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Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

SOCIETAL PROGRESS INDICATORS AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL A POSSIBLE ANSWER TO SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2022, vol. 76, pp. 122-136

<https://doi.org/10.33788/rcis.76.9>

Published by:
Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:
„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,
Department of Sociology and Social Work
and
HoltIS Association

Societal Progress Indicators and Co-Responsibility for All a Possible Answer to Sustainable Social and Economic Development during the Global Pandemic

Elena Simona TOMOZII¹, Lei HUANG²

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to introduce a pertinent management model for municipalities and relevant groups to support the local communities in dealing with social and economic issues, or as in our case, with the effects of the global pandemic, while promoting sustainable development, through corporate social co-responsibility and efficient allocation and reallocation of resources. SPIRAL Methodology was used to implement exploratory research using the focus group as main research method and ESPOIR software for the statistical analysis. 2275 answers were collected from 198 citizens in Brasov Municipality. The citizens' answers positively correlate with the social and economic situation, dominated by the effects of the Great Recession. Mostly, well-being through their eyes is related to the working place, purchasing power, education and mental and physical health. Secondly citizens focus on improving their lives and contributing to the society. Lastly, they pay attention to the personal equilibrium. SPIRAL represents a useful tool in supporting governments and local stake holders to identify the pain points, find solutions and locally available resources while, sharing responsibility and successfully overcoming the negative impact of the global pandemic over the economy and society. When comparing the effects SPRIAL methodology had in the communities where it was applied, with the current situation around the world and with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we contribute to enriching the management knowledge by providing a comprehensive tool that promotes sustainable development, measures wellbeing and nurtures cooperation and social innovation.

Keywords: sustainable development, global pandemic, SPRIAL Methodology, wellbeing, co-responsibility, great recession, Local Action Groups, local communities, social innovations.

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Literature review

Lessons from the Great Recession

Looking back at the economic situation we experienced in Europe and around the world between 2007 to 2009, now we can clearly see the effects the Great Recession (Buti, 2009) had over economies and society in general; specialists all over the world agreed the crisis was unprecedented and multifaced (Boron, 2009; Chesnais, 2009; Guillen 2020).

It represented the sharpest contraction on the history of European Union that called out for a rational coordination of policies to face the financial crisis (European Commission, 2009). Therefore, it was a strong call towards a coordinated crisis management and a framework to help respond to this and to other potential similar situations that might arise in the future (Van den Noord & Szekely, 2009).

Similarly in USA it led to a prolonged and deep recession that decreased the overall GDP with 4.3% and unemployment peak reached 10% by the end of 2009, while the poverty rate increased to 15% (Duignan, 2019). In Latin America the effects of the recession became visible starting with 2009 when the GDP contracted by 2.5%; the mechanisms behind the crisis replication in South America were represented by the severe deterioration of trading activities, shrinking the remittances from the emigrants couples with the massive withdrawal of private capital from financial markets (Guillen, 2011).

During the Great Recession period the Chinese government managed to find a quick and feasible response to the economic crisis which reduced its impact on the economy by engaging a set of measures to sustain the economy, announcing to introduce stimulants for a period of two years, packages equivalent with to 13.3% of China's GDP for 2008. The overall value of this measure reached 586 billion dollars, equivalent of 4 trillion yuan at that moment. The funds were dedicated mainly to the infrastructure related projects but not only: they also included affordable housing and other environmental friendly projects.

As it can be seen, countries all over the world highlighted the need for a coordinated management system for crisis situations. But did the Great Recession prepare us for the current global pandemic?

The impact of Global Pandemic over the economic and social systems

The outbreak of COVID 19 in 2019 rapidly turned into a global pandemic. We find ourselves at the end of year 2021 and, the pandemic is still uncontrollable, and it negatively impacts the economies and social systems around the world.

