of methods of enquiry and arguments to produce policy-relevant information in order to evaluate human actions against the normative goals of sustainable development'. The cited author considers that the last generation SAs are all characterized by an integration of the three pillars of sustainable development; focus on the principles of sustainability as opposed to targets; participatory; inclusion of equity considerations (p. 16).

In addition to methods, indicators are fundamental instruments to measure progress toward sustainability. There is a wide variety of sustainability indicators available worldwide (on its website the International Institute for Sustainable Development) reports about the existence of over 600 initiatives concerning main efforts towards defining sustainability indicators). Colantonio (2007, p. 18) argues that most sustainability indicators tend to focus on environmental issues rather than social ones; also they tend to address small-scale issues accessible to specific methodologies, rather than to address sustainability from a holistic perspective.

As discussed in the previous section, communities are re-discovered as the main spatial and operational space for the pursuit of sustainability (Colantonio, 2007, p. 18). In this section we examine one specific metric (Sustainable communities indicators - Egan Review) developed in the UK which is illustrative of some of the shifts emerging with regard to social sustainability assessment. We decided to focus on this metric because, though context-specific, it is general enough to be replicated in other urban settings (at least as a starting point). In April 2003 the UK Government commissioned a review of the skills needed to deliver sustainable communities. Skills were to include both professional, built environment skills, and so-called generic skills. The resulting Egan Report was published in 2004 and it comprises seven key components of sustainable communities:

- **Social and cultural:** vibrant, harmonious and inclusive communities;
- **Governance:** effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership;
- **Transport and connectivity:** good transport services and communication linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services;
- **Services:** a full range of appropriate, accessible public, private, community and voluntary services;
- **Environmental:** providing places for people to live in an environmentally-friendly way;

- **Economy:** a flourishing and diverse local economy;
- **Housing and the built environment:** a quality built and natural environment (Egan Review, 2004, p. 19).

In the following years, the UK government developed other policy documents including sets of indicators for defining and measuring the sustainability of communities. Thus, in two five years plans published in January 2005, a new dimension was added to the seven already defined in the Egan report. This new dimension was labeled ‘fair for everyone’, emphasizing the equity theme in the sustainable communities debate (Evans, 2011, p. 7).

Between four and nine indicators were selected for each of the seven components/dimensions outlined in the Egan report. The resulting fifty indicators include a mixture of subjective and objective data inputs. As stated in the report, the subjective input obtained from residents is equally important to the objective data, because ultimately they are the ones who live in that community. Also, the report acknowledges that various indicators work at different scales; the decision about what scale to use rests primarily with the local authorities (Egan Review, 2004, p. 24).

Figure 1 and Figure 2 below present the indicators for the social and cultural as well as for the governance dimensions. We decided to look more in depth at both these dimensions because, as highlighted throughout the paper, social sustainability is sometimes defined as including also themes concerning participation and leadership at the local level.

What conclusions can be derived from examining the indicators above? In the first place, one can easily observe that there is a departure from the basic needs approach. We have dimensions that focus on the basic needs of the individual (housing for example, which in the case of the Egan report represents a priority of the UK government that is central in other policy documents as well) but otherwise the rest of the dimensions are more oriented toward governance and institutional factors. Secondly, it can be observed that all dimensions of sustainability have the same weight. In other words the emphasis is shifted from a pre-established weight assigned to each dimension to the responsibility of local decision-makers to decide how sustainability has to be pursued. Third, it can be observed that numerous indicators are no longer based exclusively on statistic data but rather on a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators. In Figure 2 it can be easily observed that almost all indicators are, in the language of the Egan report, subjective.

