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DECENTRALIZATION - THE MAINSTAY OF INCREASING QUALITY IN DELIVERING

Irina BILOUSEAC ¹

Abstract

The article deals with the issue of how the application of decentralization in public services leads to an increase in their quality. Although quality is more difficult to measure and quantify, it can be said that it is the extent to which the nature of public service performance meets the expectations of citizens in a particular community.

Where service delivery is carried out in a decentralized manner, the local public administration authorities must first be concerned about how they respond to the expectations of the beneficiaries, and for this to describe quality standards, materialized by measuring some indicators. Measuring the quality of decentralized public services is the first step towards optimizing them. The article highlights the quality standards to be met by the local public administration authorities in the provision of a decentralized public service. With the provision of a decentralized public service, public authorities need to identify whether there is an improvement or a decline in the quality of services provided by decentralization and verify whether the increase in the quality of public services has led to a maximum degree of satisfaction that can be offered to the consumer.

Thus, increasing the quality of public service provision must be a direct consequence of the application of the principle of decentralization by local public administration authorities.

Keywords:

Public services, quality standards, decentralization of public services, indicators, Quality standards

JEL classification: H79, H83

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I. INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of functioning of the administration of any state is to provide quality public services to citizens through a series of actions to help meet general interest of the community.

The issue of decentralization as the main pillar of increasing quality in the delivery of public services is an important issue in the current context, given that all members of the European Union are interested in applying the principle of decentralization of public services, materialized by the transfer, by virtue of some legislative norms developed in this sense, by the competencies of the local administration bodies. In the case of decentralization, decision-making is brought to the closest level to the citizen, with local authorities best aware of the problems in the community, which are the services that the community needs, the specific way of providing services, the cost and quality standards wanted by that community.

Applying decentralization will increase the quality of public services, which must lead to the maximum degree of satisfaction that can be offered to the consumer. Practically, citizens want to maximize individual utility by reducing the constraint imposed by the combination of public utility-financial obligations[2].

Therefore, the quality of public services must always be designed so as to meet the needs of consumers in a local collectivity.

II. INCREASING QUALITY IN THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES - CONSEQUENCE OF THE APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF DECENTRALIZATION

The principle of decentralization is enshrined in Article 119 paragraph (1) Of the Constitution of Romania, and at European level in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, adopted in Strasbourg on 15 October 1985².

² ratified by Romania by Law11/1997, published in Official Monitor Part I, no. 331, from 26.11.1997

The regulation of the principle of decentralization is described in detail in the Romanian legal system in "Law no. 215/2001 of the local public administration³ and in the provisions of the "Law - Framework no. 195/2006 of decentralization⁴.

Under the provisions of Law no. 195/2006, decentralization is identified by the following defining features, which will lead to an increase in the quality of public services provided:

a) territorial authorities are autonomous public entities, chosen by the territorial authorities;

b) territorial authorities have a decision-making power of their own, having a dual status, both in taking decisions relating to the management and administration of affairs, and putting them into practice;

c) there is no report of hierarchical subordination between the central and local authorities in the territory⁵.

The decentralization strategy is a strategic planning tool with the fundamental objective of strengthening the public administration's capacity to provide diversified and quality public services by transferring new competences from central government to local public administration authorities in the following areas: a) agriculture; b) culture; c) tourism; d) environment; e) health; f) education - extracurricular activities; g) youth and sport.

Measuring the quality of decentralized public services in order to optimize them is a step towards the reform of the public administration, which brings with it an additional rigor and transparency of the performed activity [7]. If public administrations manage to deliver services that are as low as possible and generate the highest possible satisfaction index [3], it will reach the general interest of the beneficiaries.

Indicators for periodic performance evaluation of public services, under decentralization, provide a range of information to formulate appropriate strategies for the services provided. The analysis of these indicators should answer several questions, such as:

What are the quality standards that must be met by local government authorities in providing a decentralized public service?

How decentralized public services respond to citizens' expectations?

³ republished, in Official Monitor Part I, no.123/23 February 2007, with subsequent modifications and completions.

⁴ published in Official Monitor, Part I, no.453/ 25 May 2006.

⁵ art.15-19 from Law- Framework no. 195/2006.

Is there an improvement or a decline in the quality of decentralized services?

Therefore, increasing the quality of public service provision must be a direct consequence of the application of the principle of decentralization by local public administration authorities.