Early estimations about the economic damage the pandemic will have, stated a decrease in GDP with at least 2.9% when in reality it dropped with a higher percentage reaching 4.5%; from an estimated GDP of 87.55 trillions U.S dollars in 2019, it only reached 83.61 trillion U.S. dollars; similarly in 2020 the world's

GDP only reached 84.57 trillion U.S. dollars (Szmigiera, 2021). Economies all over the world still bear severe losses in 2021. Unlike the Great Recession period, the global pandemic integrates several other strong negative characteristics: it produced impactful disruptions in the medical systems and affected the health of the population, leading to an increased fatality rate: over 247,047,197 people were affected by COVID while the number of deaths reached 5,000,000 people (Worldometers, 2021).

The current crisis also creates difficulties in following an agenda to promote sustainable development at macrolevel, while on the microlevel has a much deeper impact and severity when compared with the Great Recession, since it dramatically impacts the lives of citizens in terms of personal wellbeing: mental and physical health, finances, job related safety, etc. The overall life dynamics changed, people being subject to social isolation had to redefine the ways they are conducting their daily activities and lives.

Now, more than ever, we need a coordinated managerial strategy and intervention that would consider more the population, in a way that we identify not only the effects the crisis has over the population, but to move from down to up and identify the understanding of people over the subjective and objective wellbeing in the present moment, along with their actual needs, as well as to identify the right resources in the local communities and allocate them according. It is a moment when the responsibility not only belongs to the governments mostly, but to the communities in an equal manner. There is need for proactive responses on behalf of the multiple stakeholders at local level, a perfect time to share the responsibility and act in unity through social responsibility.

Results

Societal Progress Indicators and Co-Responsibility for All – SPIRAL, sustainable development and shared responsibility

The need for sustainable development emerged from the interplay of several important aspects: social, economic, increase in population, high poverty rate, global and local environmental problems (Malkina-Pykh, 2016). In 2020 United Nations formulated the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development with the aim to achieve a good quality of life for all while living in a healthy planet (Jatana & Currie, 2020), through the implementation of 17 major goals under the name of Sustainable Development Goals- 17SDGs that include alienation of poverty and hunger, decent work and economic growths, infrastructure, innovation and industry, sustainable communities and cities, a greener planet and partnerships for achieving the goals. The pandemic made and still makes difficult the implementation of the 17SDGs; if we consider that economies lowered their growth rate considerably, companies closed their doors, unemployment rates increased, and the health

systems confronted with major disruptions, many times being incapable to respond in a timely manner to the raised challenges (Ijjas, 2021); all pointing towards an increase of the population living in poverty- 119 million to 124 million people. According to UN the goal to alienate poverty by 2030 is already missed, but we are still expecting the poverty rate to decrease to 7%, the equivalent of 600 million people, by 2030 (United Nations, 2021).

SPIRAL can prove its utility for a more sustainable society that manages to create a lucrative framework of actors, who act together in a concerted manner in the benefit of all and support the sustainable development. SPIRAL Methodology was created by Dr. Samuel Thiron and his colleagues at Council of Europe with the aim to contribute the social sustainable development by including citizens in the process of decision-making, encouraging the social dialogue and developing measures and plans to solve communities' issues through cooperation with multiple local stakeholders (Council of Europe, 2011). At present SPIRAL through its' network, integrates over 737 territories of co-responsibility in Europe (337), Africa (397), South America (2) and North America (1), being present in 20 countries and leading the development of thousands of projects, initiatives and actions meant to serve the local communities. Any of the following structures can become a territory of co-responsibility: municipalities, non-governmental associations, enterprises or even informal groups that activate in the local communities, if their aim is to investigate local problems and offer innovative and viable solutions while stimulating the social dialogue and cooperation.

Through its large portfolio of methods, techniques and instruments SPIRAL enables the achievement of the following objectives: the development of the indicators necessary for the definition of well-being and for a facile cooperation between all citizens; the promotion of shared responsibilities necessary to ensure the progress towards welfare for all, including the future generations; the monitoring and evaluation of the achieved societal progress (Thirion, 2010).

The implementation of SPIRAL is organized into several steps, we can observe in Figure 1. During the first phase of the implementation, the main coordination group is established, and the target population is organized in homogenous groups that will participate in the designed focus group activities. A special importance is allocated to the structuring and the efficient management of the designed spaces to host the meetings with the citizens, to ensure the success and their efficiency.