Ref no.	Source	Indicator	Probable spatial level	subj/obj
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL				
5	BVPI QB Q11/CC02	% of respondents surveyed who feel they 'belong' to the neighbourhood (or community)	district	s
6	QoL 25	% of people surveyed who feel that their local areas are a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together	district	s
7	Newly recommended	% of people who feel a great deal involved in the local community.	district	s
NB: Based on an established questions from the MORI People's Panel 1999 questionnaire. "Overall, how involved do you feel in the local community?" Ranked from a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, not at all or don't know.				
8	BV 119/BVPI gen Q13	% of residents satisfied with LA cultural services (a) sports and leisure (b) libraries (c) museums (d) arts activities and venues (e) parks and open spaces	district	s
9	BVPI Gen Q25	Extent anti-social behaviour a problem in the area	district	s
10	BV 126/QoL 16/T&C V3.08/UK Sust Dev H8	Domestic burglaries per 1,000 households and % detected	district	o
11	QoL 15/BVPI QB Q36	% of residents surveyed who feel 'fairly safe' or 'very safe' after dark whilst outside in the local authority area	district	s

Figure 1: Indicators for the social and cultural dimension

Source: Egan Review (2004, Annex B)

Ref no.	Source	Indicator	Probable spatial level	subj/obj
GOVERNANCE				
12	BV 3/BVPI gen Q17	% of citizens satisfied with the overall service provided by the LA (taking everything into account)	district	s
13	CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment – overall service score	various to district	o
14	CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment – council ability to improve	district	o
15	BVPI Gen Q4	Extent respondents feel the council keeps residents informed about benefits and services it provides	district	s
16	QoL 23/BVPI QB Q7	% of adults surveyed who feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area	district	s

Figure 2: Indicators for the governance dimension

Source: Egan Review (2004, Annex B)

4. An applied research concerning the role of the Romanian municipalities in measuring social sustainability at the local level

4.1. Methodology

4.1.1. Research goal and questions

The main goal of the research is to determine whether public servants working in urban planning or in other areas that are closely related to planning are in favor of introducing at the local level a sustainability assessment system. The research questions are: a) Is sustainability assessment seen as component of a broader performance measurement system? b) Are social goals/objectives important in relation to the other goals of sustainability? c) Are public servants familiar with the concept of sustainable or livable communities and if yes, which are the themes mostly used in order to describe them? d) What is the role of the municipality and of other actors actively involved at community level in designing and implementing a sustainability assessment system?

4.1.2. Research method

The research was carried out from June 2011 until June 2012. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with public servants working in the field of urban planning and other connected fields within medium and large cities from the North-Western region of Romania. We opted for a qualitative research method because the topic is relatively unexplored, at least in the Romanian literature. Our intention is however to conduct, at a later stage, a quantitative survey, thus using the data obtained from the interviews as input for the quantitative research design.

The interview questions were initially sent via regular mail or email (depending on the preference expressed by the representatives of the municipality during the initial contact by phone/email). In the instructions attached to the interview it was specified that at least two public servants (no more than four, out of whom one should be in a managerial position) working in the field of urban/community planning, development of metropolitan area, strategic planning, and/or drafting and implementation of EU projects should answer the questions. These units were targeted based on the assumption that employees working in these units are most likely to have been involved, even in a remote manner, in the process of strategic planning and are aware of what sustainable development means. In many cases, upon receiving the filled out survey, we conducted additional inquiries via the phone. This two-steps methodology was used because numerous public servants initially refused to be part of the research. After contacting the municipalities by phone we were told that most of their employees usually prefer to have the questions mailed in advance in order to get a better feeling of what the research is about. During the phone interviews several of them stated that they were afraid that the purpose of the research was to test their knowledge on this topic.

4.1.3. The sample of municipalities

For this research the sample consisted of medium and large size municipalities from the North-Western region of Romania. We contacted all the municipalities with a population of 40,000 inhabitants and over. The option for including only medium and large size municipalities was based on the assumption that they are more likely to be involved in developing and implementing performance and/or sustainability assessment systems. In addition, these municipalities have been involved in the last years in drafting integrated urban development plans, in setting-up metropolitan structures for cooperation, or participating in various EU or World Bank projects, all of which had at least some form of follow up or evaluation component.

4.1.4. Structure of the interview

There are three distinct sections in the interview. The first section concerns itself with assessing the perception of the public servants with regard to the importance of performance evaluation/measurement in the public sector in general and tries to determine if social and environmental goals are generally taken into consideration when designing and implementing performance measurement systems. The second section focuses on how sustainability goals are defined and measured (the emphasis is placed on social sustainability), dealing with specific themes such as: the % of sustainability indicators pertaining to the social pillar of sustainability; whether the indicators used are objectives or subjective, the scale at which the data for the indicators are collected etc. The final section of the interview comprises questions which are meant to determine if the public servants working in fields closely interlinked with urban planning would recommend to their hierarchical superiors and/or to the political decision-makers the introduction of a sustainability assessment system.

