

# Integrative Processes in the Romanian Contemporary Rural. The Impact of Advisory Community Councils

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## Abstract

*This research has the purpose to identify several ways to improve social services in rural areas from Romania, especially from Iasi County. In this article we focused our attention on the views of members of Advisory Community Councils from Iasi County, in order to highlight their perspectives in improving the social services developed in the researched areas.*

*This article was developed during the research "Supervision of Social Services from rural areas of the county of Iasi"; the research was made on behalf of Lumen Research Centre in Humanistic Science and of "Supervision and Social Planning" Master Program, from "Al. I. Cuza" University Iasi. The research frameworks are more complex than this exposure, that's why we limited the analysis in this article on the perceptions of members of Advisory Community Councils to modern social services and their supervision.*

## Keywords:

*Supervision, social work, job description, social work in rural areas from Romania,*

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### **Introduction**

Research goal is to identify ways of improving the social services in rural areas. In this article we focus on the members' views of Community Advisory Councils.

The present research was realized on the base of the research "Supervision of social services in rural areas of Iasi County" developed within Lumen Research Centre in Humanistic Sciences and the "Supervision and Social Planning" Master Programme from "Al. I. Cuza" University, Romania . The entire research is more complex than the present exposure, we limited the analysis in this article on the perceptions of the members of Community Advisory Councils regarding the modern social services and their supervision. The other dimensions of the entire research as: self-perception of social workers (Unguru, Sandu, 2010), the perceptions of Local Government and the purpose of supervising social services (Sandu, Unguru, 2010) are exposed in other articles or communications.

Romanian rural area is currently subject to two distinct integrative processes which partly overlap and namely Europeanization process, and on the other hand the phenomenon of globalization. European integration requires reporting to quality standards, which can allow a certain level of living and regional development, in accordance with the European standards. The second process generates integrative cross-cultural with various effects upon social structure, cultural dynamics and lifestyles. Both involve the adoption of institutions and social practices, including on the community level, whose meaning is in the process of social construction. We believe that these two processes generate large socio-cultural progress, and also risks that come from the adapting of the existing social networks to new settings.

From the Romanian rural's vulnerabilities (Cojocaru, S., 2005) we can mention: the lack of jobs, the disparity between the number of population and livelihoods, reducing the value of core institutions (Miftode, 2010) such as church and family, the extended moral crisis enhanced as well by the economic crisis, loss of prestige of some classes and social groups (Zamfir, C., 1999).

The Romanian society is not without care traditions, both individual and community (village, family), practiced with simple, local, and natural ways, transmitted from generation to generation (especially through the old women or midwives' village) (Miftode, 2004), by teachers and priests, through the development of various services and programs of social work (Cojocaru, 2010a; Cojocaru 2010b).

Social welfare services (Zamfir, E., 2000) charged to local community aims helping all disadvantaged categories of populations:

- Supporting elderly people for participation in social life and maintain objective and subjective standards of life's quality that are appropriate for this category of beneficiaries.
- Activities of Child rights protection carried out based on the principle of priority of protecting the best interests of the child.
- The Street children are victims of the society and of their families, and also their own victims, because of the processes of marginalization, dependency, vulnerability that turns in many cases in to auto-marginalization, auto-dependency and auto-vulnerability (Lavric, 2006).
- Persons with disabilities and their families (Ponea, 2009);
- Poor families with many children and without means;
- Social isolation represents total or partial separation of the individuals or the social groups, in terms of communication, interaction, mutual social involvement;
- Poverty has various forms and degrees of severity, regarding the livelihoods affecting the individuals, families, communities, social groups or even societies as a whole;\
- Collective poverty is found in less developed societies as a result of insufficient resources, and of their improper control by a dominant group and a bad system of income distribution;
- Community development and facilitation (Lucian, 2007);
- Illiteracy and absenteeism as a vulnerable factor;
- Labor exploitation;
- -Domestic violence;
- -Family's restructuring and vulnerability on the family level, going to family abandoned;
- Social risks produced by the worsening by the alcoholism phenomenon;
- Dependence by social services. (Croitoru, Gugeanu, 2010).

Society must ensure, through its bodies, respecting the rights and interests of individuals and the community, to provide the material, legal and professional conditions for the construction and operation of the entire social work system needed by the population.

