

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM: THE CASE OF ROMANIA

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Abstract

Strategic planning is an excellent tool that local governments can (and should) use in order to deal efficiently with change, which means that planning is an important aspect of public sector reform, arguably one of the defining elements of the public policy landscape for the past three decades (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Our main objective with this research is twofold: to analyze why and how local public administration uses strategic planning as a managerial tool for managing change (reform), and to identify whether the planning efforts display a specific reform pattern. We employed a quantitative methodology – online survey – to collect data on the strategic planning process at the local level in Romania, with a specific framework for the strategic profile (Hințea, 2015) and another three dimension model – NPM, NWS, NPG¹ – for the reform component (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Our analysis indicates that over 70% of strategic planning efforts are done because it is a mandatory condition for accessing EU funds. Major issues concern implementation, monitoring and evaluation with only around a third of organizations having a formal body responsible for this. Although the process has mixed characteristics, NWS type elements are more common/preferred, while NPM seem least common/preferred by local authorities.

Keywords: strategic planning, New Public Management, Neo-Weberian State, New Public Governance, public management reform.

1 The following achronims are used throughout the text: NPM = New Public Management, NWS = Neo-Weberian State, NPG = New Public Governance.

1. Strategic planning and public management reform

Public sector reform has arguably been one of the defining features of the public policy landscape for the past three decades (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Public organizations are faced with an increasing array of problems, facing increased pressure to respond in an efficient manner to complex social, economic and political challenges. At the same time, there are numerous instances where they are seen as part or actual source for these problems. Thus, public organizations are constantly facing the stress of rigorous and extensive management reforms (Andrews, Downe and Guarneros-Meza, 2013; Jilke and Van de Walle, 2013). Any reform policy implies a certain element of change. Strategic planning is an excellent tool that governments can (and should) use in order to deal efficiently with change. As change pace is exponential, thinking strategically (planning for the future) becomes a condition for both organizational survival and development. Focusing on cities, Positer and Streib (2005) demonstrate the benefits that local public authorities gain when using strategic planning: increasing focus of major stakeholders and political leaders on the mission, goals and priorities of the locality, improving communication between stakeholders, better general management and decision making inside the organization, improved employee professional development and a general improvement of organizational performance. Other benefits of strategic planning efforts are well documented in the academic literature, and include: the potential to improve management, decision-making, stakeholder involvement in public organizations, and performance (Edwards, 2012); it helps unify various parts of an organization through better communication (Denhardt, 1985; Pindur, 1992; Berry and Wechsler, 1995; Boyne, 2001); it can enhance the ability to better respond to changes in the external environment (adapt to change, take advantage of new opportunities – Bryson, 1981; 2004; Denhard, 1985; Pindur, 1992; Boyne, 2001); it increases public participation and interaction of local stakeholders (Denhardt, 1985; Gabris, 1993; Berry and Wechsler, 1995) which implies improved communication between stakeholders (Kissler *et al.*, 1998) and facilitates consensus building (Pindur, 1992); finally, strategic planning improves overall organizational performance (Bryson and Roering, 1988; Bryson, 2004).

Coming back to the issue of public sector reform, one can argue that a common theme of reform initiatives is the general objective of increasing effectiveness and quality of public services or public organizations (Pollitt, van Thiel and Homburg, 2007). The most prodigious public sector reform models in the last 30 years are: 1) New Public Management (NPM), has taken the spotlight starting with the 1980s and has had a lot of attention from both scholars and practitioners in the following two decades, with the jury still out on its real impact; 2) The Neo-Weberian State (NWS) (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004; 2011; Drechsler, 2005) represents a reinterpretation of Max Weber's theory, describing a model that takes the positive elements of NPM and places them on a Weberian foundation as a reaction to concerns with the inadequacies of NPM and overly managerial focused reforms mostly imported from the USA (Dunn and Miller, 2007); 3) New Public Governance (NPG) (Pollitt and

Bouckaert, 2004; 2011) that brings the concept of governance at center stage, implying a redefinition of the state's role (but not necessarily a reduction), and emphasis on complex organization networks, partnerships, negotiations and mutual adjustments between different actors.