4.2. Main findings

We received back by mail and email 32 filled out interviews. Out of the 32 interviews, 4 were excluded because the answers given were extremely short and the public servants, once contacted via the phone, refused to provide additional information. Below are presented the main findings of the research based on 28 interviews.

The questions pertaining to the first section of the interview tried to assess how important performance evaluation is for the public servants working for medium and large municipalities and to determine whether sustainability is or should be part of performance evaluation.

Most public servants agree that performance evaluation is an important activity that needs to be undertaken by all public organizations in an effort to increase the trust of their constituencies, to enhance the transparency of the daily operations of the municipality, and to make the municipality more accountable toward a broad variety of stakeholders. Two of the interviewed public servants also mentioned that the management of the organization itself can use the results generated by performance evaluation in order to improve its daily operations and make the necessary corrections

at the strategic management level. It could be observed however that many of the interviewees mistake performance evaluation at the organizational level for the evaluation of the personnel. When asked whether the organization they work for has in place a performance evaluation system, some public servants responded that this is a legal requirement and that performance evaluation needs to be carried out once a year (as already mentioned they were referring strictly to the evaluation of the personnel). From the responses of the public servants interviewed for this research we could conclude that only two organizations have in place some sort of performance measurement systems. In both cases they had been developed as part of larger projects meant to increase administrative/institutional capacity and financed by international organization (in one case the public servant knew that it was a World Bank financed project). From the discussions with the public servants it became apparent that most of them are aware of a change of paradigm in the way the public sector is meant to operate – most of them used words such as increased efficiency/effectiveness, efficient use of public money, reform, more focus on actual outcomes than on rules, client satisfaction etc. This shows that they are not completely unaware of the changes that are currently taking place within public administration both worldwide and at the national level.

The next question referred to EIAs (environmental impact assessment) and SEAs (strategic environmental assessment), and respectively to SIAs (social impact assessment). These are all methodologies that help evaluate the impact, environmental and/or social, various projects and programs have. We wanted to know if public servants are aware of them and if they are used especially with regard to social objectives. Most of the interviewees claimed that they have at least heard about these methodologies, however only three of them were able to clearly state when, by whom, and under what circumstances they are used at the local level. One public servant, who was involved in drafting several EIAs, argued that social objectives have never been addressed.

When asked if social or environmental goals should be part of performance measurement most of the interviewees agreed that perhaps social goals should be included; with regard to environmental goals only two public servants considered that they should be part of performance measurement. Many of the surveyed public servants perceive their organization as having a key role in providing some form of economic and/or social wellbeing for the residents in their community; moreover, some of them argued that the city hall is engaged in supporting various social programs for disadvantaged groups. This can at least partially explain the emphasis placed on social goals. With regard to environmental goals, the public servants argued that the city hall needs to comply with numerous environmental regulations. In their opinion this is enough to ensure a minimum protection of the environment without placing an unreasonable financial burden on the city's budget. It is interesting to note that several public servants argued that environmental protection should be mostly pursued by the private companies who directly impact the environment in a negative way through their production activities. The answers provided to this question are somewhat different from the evidence from the literature, where it is shown that in general environmental objectives are used more often than the social ones.

Another question tried to determine if and how sustainability measurement could be incorporated into the broader performance measurement system of an organization. All of the interviewees, once the term of sustainable development was brought up, argued that sustainability should be evaluated separately, because it is too broad and complicated to be part of a more general performance evaluation system. Only one public servant argued that the general goal, in his opinion, of any performance measurement system is the sustainability of the organization in general, of its activities, and of its results which can be observed at the community level. From the discussions with the interviewees it became clear that for them performance measurement, as well as sustainability measurement, represent linear processes, which end with the implementation of the measurement system. Only one public servant argued that some integration of sustainability goals into the general performance evaluation system should be achieved, with the goal of helping both the management of the organization and the political decision-makers to operate the necessary corrections as indicated by performance evaluation.