The necessity of organize Community Advisory Councils arose as a result of the large number of requests for the establishment of special protection measures for children from Iasi county, which after the evaluation were considered unjustified (ADPS, 2009). Upon the recommendation of DGASPC (General Direction of Social Work and Child Protection) Iasi, in the Community Advisory Councils' structures have been co-opted a number of resource

persons for the community, and also its leaders, such as the mayor, social worker, school's director, family doctor, priest, chief of police, private entrepreneurs representatives of NGOs. Special cases from the community are being debated in the Council, being proposed different protection solutions that can be local implemented with community resources.

The Community Advisory Council meets the following roles:

- Prevention role: evaluation of all cases of children in difficulty, requiring special protective measures in order to prevent institutionalization and entry into the protective system;
- Reintegration role: evaluation of children whose parents are legally domiciled within the village and have a protective measure in order to decrease the number of children in care system (ADPS, 2009).
- The expected results following the establishment of the Community Advisory Councils were:
  - Awareness of real needs on community level;
  - Increasing the degree of involvement of the community's members;
  - Reduction the number of requests for special protection measures for community's children by identifying local resources such as in the large family, in the extended network of family or in to the neighborhood.

The Community Advisory Council, from each community, has the role of a local and social micro-commission, and should prevent cases reaching to the Child Protection Commission (ADPS, 2009).

In 2004 the National Authority for Child Protection extended the activity of Community Advisory Councils to the entire country through the Law 272/2004, which imposes the Local Public Administrative Authorities to involve the local collectivity in identifying and resolving community needs, enabling the creation of Community Consultative Committees in all rural communities across the country.

The established role of the Community Advisory Committees is that to resolve the local social cases from the community, through active involvement of community resources, especially human resources being co-opted: local businessmen, priests, teachers, doctors, local councilors, policemen.

Community Advisory Council has a consultative role and not deliberative, meaning it does not make binding decisions, but consider the cases in depth, search for local solutions for proper solving of the cases.

Rules of operation and organization of the Community Advisory Councils' members:

- The Community Advisory Council members are required to participate at least a monthly meeting or whenever the situation so requires.

- The community social worker should convene and organize meetings with Community Advisory Council members.
- For each meeting the members of the Community Advisory Council should prepare the attendance list of those present at the meeting.
- The Community Advisory Councils members are required to make an Activity Report through what are recorded the decisions on each case discussed.
- The community social worker must complete an Evidence Register of the cases discussed at the meetings.
- The President of the Community Advisory Council is responsible for preparing the minutes of the meeting.
- The community social worker must send to Association for the Development of Social Programmes (ADPS) from Iasi County, the Minutes of the meeting, the attendance list and the Evidence Register of the cases until the last working day of the month (ADPS, 2009).

### **Methodological Design of the research**

#### **Research objectives:**

We wanted to highlight how members of the Community Advisory Councils evaluate their involvement in solving social cases at community level;

We want to emphasize the impact of new social practices, mainly the supervising the quality of social services in rural areas.

Data interpretation was realized through the method of successive inductions (Sandu, 2009) specific to Grounded Theory (LaRossa, 2005). We considered that the supervision practice of social works from rural areas is in an early stage and as such our research has an explorative generative character (Cusen, Buja, 2009).

Simona Branc identifies two main paradigms based on qualitative research, namely objectivism and constructivism. The first assumes that information about the social world can be analyzed so as to reveal a reality or a social structure "beyond the data collected", while the second paradigm reveals how data and speeches are organized and created through social interaction - Constructive Grounded Theory (Glaser, Holton, 2004). The methodology involves a systematic generating process of concepts and theories based on collected data (Dick, 2000).

Specialized literature defines Grounded Theory as an inductive approach that starts with general observations and during the analytical process creates conceptual categories that explain the theme explored (Sarker, et all 2001, Allan, 2003, Walker, 2006). The research insists on the role of sociological theory in managing the data research and provides ways of conceptualizing the

descriptions and explanations (Branco, 2008). Strauss and Corbin (1998:5) refer to constructions that are generated during the Grounded Theory process as changeable, open and negotiable.