The theoretical model used for the strategic planning process at local level has been developed by us and it is based on one major concept: unique strategic profile of the community. The model assumes that a successful strategic planning process involves directly the local community and should lead to a unique image of the community – strategic profile – which should guide the development process. The model has a 'bottom up' approach using empirical data at the 'base' and building into a full strategy, going through a series of logical steps that lead in the end to the strategic profile which represents the top. The main stages of the process are: preliminary data analysis (gathering and analyzing empirical data on major fields of interest regarding the community), analysis of the strategic framework, quality of life assessment, consultation of local stakeholders, vision definition, creation of a strategic profile (which includes the strategic concept, key strategic factors, major problems, competitive advantage, lines of action, operational programs and implementation plan, monitoring and evaluation system). By using this logical framework for the process, we have the possibility to literally 'build up' the strategy and then do the comparative analysis on different types of authorities at local level. The model is described thoroughly in a separate article (Hințea, 2015).

2. Methodology

2.1. Research objective and questions

Our main objective in this research was twofold: first, to analyze why and how local public authorities use strategic planning as a managerial tool for managing change (reform) and second, to identify whether the planning efforts display a specific reform pattern. In order to accomplish this, we have divided the concept into three main dimensions: (1) purpose (of strategic planning), 2) process, and 3) outcomes (of planning process).

We have operationalized this general objective in the following research questions:

General research questions:

- What is the current practice of strategic planning in the local public administration in Romania?

Specific research questions:

- Purpose: What are the main reasons that determine local public authorities to initiate and implement strategic planning efforts?
- Process: What are the main steps included in the planning process? What are the basic principles guiding this process?
- Outcome: What are the major outcomes of strategic planning? Major benefits and challenges?

Regarding the pattern of planning efforts our goal was to test whether specific characteristics of public management reform can be traced in the strategic planning process adopted by local public authorities. We operationalized reform patterns in the following three models:

Table 1: Operationalization of public management reform patterns

Reform model	Main claim	Specific elements
New Public Management (NPM)	Make government more efficient and 'consumer-responsive' by injecting businesslike methods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of market type instruments (privatization, contracting out, public-private partnerships or concessions for better services and increased efficiency); • Using performance standards and indicators; • Encouraging competition; • Focus on economic viability and efficient use of resources.
Neo-Weberian State (NWS)	Modernize the traditional state apparatus so that it becomes more professional, more efficient, and more responsive to citizens; the state remains a distinctive actor with its own rules, methods, and culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following organization rules, guidelines and orders; legal framework guiding the process; • Conducting activities in an impartial way; • Central role of state authorities in the planning process; • Ensuring mechanisms for policy monitoring and reduce the possibility of abuse of power/protect individual rights.
New Public Governance (NPG)	Make government more effective and legitimate by including a wider range of social actors in both policy-making and implementation; increased used of networks for coordination; mutual adjustment and horizontal control mechanisms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging high level of public participation and collaboration with local stakeholders; • Development of networks and partnerships with external stakeholders for different phases of the process; • Ensuring principles like transparency, accountability, sustainability and integrity are reflected in the process; • Focus on sustainability and broad social impact of planning process.

Source: Adapted from Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, p. 22)

2.2 Study population and data collection

The study population included all local public authorities in Romania, which translates in a total of 3,062 public authorities which were grouped in the following categories: 2,700 rural communities, 217 small cities¹, 86 mid-level cities², 17 large cities³, 41 counties and Bucharest City Hall. We opted for an online survey, using an email sent to the official address of the institution. The request for responding was addressed to the head of the institution with the endorsement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Data was gathered during a 40 day period, in September-October 2015. We received 170 valid responses with varied response rates from each category of institutions (please see Table 2 below). As expected, results on rural towns, small and medium cities are rather low while those on large cities and county councils are covering almost half of the total population.