A final question in the first part of the interview focused on the role of citizens during the process of performance evaluation/sustainability evaluation. Most of the interviewees emphasized that citizens need to be informed when a performance/sustainability evaluation system is put in place and also about the results generated by the evaluation. However none of the public servants considered that the citizens' input could be valuable in the strategic planning stage. In their opinion the process through which goals, targets, benchmarks, and milestones are set is highly technical and therefore it should be expert-driven. Several public servants stated that if they were to develop such a system, from the very beginning, they would search for similar systems implemented in other jurisdictions/municipalities (from abroad, namely). Three interviewees stated that the local context is important, and it should be factored into the process of establishing goals and indicators, but eventually it is the role of the specialists to decide what gets finally evaluated.

The second part of the interview is also the most developed one and it focuses exclusively on how sustainability can be evaluated at the local level. The interviewed public servants were first asked to mention if they are familiar with the concept of sustainable communities (or livable cities/communities) and to name a few characteristics of such communities. Most of the public servants claimed that they are familiar with the concept; some of them offered as an example various rankings that look at how attractive cities are or how livable they are (at least one such ranking is available for the Romanian cities as well). The themes that were most often mentioned refer to the available amount of open space, the quality of life, income, quality of public services at the local level (public transportation being the one cited most often), the quality of the local leadership (if the mayor is supportive and actively seeks opportunities for local economic development, if he/she fosters entrepreneurship, if he/she has a 'hands-on' approach to solving problems within the community etc. We also asked the public servants which is, according to their opinion, the pillar of sustainability most likely to

be tackled by policies implemented at the local level. Most of the interviewees argued that municipalities get involved in quite a lot of social projects/programs. Very often by social programs the surveyed public servants understand programs that target the socially disadvantaged groups. Two main issues were brought up with regard to what cities could do to be supportive of social goals. The first had to do with social housing, which for most municipalities is a sore spot. There are simply too many poor people looking to get a subsidized housing unit. A second issue concerned the support many municipalities are providing to families whose members have no income or very low income (there is a law in place regarding minimum wage).

We asked the public servants to name, in no particular order, three themes that in their opinion a socially sustainable city should strive to achieve. Interestingly enough, more than half of the public servants mentioned cultural diversity. This is interesting in the context in which most of the social goals the public servants described during the previous questions are oriented toward basic needs. Cultural diversity on the other hand is often considered under the 'soft' themes of social sustainability. One possible explanation is that many of the municipalities in our sample have a significant Hungarian population, in some cases German too. This might lead to perceiving cultural diversity as an important social sustainability goal. Other themes mentioned in more than one interview include employment, social exclusion, education and training, and support for families with numerous children. No civil servant mentioned any theme concerning the built environment that would have social implications, such as walkable, pedestrian friendly neighbourhoods.

The public servants were asked if in their opinion, a specific weight should be assigned to each dimension of sustainability when an index is developed. Most of them argued that in this way it will be clear for everybody how the index was developed. This process was perceived by most however as being highly technical. When asked who should decide the weight, many interviewees said that there should be a mathematic formula. Only three public servants stated that at least some sort of public consultation should take place in order to determine what the community as a whole values. The importance most public servants assign to objectivity and clear methodologies was evident from the answers received to the question 'should the subjective perceptions of the residents be taken into account?' Most of the interviewees agreed that at least with regard to social issues, the residents are important. However they argued that political decision-makers usually want statistical data (objective input). One public servant explained that often political decision-makers feel that the residents do not trust them enough when announcing improvements or the betterment of environmental and/or social conditions at the local level unless they are based on solid evidence. Another public servant also brought up the issue of trust, this time with regard to local council members pertaining to different political parties. In his opinion political decision-makers are more likely to agree to have such an indicator developed at the local level if they perceive the whole process as expert-driven and based on objective data. Otherwise, some of them will claim that the majority is just trying to 'brag' with their accomplishments.

One final question in this section of the interview referred to the scale at which data should be gathered. Most of the interviewees acknowledged that there are themes for which data is best gathered at the neighborhood level. The most often cited example refers to the available amount of green/open spaces. Several public servants argued that very often citizens feel cheated when presented with data aggregated to the city level in cases when there are major differences between neighborhoods. Other interviewees brought up the issue of data availability. They claim that some data which are necessary at a level superior to the municipality are not always aggregated to the scale they want. Two of the interviewees argued that there are not employment and income feature available at the metropolitan level.