### **The research sample**

We designed the research sample starting from representative criteria, such as the distance to urban area, community size, age, affiliation to the Community Advisory Councils etc.

There have been interviewed 36 members of the Community Advisory Council from the following 16 communities: Belcești, Holboca, Movileni, Coarnele Caprei, Șipote, Mircești, Popricani, Aroneanu, Butea, Heleșteni, Scanteia, Ciurea, Halaucești, Balti, Scobinți and Plugari.

### **Data Validation**

Triangulation of data coding process was conducted by masterand researcher Elena Unguru, research Ph.D. Antonio Sandu and masterant researcher assistant Simona Ponea, from Research Lumen Centre in Humanistic Sciences, through the procedure for obtaining an interpretative consensus.

### **Research Tools**

In realizing this research there were applied interviews, which contained 20 open questions, the same for all subjects, whose relevance and significance will be discussed further.

We present a series of questions that were included in the interview guide and also the significance that conducted to the question's introduction in the design methodology of research:

- How long are you in the Community Advisory Council and who decided that you become a member?

The question aims to evaluate the subject's experience in the Community Advisory Council and also to highlight the power relations within the Community Advisory Council, because the decision to co-opt a member of the board is a symbolic act of power.

- What is the relationship between you and other members?

Question aims to clarify the power relations and also the nature of power relations in the Community Advisory Council.

- As a member of the Community Advisory Council which are your attributions?

Through the analysis of the attributions we can clarify the position of the Community Advisory Council member regarding the system of social services in the community and also its functionality analyzed from the perspective of structure and function.

- How do you collaborate with social workers?

The way of working with social workers highlights eventual dysfunctions that are in the social services offered in the community

- What do you understand by supervision?

The analysis of the meaning of "supervision" given by the Community Advisory Council members will allow us to form an idea of the position they have regarding the process of supervising social services and possible resistance to change on the introduction of social services supervision in the community.

- Do you consider as necessary the help of a specialist on certain components of social services?

The question concerns the impact that may have the introduction of supervision in social services, between social worker and the Community Advisory Council, through the evaluation of previous acceptance of this service.

- What are the components of social services you feel you need a specialist supervisor?

Acceptance of certain sides of supervision opens the possibility of accepting supervision services entirely, and, on the other hand, highlights the Community Advisory Council members' view regarding the supervision domain.

- The cases from your social area are with simple or complex issues?

The question concerns to correlate the answer with the social worker's response and hence to highlight the emphasis on complexity of the services offered at the community level.

- What are the problems you encounter in the social services and beyond?

The question aims to highlight the existing issues in the community social services and the impact of other issues from the community on the quality of social services.

- How frequent do you report cases that can not be solved by social workers?

The question seeks to measure the Community Advisory Council involvement in increasing the quality of social services in the community, and secondly the extent and quality of communication between social worker and members of the Community Advisory Council.

- Do you have any plan for guiding your activity, considering you are a member of the Community Advisory Council?

The question seeks to measure the systematic character of the functioning of the Community Advisory Council.

- How important is the existence of a Community Advisory Council within a community?

The question seeks to identify awareness of the importance of the Community Advisory Council by its members, therefore the quality of the Community Advisory Council activities and members' involvement in it.

- How often do you meet with the members of the Community Advisory Council?

The frequency of the meetings and their regularity can be an indicator of the professionalism Community Advisory Council's work.

- How does this meeting take place?

From how to conduct these meetings we can identify elements of social practice in the community, to highlight the role of the Community Advisory Council in the community and the quality of services.

- What are the steps to resolve cases?

The existence of staging and planning in solving cases reveal the existence of a systematic methodology and practice.

- What are the criteria for which a case can not be resolved within the Community Advisory Council?

The criteria of incompatibility or failure of the settlement of the cases gives information on the ethical dimensions of practice in the community, and also the degree of involvement of the Community Advisory Council in the management of social services.

- How do you see the process of supervision in the social work services within the mayors?

The question is related to the previous ones and seeks the evidence the opinion of the Community Advisory Council members on the need for supervision and community dimensions.

- What solutions do you believe that you could offer to improve social services in rural areas?

Community Advisory Council members involvement in improving social services in rural areas makes them aware of their role and generate best practice principles of supervision in rural areas.