1 Population under 30,000.

2 Population between 30,001-120,000.

3 Population over 120,000.

Table 2: Response rate

N=170	% out of total national population
Rural communities	4.25% (115 responses/ 2,700 rural towns)
Small city (under 30,000 population)	8.75% (19 responses/217 small cities)
Mid-city (30,001-120,000 population)	10.40% (9 responses/86 mid-level cities)
Large city (over 120,000 population)	41.00% (7 responses/17 large cities)
County Councils	46.00% (19 responses/41 counties)
City Hall of Bucharest	100.00% (1 response)

2.3. Instrument

We used a 30 question questionnaire, 28 of them using mostly 5 point Likert scales or yes/no questions, while the last two were open-ended questions, asking for the most important benefits and biggest barriers/challenges. The instrument was divided in three sections:

- Section 1: Purpose – In this section we collected information related to the main reason and general purpose for initiating and implementing a strategic planning process. The information gathered here was focused on reasons for planning – Why was the planning process initiated by your organization? What were the main reasons and factors that have determined your local government to pursue strategic planning?
- Section 2: Process – In this section we collected information regarding the actual process of planning – methodology used, criteria, guiding principles, decisional process, and stakeholder involvement. Information gathered in this section was focused on how the actual process was implemented – What were the main phases of the process? Who were the stakeholders that were involved? What were the guiding principles behind strategic planning in your organization?
- Section 3: Results – In this section we collected information regarding strategic planning outcomes – information gathered here was focused to answer the ‘what questions’ – What were the actual outputs of the strategic planning process? What were the main benefits and the main challenges?

In order to link the results with the three reform models, we introduced questions built on the characteristics of the three models, in each of the sections, using the following logic:

- Purpose – reasons specific to NPM/NWS/NPG for initiating such a process;
- Process – specific features of NPM/NWS/NPG part of the planning process; and
- Outcome – evaluation of outcomes based on NPM/NWS/NPG criteria.

2.4. Results

Demographics

Overall, missing cases vary from 5% to 12% and have been excluded from all the percentages presented.

Table 3: Demographic information (respondents)

	F	M
Gender	49.4%	50.6%
Age	Avg. 41.56, Std. dev. 10.137	
High school education	7.8%	
Undergraduate/College	46.1%	
Master's degree	43.7%	
PhD	2.4%	
Experience in organization	Avg. 10.6 years, std. dev. 8.128	

The first section of the questionnaire was focused on the purpose of planning, with the aim of finding out whether local authorities were using strategic planning regularly, what were the main reasons for this and whether they saw strategic planning as a priority.

Table 4: Local authorities that have a strategy

Your local gov. has a strategy	
Yes	87.3%
No	11.5%
Don't know	1.2%

Table 5: Number of strategies in the last 20 years

No. of strategies (last 20 years)	%
Two	56.2%
One	18.5%
Three	10.5%
Four	4.2%
Five or more	3.8%
None	6.8%

Most of the local authorities (87%) have (at present) a development strategy, while 56.2% have had two strategic planning initiatives in the last 20 years with another 10% declaring they had three such processes. Answers concerning the reason for such efforts were most important for our research: 70% of public authorities did a planning process because it was a mandatory requirement for having access to European funds. Other reasons include: strategic planning is an essential element of good governance at local level (57%), it is part of a broader program of public administration reform (36%) or it is part of a larger effort to create a more coherent legal framework regarding local development, and offer impartial and fair treatment to all citizens (31%) – this being the NWS indicator, with NPG and NPM indicators getting 14% and 9.6% of the answers. Finally, most authorities rate strategic planning as a top priority for them – mean of 4.33 out of max. 5. The overall picture regarding the purpose of strategic planning indicates that most planning efforts have probably started during the last 10 years and are mainly done to gain access to European

funds (PND, 2007)⁴. There are some signs that public authorities also understand the intrinsic importance of planning for the governance process. Finally, it is worth mentioning that approximately one in three authorities link strategic planning to specific NWS elements. This is a bit odd because planning has been adopted from the private sector, thus a NPM link would be expected. One potential explanation for this is the specific legalistic approach to reform which is well documented in Romania's case (Verheijen, 1998; Ioniță, 2007; Dinu and Giosan, 2013; Răuță, 2014; Radu, 2015).