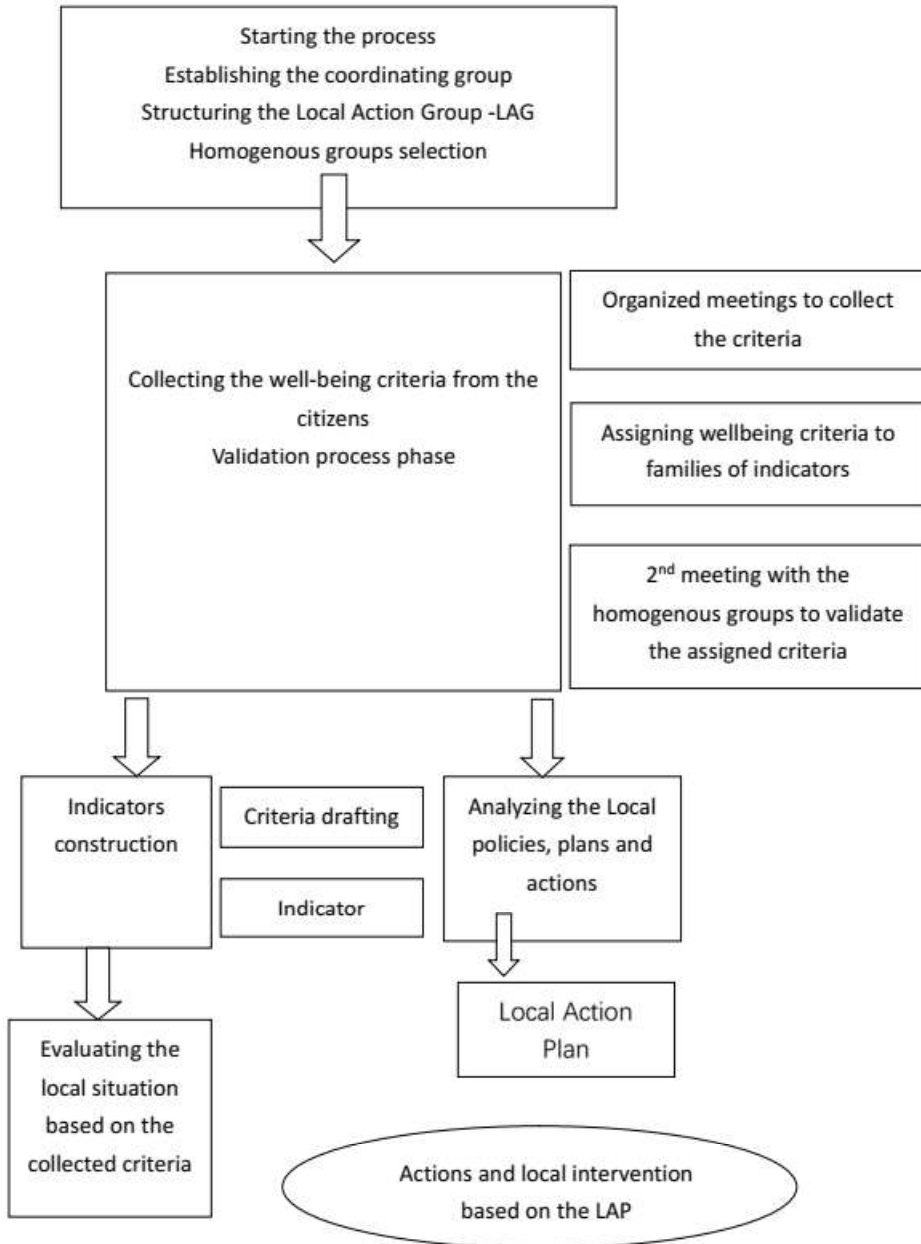


Figure 1. The step of the social co-responsibility process when applying the SPIRAL Methodology (adapted from Vetan, M., Obrecht., J. 2011)