### **Analysis of research data**

Community Advisory Council members have a certain length within this organization ranging, from a few months and five years, averaging around 3 years.

The interviewed subjects became members of the Community Advisory Council at the initiative of one of the following persons: social worker, mayor, City Council, older members or Tutelary Authority.

All the interviewed subjects consider they have a good or very good relationship with the other colleagues from the Community Advisory Council based on collaboration, cooperation, coordination and support.

As members of the Community Advisory Council the interviewed subjects consider to have the following responsibilities:

- *Resources' evaluation, discussing the case, proposing solutions;*
- *Referring various situations encountered in the community and collaborating with colleagues from the Community Advisory Council;*
- *Identifying the social needs of the local community (periodic workshops), finding sponsors for helping families that are in crisis; finding solutions for solving the local social cases;*
- *Discussing local community issues, problems, special cases, to seek solutions for local development and providing social protection to identify the real needs of the community;*
- *Working in social care service within the municipality; monitoring how are helped the disadvantaged people.*

All Community Advisory Council members considered that they have a very good collaboration with the social workers from communities.

Most respondents considered that the problems facing the community are complex or very complex. As examples of problems facing the community are given by:

- *Negligence, abuse, violence;*
- *Alcohol consumption, poverty, lack of education;*
- *Domestic violence;*
- *Relationship issues between parents with children;*
- *Lack of cooperation of others around;*
- *Medical and legal issues;*
- *Financial problems;*
- *Measures of social protection for all categories of beneficiaries are not taken on time;*
- *Lack of adequate space for conducting the activities;*
- *The social services do not have enough professionals in the organization, regarding with the complex problems faced;*
- *Slowness of procedures, lack of staff;*
- *Intra-familiar conflicts, domestic violence, inadequate staff, gaps in legislation;*
- *The fact that the Community Advisory Council members are not remunerated for their activities;*
- *The activities financing - insufficient payment.*

Cases that can not be resolved locally by social workers are usually reported immediately whereas in an interval of 1-3 days by higher organizations. Those interviewed insists in noting that: social cases are usually resolved locally, otherwise we use the referral process (by phone) to DGASPC.

In four of the cases the Community Advisory Council member is not aware of cases that need to be reported. A single interviewee says that he does not know where he might refer his cases: "where can these be referred?" and two of the respondents stated that this procedure is done quarterly.

Given this range of answers, we think might be a useful measure in many communities carrying out training sessions with the Community Advisory Council members, for deepening their knowledge about the role and methodology of the body part.

Regarding the existence of a plan to guide the work of the Community Advisory Council, this could not be identified with certainty from the answers the majority of those interviewed:

- The work as a member of the Community Advisory Council is somehow included in the professional work;
- No, each meeting is organized according to the current problems;
- Most of the times the program is made with five days before;
- Most times this is organized on the problems that exist;
- According to the methodology.

Subjects' responses do not show a real planning, which follow a well formalized standard methodology. Only two of the answers show the existence of such a methodology, and its knowing by the members of the Community Advisory Council.

- *Yes, are organized work subgroups with the Community Advisory Council members, and further, the conclusions of each subgroup are presented and discussed in large group;*
- *Annual Activity Plan of the Community Advisory Council.*

All the intervened subjects recognize the importance of a Community Advisory Council, mainly for the complex cases, and also for choosing the best solutions, for awareness and empowerment of the community regarding the cases encountered. Two of the respondents highlight the need for effective involvement of the Community Advisory Council in solving community problems - very important if they are properly involved - , or even deny its importance. The meetings of the Community Advisory Council members are conducted monthly and whenever needed, and in a single case were four meetings in a week.

The deployment methodology of the Community Advisory Council meetings is based on planning, open and focused discussions, cooperation and collaboration, discussion and proposals of the cases there register, and what is important to note the proposed solutions are non-binding.

The steps required to resolve cases:

- *Information, Evaluation, Selection of alternatives;*
- *Referral, discuss the problem, identify solutions, referral visits, hearing, filing documents, analyzing the documentation, sending to the centre;*

- *Referral, visits, hearing, case analysis, completion and submission of documents.*

Community Advisory Council shall decline his jurisdiction in resolving the following types of cases:

- *Situations involving legal document;*
- *When the case involves a medical diagnosis;*
- *When the person / family does not communicate or has no interest in solving the problem;*
- *When people with mental disability are concerned,;*
- *When a person it is uncooperative;*
- *Health status or laws that provide special protection measures.*

In two cases it was considered that there were cases that could not be resolved within the Community Advisory Council (known by those interviewed).