The second section was focused on the actual process of planning, gathering information about the methodology used, criteria, guiding principles, decisional process, and stakeholder involvement. The first aspect observed here is that although overall knowledge regarding the process as a whole and each step is very high (mean between 4.3 and 4.5 out of max. 5) there is one step which is not so well known – monitoring and evaluation system for the strategy (average score of 3.7). Going forward, 78% of local authorities that participated in the study declared that they include a situation analysis in the development of the strategy. This analysis is mostly focused on social problems, demographics, economic performance, education, public health and labor market (9 out of 10 do this). Least attention is given to e-government and ITC along with evaluating the success or performance of the previous strategy, with only half of the authorities doing this. Competitive advantage analysis is missing in at least one third of cases (see Table 6 below).

Table 6: Sections included in the situation analysis

Dimensions included in the situation analysis	Yes	No	Don't know
Strategic framework analysis (an analysis of other strategic documents at different levels (national, international) that are relevant for the local strategy)	75.5%	5.8%	18.5%
Evaluation of success rate of the former strategy	55.8%	24.7%	19.5%
Economic analysis	84.5%	3.2%	12.3%
Social and demographic analysis	89.2%	1.3%	9.5%
Education	89.9%	3.2%	7.0%
Public health	87.2%	3.8%	9.0%
Labor market	87.3%	4.5%	8.3%
Public service and local governance	81.8%	4.5%	13.6%
E-government and ITC	55.0%	22.8%	22.1%
Urban planning and infrastructure	84.0%	6.7%	9.3%
Culture and diversity	88.7%	5.3%	6.0%
Competition analysis/competitive advantage	70.3%	12.3%	17.4%
SWOT analysis	83.4%	5.7%	10.8%
Other factors/dimensions (please specify): Tourism, natural environment, agriculture (less than 5%)			

⁴ The first national strategy for local development was adopted in 2007 named National Development Plan 2007-2013 and required local authorities to develop a local strategy in order to gain access to funding.

Regarding public participation, 59% of communities do at least one citizen survey during the planning process, with the primary focus being the identification of community problems and citizen needs. Only 60% of authorities do a stakeholder analysis which in turn is reflected in a rather average to low participation of stakeholders in different phases of the process, with NGOs and business sector being part of the planning process in about 40% of the cases (the exception is participation of citizens/citizens' representatives which scores high, above 90%). Somewhat striking is the lowest score obtained by the academia, with a participation level of less than 20% (thus only 1 in 5 planning processes will include at some point representatives of universities/academic field) although it should be an important source of expertise in this field. Central government also plays a minor role in this phase. Clearly, participation is higher at the beginning of the process (decision to initiate process) and drops throughout, with minimal scores regarding participation of stakeholders in the monitoring and evaluation process (see Table 7 below).

Table 7: Public participation of stakeholders in different phases of the process

Stakeholders	Decision to initiate the planning process	Current situation analysis	Mission, vision and strategic objectives development	The action plan for implementing the strategy	The system to monitor the implementation plan	This stakeholder is part of the implementation & monitoring committee
Citizens/civic representatives/ local social groups	88.1%	90.3%	91.9%	88.8%	88.2%	56.3%
NGOs and think tanks	50.7%	56.7%	56.3%	56.7%	52.0%	31.7%
Representatives of other local public institutions	42.5%	45.5%	45.2%	44.8%	43.3%	26.2%
Representatives of the business sector	59.7%	57.5%	60.0%	59.7%	55.9%	31.7%
Representatives of the central government	17.2%	14.2%	19.3%	17.9%	15.7%	9.5%
Representatives of local minorities	34.3%	36.6%	41.5%	40.3%	36.2%	19.8%
Representatives of higher education institutions/universities	21.6%	21.6%	21.5%	20.1%	17.3%	11.9%
						There is no such structure 34.1%
Other (please specify):	Less than 5% Our own representatives – most common answer (implied already), immigrants (1%), mass media, church, cultural institutions, youth representatives.					