The second phase is dedicated to the collection of the well-being indicators from the target population, by organizing focus-group activities with various homogenous groups, which are representative for the local community; in the same phase the first statistical analysis is performed after the wellbeing criteria are established and the wellbeing indicators validated. At the end of this phase the main group of trained experts introduces the findings to the Local Action Groups - LAGs (groups created with the purpose to manage the implementation of the whole process at local level and facilitate the social dialogue, cooperation and co-responsibility). Importance will be given to the situation of each local community: we are interested identifying family of wellbeing indicators, levels of existence for each family of indicators, indicators and criteria; local problems will be highlighted, and community access will be given to the community resources. In the third phase the members of LAGs will research the existent local policies, projects and other resources that can be found in the communities and can contribute to the improvement of the citizens' well-being levels and act as a platform of communication and interaction between groups. Lastly the LAG will elaborate a centered Local Action Plan – LAP with measures to be taken in the respective community, to achieve the above listed objectives. In the last phase, the LAGs focus will move on the implementation and monitoring of the projects, making sure the co-responsibility is shared accordingly between various stakeholders and the overall well-being increased at the level of each community (Vetan *et al.*, 2011).

In terms of human resources, we have organized the actors in several groups. Firstly, the methodology needs a group of trained experts to facilitate the whole process. Secondly there is need to research the local populations in their local communities. The respondents are organized in homogenous groups. At the level of community, a LAG is created, integrating important stakeholders from the community: representatives of governmental institutions, economic actors, representatives of non-governmental organizations, important social informal group's members, etc.

A model of good practices. Applying SPIRAL Methodology at the level of Brasov Municipality, Romania

Between 2010 to 2013 the SPIRAL Methodology was applied in a project funded by the European Social Fund through a national mechanism called POSDRU. Its' implementation took place in eight municipalities across Romania and resulted in the creation of eight LAGs that are active even in the present moment. The project had a group of 40 trained experts, from each of the 8 municipalities and established a framework of cooperation, gathering over 120 social partners who were members of the regional pacts for employment and social issues, local governmental bodies, members of the chamber of commerce and industry, farmers associations, craftsmen.

The methodological research approach was applied on a group of 1816 citizens in Romania, coming from 242 representative structures at local level. The main outcomes consisted in a lucrative platform for cooperation at national level, the familiarization with models of good practice within the SPIRAL global network of cooperation, such as Mulhouse, France, the establishment of the 8 territories of co-responsibility within Romania coordinated by the 8 LAGs, the emittance of 8 LAPs on an annual basis and the development of projects and various actions to contribute to the increase in the wellbeing levels and to stimulate social cohesion (Vetan, Obrecht, & Rus 2014).

In Brasov Municipality the main implementation team was composed of four members: one local project coordinator and 3 local facilitators in charge of both the project and the methodology implementation. The LAG in Brasov gathered over 25 collective actors such as local governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, professional association several informal groups. 198 respondents from the local population were consulted about their wellbeing, needs and possibilities to act upon solving personal and local social problems. The citizens were organized in 20 significant homogenous groups as presented in *Figure 2*.