The complex cases that can not be resolved within the Community Advisory Council are referred to other specialized institutions or in some cases is required the presence of a specialist.

Regarding the supervision of social services in rural areas, the interviewed members of the Community Advisory Council define this term as:

- *Reconfirmation / rejection of a proposal;*
- *Acceptance of our solution by a superior body;*
- *Reconfirmation of certain solutions;*
- *Interest in solutions as fair;*
- *Improving the activity of social services;*
- *Expert analysis of a problem;*
- *Coordination and control;*
- *Supervision of cases;*
- *Approval of an act;*
- *Closely monitoring the problem cases;*
- *A method of verification, in guiding the social worker's work;*
- *Subordination;*
- *Surveillance / Supervision;*
- *Supervision, assistance;*
- *An individual as a representative of an institution that locally coordinate the county;*
- *Continuous supervision;*
- *Verification / collaboration;*
- *Control and review again*

Regarding the need for supervision, there were only two negative responses, a person who believes that the need for supervision depends on the situation, and also a non answer. The remaining 32 subjects responded affirmatively.

The question on which experts can call the social worker when he has difficult cases, were mentioned the specialists from the general regional centers, AJPS, NGOs, Community Advisory Council members, psychologists, police, doctors, other professionals.

The Community Advisory Board members consider as necessary the supervising process especially in the following areas:

- *Legislation, issues regarding adoption and child rights in general,*
- *Abuse, neglect, domestic violence;*
- *Abandoned children;*
- *Dysfunctional families;*
- *Situations that require psychological assistance;*
- *School dropout;*
- *Preventing the child separation of parents;*
- *It is necessary the supervision from a complex team;*
- *Outside intervention can contribute to finding more effective solutions;*
- *Optimization of intervention to resolve a case;*
- *Leads to a deeper analysis of alternatives for solving a case;*
- *As a measure of support of social activities;*
- *Supervision is difficult because social work field is overloaded;*
- *It would be necessary only when are more people employed on the same job;*
- *A deeper collaboration between institutions;*
- *As a supervisor and coordinator;*
- *Monitoring the services provided by each institution;*
- *Support and guidance;*
- *In our case it is unnecessary.*

To improve social services in rural areas the Community Advisory Council members propose:

- *Financial Motivation;*
- *It is necessary that the Community Advisory Council members have the jurisdiction to determine sanctions for local people who are loyal customers, in terms of behavior;*
- *Legislative framework for the protection of the persons responsible for social work;*
- *The existence of a complex team for operational solving;*
- *Provide facilities for people involved in these activities;*
- *I think we should accountable as much the community;*
- *Better funding, better legislation;*
- *Relieve the social workers of other responsibilities, that are not part of the special services of social work. The active involvement of all stakeholders in solving cases, particularly in the prevention activity. Awareness correlations should be made to members of the community on specific issues like violence, human trafficking or alcoholism;*

- *Adapting the services to the needs of the community;*
- *Development of services according to community needs;*
- *Create a network of volunteers;*
- *Ensure adequate financing;*
- *Partnership activities with the DGASPC and NGOs;*
- *Multidisciplinary teams.*

### **Conclusions**

We aimed to research this issue because we believe that the supervision of social services in rural areas is a very important domain, and not just a new domain. The research goal is to identify ways to streamline these services. We put emphasis on the views of the Community Advisory Council to highlight their opinions and their beliefs, because starting from here we can build new perspectives, and also instruments for their work, which are closer to their reality.

The conclusions of this research point that the investigated subjects deemed important to have a Community Advisory Council, mainly for complex cases, in choosing the best solutions for the existing cases, in processes like community awareness and empowerment of their people.

Community Advisory Board members define "supervision" in terms very close to those in the literature. Deepening the research regarding the subjects' perception on supervision proves that they do not have practical knowledge of the phenomenon and also do not have access to experience in this domain.

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