So far, a clear weakness of the process is the lack of a monitoring and evaluation system. Although most communities declared that they have clear operational/implementation plans (67%) and measurable performance indicators defined in the strategy (53%), only 31% of communities do an evaluation at least once in 18 months, while 15% do no evaluation whatsoever of the strategy, once it is adopted. Another 29.6% have no information about the existence of an evaluation process. This is visible at institutional level as well, with only 37% of authorities having a formal institutional structure responsible with monitoring and evaluation of the strategy.

With regard to transparency, authorities do well in offering to the general public access to documents produced during the process (75%), possibility to offer input/feedback (68%) and holding at least one open public debate on the strategy (63%). Proactive approaches are less popular, with only half of the authorities offering a constant feed of information to the public regarding each step of the process through mass media – websites, email addresses of stakeholders, local papers, TV (51%).

From a public management reform perspective, NPM elements (especially use of privatization, contracting out and PPP) are seen as the least important to the planning process with transparency, openness and responsiveness along with ensuring a fair impartial treatment and keeping a central role of the local authorities in the planning process seen as most important (NWS+NPG) (see Table 8).

Table 8: Characteristics of the strategic planning process

Level of importance given to the following criteria/values/principles, in the current strategic plan/strategic planning process (1= no importance at all, 5= very important)	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.
1. Achieving cost effectiveness (NPM)	4.01	4	5	0.993
2. Use of privatization, contracting out, public-private partnerships or concessions for better services and increased efficiency (NPM)	3.61	4	3	1.077
3. Using performance standards and indicators (NPM)	4.05	4	4	0.877
4. Encouraging competition (NPM)	3.84	4	4	1.065
5. Defining results and success in terms of economic viability (NPM)	3.78	4	4	0.993
Overall NPM = 3.85				
6. Ensure that local authorities play a central role in strategic planning and local community development (NWS)	4.38	5	4	0.789
7. Ensure that legal rules and procedures are put in for all phases of the process, in order to reduce possibilities of abuse of power or arbitrary conduct (NWS)	4.02	4	5	0.920
8. Ensure a fair, impartial and equal treatment of all citizens (NWS)	4.42	5	4	0.867
9. Ensure that mechanisms for monitoring and control of local government actions and decisions are in place, and they can be used by the local community/stakeholders/citizens (NWS)	4.07	4	5	0.914
10. Defining results in terms of respecting individual rights and liberties and conforming to legal provisions (NWS)	4.04	4	5	1.012
Overall NWS = 4.18				
11. Create a framework that would encourage and support stakeholder public participation (NPG)	3.86	4	4	0.970
12. Transparency, openness, responsiveness to citizens interests and needs (NPG)	4.43	5	5	0.819
13. Strong commitment for integrity, professionalism and rule of law (NPG)	4.31	5	5	0.873
14. Developing networks and partnerships with local stakeholders and encouraging active involvement in the planning process (NPG)	3.80	4	4	0.958
15. Defining results and success in terms of economic sustainability, social impact and environmental impact (NPG)	4.35	5	5	0.781
Overall NPG = 4.15				

Finally, vast majority of authorities (85%) turn to an external consultant for the planning process, the process is mostly done in collaboration with an external consultant (around 85%), but the involvement of the consultant varies (see Figure 1).