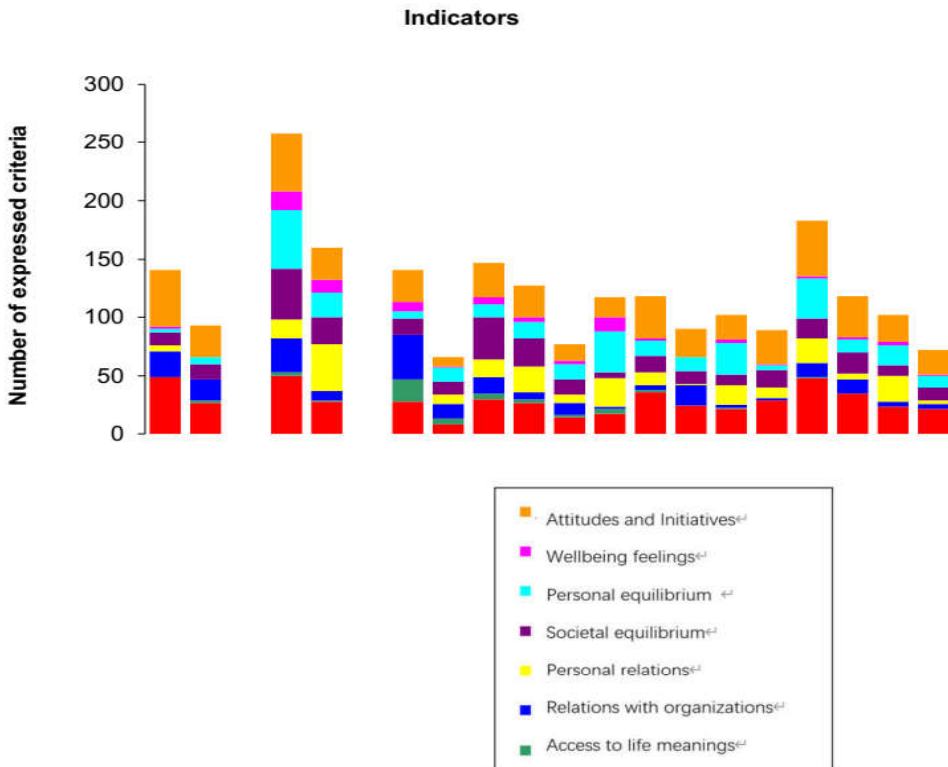


Figure 2. Homogenous group reparation according to the express criteria, organized in the 8 families of wellbeing indicators

Since the methodology itself is a bottom-up strategy, with a flexible framework, the focus of our research is to gather as much qualitative data as possible from our respondents. Therefore, each homogenous group participated into a focus group activity that was moderated by an animator- a trained expert. During the focus group the citizens task was to answer to 3 relevant questions by writing each of their answers on a post-it notes, that was sticked on a poster, especially created with the occasion of the focus-group meeting. The three questions from the interview guide were: (1) What does a good life means for you? (2) What prevents you from having a good life? (3) What did you do, or would you do to improve your life as well as others life?

Each question tackles an important aspect of the wellbeing. The first of the questions focuses on the understanding of the wellbeing concept for the respondents' perspective. Through generalization, it reflects the state of wellbeing both subjective and objective wellbeing at one point in time. The second question tackles the problems in the local communities, while the third one aims to identify what resources exist in the communities.

The collected criteria are organized according to the 8 families of indicators

The respondents generated number of 2254 criteria organized in the 8 families of wellbeing indicators as presented in *Figure 3*.