The final section of the interview comprises questions which are meant to determine if public servants are in favor of sustainability measurement (evaluation), if social themes should be part of sustainability measurement, and if the municipality should be the leading organization in designing and implementing a sustainability evaluation system. Most of the interviewees answered that in their opinion sustainability measurement is important at the local level and claimed that if asked by their superiors, they would strongly recommend it. However, without being explicitly asked, seven of them stated that the management and the political decision-makers are not likely to take into consideration such a recommendation. They offered as a main reason for this the fact that especially political decision-makers usually perceive such initiatives as being too technical and specialized, and thus without a big impact on their constituencies. This seems to be slightly in contradiction to what was stated in relation to a different question in the interview, whether political decision-makers would prefer objective or subjective indicators. Only one public servant mentioned the fact that political decision-makers do not fully understand that the results of sustainability measurement, especially when they suggest an improvement in environmental or social conditions at the local level, could be very easily presented to the residents in a simple, easy to comprehend manner. He argued that for example each year the municipality could release an indicator measuring the quality of life or the livability of the city, thus establishing itself as an engaged party in the promotion of sustainability.

We also asked the public servants if they would include social sustainability themes among the indicators that would form the sustainability measurement system, and if yes, what percentage out of the total number of indicators would they account for. Interestingly enough, the responses of the interviewees can be grouped in two categories. A first group argued that in their opinion social themes are often blurry or fuzzy and thus it is difficult to find quantifiable/objective indicators for most of them. Some of the interviewees in this group also claimed that some of the social themes often used are not directly connected to what local authorities can do according to their competencies given by law (education was seen as such an example). Therefore, in their opinion, it doesn't make a lot of sense to assess at the local level themes that are only marginally impacted by the actions of the local authorities. The second group argued that in their opinion political decision-makers are more likely to agree to include social

themes, especially the less traditional one, which are usually assessed via surveys by the residents. Issues such as sense of place, community engagement, social capital, tend to be overrated by the residents. In this way a high score given for the subjective indicators could balance the less favorable assessments, based on objective indicators. The second group argues that social themes/indicators could represent roughly up to 40% of the total number of indicators considered while the first group argued that they should not account for more than 10%-15% of the total number of indicators.

The final question of the interview tried to determine if the municipality should be responsible for designing and/or implementing a sustainability measurement system. Most of the interviewees argued that public organizations, even in large cities, have very little experience with performance measurement in general and even less with sustainability measurement. If one looks at sustainability measurement as being integrated within the broader management activity and system of the public organization, all interviewees agreed, that according to their knowledge, no municipality in Romania currently has the capacity to do so. Several of them argued that for the time being municipalities in Romania should borrow and if necessary adapt sets of indicators developed by other cities at the international level. Other public servants considered that NGOs could be a useful partner at the stage of designing the indicator set/system. Especially the specialized NGOs could provide examples of best practices – what has been done elsewhere in this field, and help the municipality get input from the citizens. It has to be noted at this point that most of the interviewees regard the design of the indicator set as a rather technical process, where there is little need for the citizens' input. Most of the interviewees considered that once an indicator set is designed, the municipalities have the resources to carry out the survey of the residents when needed and/or to compile the data underlying the objective indicators. As already discussed earlier, concerns were expressed regarding how the results generated by sustainability measurement are going to be used.

5. Conclusions

The social pillar within the sustainable development concept has gained more recognition in the recent years. A shift was observed from the so-called traditional social themes such as education, employment, toward emerging themes such as governance, sense of place, social capital and networks. In light of this change the sustainability debate is often linked to urban environments and communities. There are various methods and metrics available for measuring the sustainability of one community; however they tend to rather look at the three pillars of the sustainability in a separate manner. In the future, most authors argue, sustainability assessment should be based mostly on determining if sustainability principles are achieved. The empirical research revealed the fact that though most public servants are generally in favor of performance management, they often do not know a lot about it and how it is carried out. Sustainability assessment is even less known; however, when asked about specific sustainability indicators, most of the interviewees were able to mention the most used ones.

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