The last section was focused on evaluating the outcomes of the planning process, focusing on the actual outputs of the planning process and the major benefits and challenges/barriers. While any strategic planning process is materialized in a written

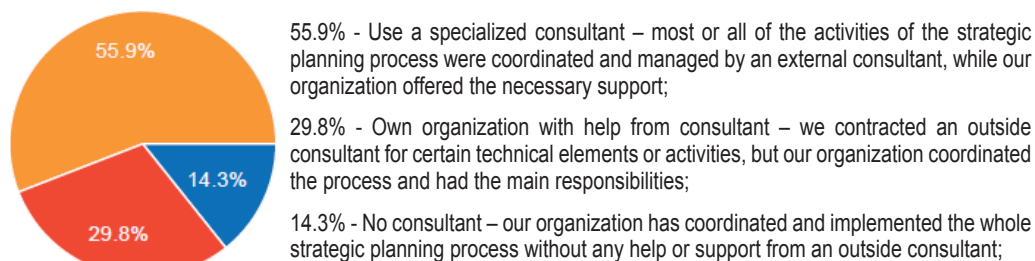


Figure 1: Involvement of external consultants

strategy, we were interested to find out exactly what was included in the document and whether there was a strategic profile defined. High importance is placed on situation analysis, mission and vision statements, definition of strategic problems, objectives, and setting up a list of priorities – 9 out of 10 authorities declared that they have included these sections in their strategic plan – with (by now expected) inclusion of a monitoring and evaluation system featuring only in half of strategies along with resource estimation. Also interesting, one in four authorities does not include a section of key strategic factors in their final development strategy (see Table 9 below).

Table 9: Sections covered by the final strategy document

Sections of the final strategy document	Yes	No	Don't know
Current situation analysis/diagnosis	90.2%	1.8%	7.9%
A clear articulation of the mission/ a mission statement	80.7%	5.6%	13.7%
A clear articulation of the vision/vision statement	92.0%	0.6%	7.4%
A clear articulation of the core values	79.1%	5.5%	15.3%
Identification of strategic problems and strategic development directions	88.3%	2.5%	9.3%
Articulation of key strategic factors	75.6%	8.1%	16.3%
A clear and manageable list of strategic goals and objectives (list of priorities)	86.3%	5.0%	8.7%
A clear action plan meant to achieve the priorities set in the strategy	79.6%	4.3%	16.0%
A summary (estimates) of the necessary resources in order to achieve the action plan	62.0%	20.3%	17.7%
A section that includes potential revenue/financing sources for the programs and actions of the strategy	78.9%	7.5%	13.7%
Clear monitoring and evaluation system with measurable indicators	53.4%	16.8%	29.8%

We further explored how well authorities estimate their financial needs. Only around half included both cost estimation and potential sources of getting funds in their final document (see Figure 2 below).

The last strategic planning process is seen as an overall success by around 65% of the respondents, guides local authorities in the decisional and policy process (68.7%), significantly contributes to the development of the community (60.5%), leads to increased transparency and responsiveness towards citizens (65%), and finally helps local authorities to work towards achieving their vision and mission (56.8%). The strategic planning process has been less successful with regards to: encouraging competition, adoption of a new legal framework for local development, increasing public participation of local stakeholders in the policy process and development

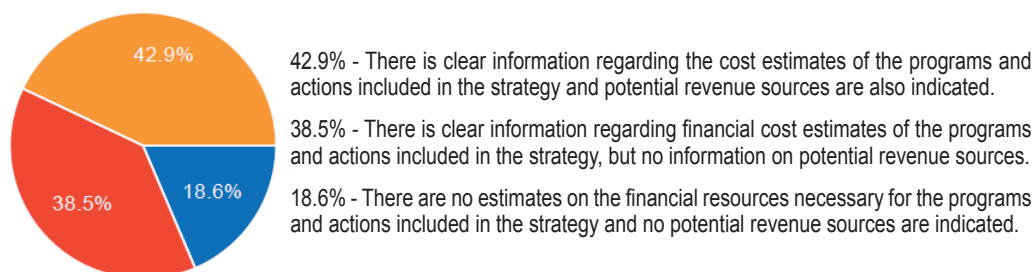


Figure 2: Financial resource estimation

of partnerships and networks with local stakeholders. Looking at the three reform models, there is little difference in answers, but it is worth mentioning that increased transparency and responsiveness to citizen's needs (specific to NPG) got the highest scores of all indicators for the three models, while encouraging and promoting competition (specific to NPM) got the lowest scores (see Table 10 below).