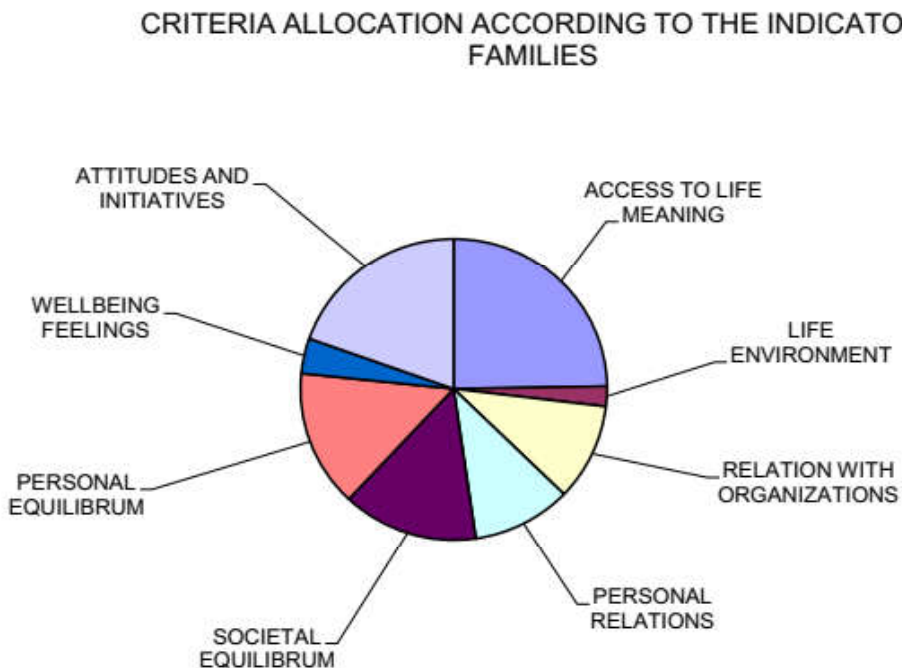


Figure 3. *Criteria repartition according to the indicator families*

As founders of the LAG and as researchers we were firstly interested to identify how well the national situation does reflects into the perception of the wellbeing (at local level) of our target research group. Secondly, we expected to have a real impact over the lives of the citizens by creating a sustainable management platform for cooperation and for promoting the social dialogue, increasing the levels of wellbeing, social cohesion and co-responsibility. The citizens answers are positively correlating with the situation at national level, a period when the effects of the Global Recession were strongly felt in Romania.

From the interpretation of Figure 3 we can see the A- Access to means of living family of indicators being allocated the highest importance with a percentage of 24.7 from the total answers. The respondents' concerns are mostly related to the A07-Purchase power / Access to finances – 36.5% of the answers inside the A family of indicators reflects this aspect: “to have enough money to pay the bills”, “to have a responsible income”, “I don't have enough money for medication”, “not to be concerned about the daily life expenses”. etc. The next indicator on the same family of indicators is A06-The working place integrating 17.83% of the answers. Here, citizens said that: “I want to find a working place”, “the lack of job for the young people”, “a working place with stable income” “security for my family, a workplace that offers sufficient incomes for a decent leaving”. On the third position we find the access to A05 - Education and training with 10.7%. The citizens are concerned about the discrepancy between demand and supply, in terms of what school offers as graduates and what companies need; aspect that contributes to the increase of the unemployment rate. Also, they are preoccupied with the educational system quality, as well as with the access to different forms of education: “lack of vision for the education (to enroll students only for the specialization that are demanded by the market to prevent unemployment)”, “a better educational system”, “the lack of sustainability of the educational system”. Another indicator from the same family has also over 10% of the overall answers: A09-Governmental support and personalized services.

From the first glance we can identify several imbalances in the social, economic, politic and education system. During the Great Recession period Romania's economy suffered a great contraction in the economic output. Also, the number of employees continuously contracted starting with the end of 2008 (Stanculescu & Marin, 2011), leading to increased unemployment rates. In 2010 the economic situation culminated with the government's decision to reduce the salaries for the employees in the budgetary system with 25%, measure that was applied through the Law 118/2010; this are only few of the consequences the Great Depression had in Romania. The citizens concern for the financial security and for security of their job are totally justified by the changes in the country's economic environment. Secondly the incapacity of the educational system to better serve the job market is also recognizable, not only in Romania but in many countries around the world. Thirdly the citizens are concerned about the social welfare and supporting system for various social categories. The A – Access to means of life's family of indicators

integrates indicators that ensure the basic wellbeing, allowing us to satisfy basic human needs. At this category the financial security plays an important role, many times when people think about wellbeing, they limit themselves to this aspect or it is the first aspect mentioned.

Table 1. *A - Access to means of living indicators and H- Attitudes and initiatives families of indicators*

Indicator	%	Indicator	%
A- Access to means of living	24.7 %	H- Attitudes and initiatives	19.6 %
A00- Access to meanings of living	3.02%	H00- Attitudes and initiatives	5.22%
NA0- Unclassified 0%	0%	NA0- Unclassified	0%
A01- Food	2.49%	H01- Personal development/ Self respect	16.37%
A02- Medication and health	7.12%	H02- Activities and private initiatives	26.16%
A03- Housing/ Equipment	1.78%	H03- Attitudes/ To be sociable	5.69%
A04- Clothing	0%	H04- To meet/ To listen/ To show solidarity	5.34%
A05- Education/ Training	10.85%	H05- Responsibility for common goals	3.02%
A06- Jobs	18.15%	H06- To get involved into the society	8.9%
A07- Free time, culture and sports	8.01%	H07- Dynamics, collective willpower	6.58%
A08- Purchasing power/ Access to finances	36.65%		
A09- Help and personalized services	10.32%		
A10- Mobility	0.71%		
A11- Documentation/ Exchanges	0.89%		