The provisions of art.9 from Framework Law no. 195/2006 on decentralization and art.33 par.(8) letter c) and d) of Law no. 273/2006 on local public finances, as subsequently amended and supplemented, established the use of *costing standards* for the provision of public services to the population, as well as *standards for the quality of public services* provided to the population. Both standards are key elements in service quality management and essential tools in public service management in a decentralized system.

Therefore, depending on who is responsible for a particular service, the line ministry (within the deconcentrated services) or the local public administration authority (within decentralized services), additional requirements need to be defined for the quality of a public service [6].

The steps to be taken to develop minimum quality standards⁶:

- a) setting goals;
- b) drafting minimum quality standards;
- c) calculation of costs related to minimum standards;
- d) negotiating minimum quality standards and costs;
- e) implementing minimum standards;
- f) monitoring compliance with minimum standards;
- g) assessing the process of improving public services.

The minimum quality standards of the decentralized public services lead to the success of the local public administration through the continuation of the decentralization process, which must ensure the improvement of local public services management and the increase of their quality [1: 33-37].

III. QUALITY STANDARDS IN PROVIDING DECENTRALIZED PUBLIC SERVICES

The local public administration authorities in the provision of a decentralized public service must achieve a series of quality standards, materialized by measuring some indicators, such as:

- Opportunity of the public service

⁶ Article 4.2. din Framework guide for the development of minimum quality standards and minimum cost standards for decentralized public services.

For calculating this indicator, the quantitative relationship between service and demand must be measured. However, if supply and demand for technical services such as water and energy are often measurable by simple methods, it will be more difficult to assess for example the demand for decentralized childcare facilities.

- Accessibility of public service

In addition to citizen satisfaction, accessibility of a service is a form of quality indicator (such as public library hours, delivery time of the heating agent, etc.). In order to measure this indicator, the share of the population with access to the decentralized public service of the total population should be calculated.

$$A = \frac{Pa}{Pt}$$

A – percentage of population with access to public service

Pa – population with access to the public service

Pt – total population

- Continuity in the provision of public service;
- **Specific indicators in public relations**, such as the number of complaints about public service quality parameters, the number of complaints about the degree of service provision, the percentage of written complaints received in less than 30 days, etc.

As quality is more difficult to measure and quantify, service quality control systems (the existence of monitoring bodies) have been developed and implemented in service institutions in developed countries that aim to achieve quality in each of the stages of the process through which the public service is achieved according to specific rules and procedures. The same problem is the quality indicators. **Quality indicators** can be of several ways [5:.4-5]:

- **Technical indicators** that are used to obtain data on the volume of services provided, such as: the coverage of the service (the population to whom the service is provided), the time between the occurrence of an accident, the restoration of the service and the return to its normal state of operation, continuity of the provision of the service.
- **Environmental indicators** that are used to monitor the effects on the environment, depending on the characteristics of the service. Significant environmental impacts resulting from inappropriate public service operations need to be monitored to identify unforeseen adverse effects at an early stage and to

enable appropriate remedial action to be taken. For example: the level of greenhouse gas emissions from transport, the degree of noise pollution, the degree of chemical pollution, the degree of environmental damage due to the amount of waste and the amount of the recycled waste.

- ***Specific quality indicators for public service*** for assessing public services offered compared to established standards, such as hot water supply temperature, drinking water supply time, comfort in public transport, etc.

- ***Customer serving indicators*** such as the number of new public service customers, the time of new connections and connections to the service, the time to respond and solve the concerns, complaints, accessibility of the service: (such as program hours, audiences etc.).

The increase in the indicators listed above means that the decentralization of the public service has led to an increase in the quality of the service to meet the expectations of the customers.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

To define the quality, we can say that it is the extent to which the nature of the product or the benefit meets the expectations of the beneficiaries. Sometimes quality is more difficult to measure and quantify. For example, in some technical areas, it is relatively easy to measure quality. In the electricity supply sector, for example, the quality corresponds primarily to the absence of current interruptions, which we can measure with a technical device.

But it is difficult to measure the quality of care for the elderly or the education available to students.

Any public service must meet a number of strategic objectives such as adaptability to consumer requirements, service continuity in time, both qualitatively and quantitatively, equal access for all consumers to public services, etc., which are basic principles of organization and functioning of public services [4:214].

Improving the functioning of decentralized public services and implicitly improving their quality, good governance can only be achieved with the full involvement of local authorities and decision-making decentralization, based on the principle of subsidiarity, accompanied by sufficient financial resources to carry out its role under the Constitution or law.

In conclusion, enhancing the quality of a public service is a consequence of applying the principle of decentralization, which serves at the same time the interests of managers, policy makers and citizens and contributes to strengthening local democracy.

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