Table 10: Strategic planning outcomes

Referring to the last strategic planning process, how accurate are the following statements (total disagreement, 5=total agreement)	Mean	Median/ Mode	Agree/ Total Agree	Disagree/ Total disagree
1. The last strategic planning process has been a success.	3.75	4/4	64.3%	9.7%
2. Most (if not all) of the decisions of our local government are guided by the priorities set out in the strategy.	3.91	4/4	68.7%	9.4%
3. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy contributed significantly to the development of the community.	3.83	4/3	60.5%	7.6%
4. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy helped us achieve our mission and vision.	3.73	4/3	56.8%	9.0%
5. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy has contributed to increased efficiency in public service management. (NPM)	3.57	4/3	52.6%	13.6%
6. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy contributed to the introduction of performance indicators and standards, and their regular evaluation. (NPM)	3.43	3/3	46.5%	17.4%
7. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy encouraged competition. (NPM)	3.34	3/3	45.1%	22.9%
8. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy contributed to the introduction of new legal rules and procedures for local development. (NWS)	3.41	3/3	45.1%	17.2%
9. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy contributed to making sure that public service beneficiaries get a fair, impartial treatment. (NWS)	3.69	4/3	54.8%	13.5%
10. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy led to the introduction of institutional mechanisms for monitoring and control of local government actions, by the general public. (NWS)	3.58	4/3	52.6%	12.9%
11. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy contributed to increased public participation of local stakeholders in the local policy process. (NPG)	3.46	3/3	48.6%	17.8%
12. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy led to increased transparency and responsiveness towards citizen's needs. (NPG)	3.84	4/4	65.6%	10.3%
13. The strategic planning process and the adoption of the strategy contributed to the creation and development of partnerships and networks with local stakeholders for better local governance. (NPG)	3.41	3/3	47.4%	21.2%
NPM average score= 3.44				
NWS average score= 3.56				
NPG average score = 3.57				

We also offered authorities the possibility to point to the three most significant benefits and three most important challenges or barriers (using open questions). Biggest challenges faced by public authorities are getting local stakeholders engaged in the process, establishing strategic goals, objectives and priorities, and attainment of necessary financial support. Biggest benefits are linked to a more coherent development at community level and improved local governance, and enabling them to access multiple financing sources, especially EU funds (please see Table 11 below).

Table 11: Challenges and benefits of strategic planning

CHALLENGES (N=170)	
Public participation of local stakeholders in the planning process - Getting stakeholders involved in the process is a real difficulty; lack of interest from citizens, NGOs and the private sector along with difficulties in organizing public debates and raising interest to participate; - Getting citizens' support for the strategy and raising awareness of the importance of the process, lack of trust from citizens; and - Communication problems and implicitly identification of citizen/community/stakeholder needs;	29%
Strategic direction, goals, objectives - Identify strategic problems, define strategic objectives, set up clear priorities for the community, define a clear vision and strategic direction toward which the community should position itself;	16%
Financial resources - Difficulties in identifying sources of financing for the priorities/programs defined in the strategy, actual lack of financial resources both for the planning process and the implementation of the plan;	12.5%
Human resource - Lack of competence and training of the existing personnel/civil servants in strategic planning (need for training programs), lack of motivation or interest, impossibility to give extra payment to those involved;	11.5%
BENEFITS	
Coherent development and good governance - Possibility to identify and understand citizens needs and define a set of priorities which will guide local authorities' action especially during the resource allocation process (21.3%); - Capacity to fully coordinate the communities development efforts through a coherent framework that has: a clear long term vision, key strategic objectives, information on strategic problems at local levels, and a set of actions meant to resolve these problems and, in the end, increase the quality of local governance (19.2%); and - Enables local authorities to create a clear picture of the current situation based on the preliminary analysis (5.67%);	46.1%
Access to financing - The adoption of the strategy offers the opportunity to either access EU funding for different projects or to identify funding sources;	11%
Increased public participation - Increased levels of public participation of local stakeholders, and in some cases it encouraged the development of partnerships or networks of stakeholders. It also encouraged collaboration and better communication between local authorities and the citizens/stakeholders.	7,86%