The second category of indicators that occupies an important place for the investigated population is H- Activities and private initiatives with a percentage of 19.57% of answers. Citizens show a proactive attitude towards their personal development and wellbeing as well towards participating in the social life. The indicator H02-Activities and private initiatives achieved 26.17% and the indicator

H01- Personal development / Self Respect has 16.37%. If we make a comparison with Maslow's pyramid of needs, we can assimilate these indicators with the highest level of human needs such as self-actualization. Most of the answers reflect the desire for a career: "to work", "to work to achieve a good position in the society", others want to become entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurs: "to open my own company", "to establish an NGO" while others' choices involve travel: "to travel abroad", and surprisingly many wish to relocate to another country: "to move to another country", "to find a workplace abroad". Others take initiative in improving the quality of their own lives by doing sports, learning new languages or getting involved with the local communities.

The next indicator in the same family is represented by the indicator H01- Work with themselves / Self-respect. The respondents place a lot of importance on the aspect of self-improvement, wishing to "give up the bad habits or negative traits" to "get out of my comfort zone", "to give up smoking", "to think positively", "to overcome my fears" "to take charge", "to give up my unhealthy habit".

Since the H family of indicators occupies the second place in the respondents' rankings, it also demonstrates they are willing to take initiative, be outsourcing and not expect support only from external sources.

The 3rd place in the respondents' ranking is given to the F family of indicators: Personal balance and health with 14.64% of the overall answers rate. The indicators that rank in the first three places are: F01. The Physical balance and health: 19.22%, F03 - Free Time and balance between activities – 9.25% and F07 – Personal Development- 8.19%. The most important aspect for the respondents is represented by their personal health, most of the answers representing a preoccupation for a healthy lifestyle.

What is interesting to analyze at this chapter is how did the criteria at this indicator change now during the global pandemic, since Romania has a very high rate of COVID-19 cases, and the sanitary system is completely overwhelmed by the large number of new cases. Currently Romania is at the bottom of the European ranking regarding COVID vaccination, with an indicator of only 40.61 when compared to Malta which has a vaccination indicator of 168.38 (Stewart, 2021).

The long-term impact of SPIRAL Methodology over the Municipality of Brasov

Brasov Territory of Co-responsibility was created as a result of the project implementation; at local level a LAG of 25 representative organizations and informal groups reunited to find solutions and promote social cohesion, increase the level of co-responsibility and wellbeing and formulate agendas that would bring us closer to a more sustainable society. Several projects and actions were designed and implemented with positive impact over the community. The Brasov municipality reconsidered the adaptation of the traffic lights as well as introduced other similar measures to support the persons with disabilities; a support group for

the people that find themselves going through challenging time was organized; the partner associations focused more on providing the adolescents and young adults career consulting activities, as well as other initiatives with impact on the local community were pursued.

How can we measure the sustainable development of a community from a bottom-up approach using SPIRAL?

We stated SPIRAL is a methodology that promotes a sustainable development, therefore through its methods and statical analysis is also capable to measure the degree of sustainable development within a community.

When the criteria are allocated to each indicator, another allocation is performed, concerning the quality and type of the given answer. There are 4 categories a criterion can be attributed to: Exclusion, Attainment, Quality and Sustainability. Exclusion represents the lack of access to a specific criterion. For example, “I don’t have access to audible traffic lights” – an answer given by a visually impaired citizen; at the level of the Brasov municipality at the time of research, there were no such traffic lights. To the category that shows attainment. The citizen can obtain the criteria. Answers such as “the laws are not respected”, “the actual level of income”, “people do not have a civic behavior”, “I don’t have money” are answers that reflect the stage of attainment. The next category – Quality reflects the fact the respective wellbeing criteria, of a specific quality is owned: “The health insurances have reasonable prices”, “the system of values is efficient and morally uncorrupted”, “I have a pleasant workplace”. The last and the ideal state for a criterion to be allocated to is the Sustainable level. This level signifies that the society is putting a lot of emphasis on offering the sustainable access to the respective wellbeing indicators; answers such as: “I have financial security”, “I have the guarantee of an abundant life for me and my family”, “I trust to educate my family in the actual educational system” can be allocated to the Sustainability category.

In *Figure 4*, we can visualize the quality of life at the level of Brasov Municipality. Most of the criteria – 44% are in the Attainment category and 39% in the Quality category. Looking again through the perspective of the country’s economic and social situation, once again it highlights the problems at national level, reflected in the community by severally impacting the level of wellbeing for both objective and subjective wellbeing indicators. With only 9% of the answers in the Sustainability category we understand there is a the long way that needs to be walked by Brasov Municipality towards sustainability.

Classification of criteria according to the indicators and categories

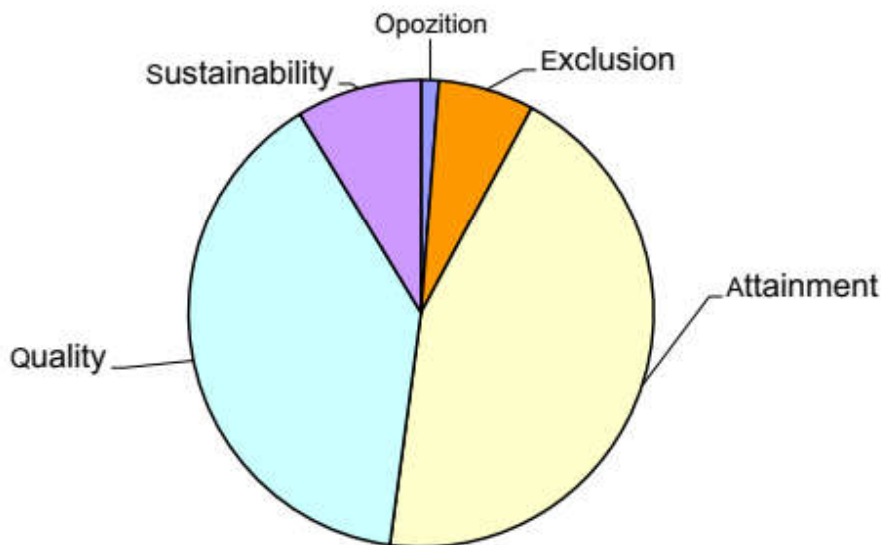


Figure 4. Classification of criteria according to the indicators and categories

Conclusion

SPIRAL is not only a complex comprehensive methodology with functional tools for the implementation of a coordinated local sustainable management, but it manages to collect a large amount of qualitative data, while offering the access to statistical analysis used by quantitative research methods, an aspect most of the qualitative research methods and methodologies can't accomplish. From the qualitative data we can gain valuable insights on situation of local communities, we can identify resources and new directions of action; the information can be used even for up governmental organizations which will have a clearer image of their communities and what is needed to be done. Basically, the methodology allows a more efficient allocation and reallocation of resources, especially at times when we confront with financial limitations. Simultaneously, it manages to harness the power of collectivity, working together towards the same goals.

Considering the actual pandemic situation with its impact over the global economies and with a deeply effect on citizens lives all over the world, we consider of great importance to refocus our attention towards the implementation of bottom-up methodologies and managerial strategies at the level of local municipalities and

local communities, to enable the promotion of sustainable developments such as SPIRAL does. This way we can better answer to the needs of local communities.

Lastly, if we are to compare the 8 families of well-being indicators, operationalized by SPIRAL, with the 17SDGs the United Nation's issued in the 2030 Agenda for a Sustainable Development, we can observe that the 17 SDGs are being part of the SPIRAL's wellbeing indicators.

In the current crisis we find ourselves, at a point where the lack of social dialogue and increased uncertainty levels entered our lives, such a methodology would remind people they are connected, they have enough resources to support each other, and they are capable to share the responsibility with the governments and other stakeholders in order to contribute together to the reduction of the negative impact of the current circumstances, so that we can better aligning with the UN 2030 Agenda.

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