Finally, the last two questions were concerned with analyzing the influence of organizational culture (OC) on the planning process, and whether strategic planning trainings (to gain competence in this field) for public employees are needed (lack of expertise). It seems that organizational culture plays an important role in the success of the planning process, and that governmental employees lack the necessary expertise in this field (see Table 12 below).

Table 12: Opinions on organization culture and special training programs

Organizational culture and strategic planning success	(1-5 scale) Mean/Median
To what extent the success of the planning process is influenced by the existing OC?	3.66/4 (std. dev. 0.993) 56.4% feel there is a strong and very strong influence vs. 9.80% weak or no influence of OC
Special training in strategic planning for civil servants	(1-5 scale) Mean/Median
To what extent do you feel training in strategic planning for local governments employees is necessary?	4.42/5 (std. dev. 0.901) 84% feel there is a strong and very strong need for special training vs. 4.2% weak or no need at all

3. Conclusions

Since the accession to the European Union, strategic planning is commonly used as a managerial tool by local public authorities in Romania, with more than 87% of authorities currently having adopted a strategic plan. The main reason for this is the legal requirement in order to access EU funds, although it is also seen as a top priority for local government by 4 out of 5 authorities, and around half feel it is an essential element for good governance at local level.

Regarding the actual process of planning, general knowledge on content and each step is rather high with the notable exception of monitoring and evaluation systems, authorities seem to know less about this component. Situation analysis (or environmental scan) is well developed and covers most of the relevant fields for a local community, but here too, evaluating success of the previous strategy and analyzing the ITC and e-government component are done only by half of authorities. The lower emphasis put on e-government and ITC is expected as Romania is one of the worst performers according to DESI (2014) even compared to the low performance countries. The lack of an evaluation culture in the Romanian public administration is also very well documented (Gârboan and Șandor, 2007; Gârboan, 2007; Mora and Antonie, 2012). Evaluation and monitoring seems to be the Achilles heel of the entire process as only one third of authorities have a formal structure responsible for this, and only 31% of authorities doing an evaluation (of the strategy) once at 18 months with less than 11% doing this every 6 to 12 months. Although it is clearly an issue that influences the effectiveness of strategic planning process, when asked about major challenges or barriers, rather inexplicable, authorities fail to identify this component as a major challenge, which would point to low awareness regarding the importance of performance evaluation. Strategic planning models emphasize the importance of stakeholder participation for strategy success, but this remains a challenge for Romanian authorities as participation of stakeholders is medium to low, least probable to participate being the academia and university representatives. The approach of authorities in this area is mostly passive, offering access to documents produced and the possibility of feedback but not actively encouraging participation. In most cases (over 75%) local authorities use external consultants for strategy development. Regarding the patterns of reform, although no clear pattern has emerged, as we found

mixed elements from all three models, it is clear that the least prominent elements are those specific to NPM, especially those concerning competition and privatization.

Finally, the main benefits of the planning process are coherence in local development efforts, increased quality of local governance and the possibility to access EU funds while the major challenges revolve around adopting effective instruments that will enable higher participation levels for stakeholders (with a specific issue on getting more interest for the process from stakeholders), and increasing expertise and competence in this field – authorities seem to find it challenging to define clearly strategic goals, objectives and set up priorities for the community they represent.

Evidently, the fact that the response rate was less than 200 is a significant limitation, especially regarding the representativeness of results, however concerning large cities and county councils we have around 50% response rate. A further qualitative study focused on several cases on both large and small communities would offer relevant insights and details on the actual process of planning, but most importantly on the causes for the problems identified here.

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