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Using triangulation in targeting social interventions for at-risk-children

Manuela Sofia STĂNCULESCU[1], Monica MARIN[2]

Abstract

This paper aims to substantiate the selection of communities to be involved in a project on developing institutional capacity to provide social assistance prevention services in the rural area. The proposed methodology is based on a triangulation approach in a two-stage model, combining statistical data with interviews with institutional stakeholders.[3]

Keywords: targeting; social intervention; at-risk children; triangulation.

Background

The on-going debate between strengths and weaknesses of qualitative versus quantitative methods has fruitfully resulted in the methodological integrating solution of triangulation. A broad definition of triangulation is provided by Denzin (1978, p. 291) as "the combination of methodologies in the supply of the same phenomenon". It includes both combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as of different qualitative methods (Flick, 1992), more in the sense of "complementary compensation of the weaknesses and blind spots of each single method" (Flick, 2009, p.27). There is neither supremacy of the quantitative over the qualitative (or vice-versa), nor the order of using the different methods is important for the final research results (Flick, 2009, p.28). The commonality is represented by the one social phenomenon under study. The insights provided by

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using triangulation in social research have been differentiated under three categories (Kelle, 2001):

(i) Cumulative or mutual validation, assuming convergence of research results as the primary aim of triangulation

(ii) Complementarity, regarded as the central purpose of triangulation. Producing complementary findings excludes converging results and emphasizes the need to gain different perspectives for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

(iii) Contradictory or divergent results provided that the methods study the same aspects of the phenomenon and not different ones.

This paper is about using triangulation in targeting social interventions for at-risk-children, as an approach to overcome mainly weaknesses related to quantitative methods. The virtues of combining different methods are emphasized, in line with highlights of previous studies on the reconciling efforts of the two distinct methodological choices (Campbell, Fiske, 1959; Jick, 1979; Bryman, 1984; Adcock, Collier, 2001; Olsen, 2004).

Previous studies for selection at community level in Romania have extensively used quantitative methods, addressing the need to provide a standardized procedure for differentiating between communities at national or county level, either for targeting funds distribution (Sandu, 2001; Sandu, Voineagu, Panduru, 2009) or for comparative analysis of social development across the country (Sandu, 2010; Stănculescu, 2010). The phenomenon under study for this paper is related to UNICEF's initiative in developing prevention services for at-risk-children in a selected number of communities, mainly located in Romania's poorest development region – North-East.

The prevention part of social assistance system in Romania, although acknowledged as highly important for acquiring system efficiency, is still under-developed (Magheru, 2009). Root causes of this situation are partially related to the legislative and institutional developments, partially to the current workload performed by community social workers who spend most of the time with paper work for social benefits management. Addressing this problem, UNICEF Romania intends to bring on the public agenda and support implementing a local service package in the area of prevention.

This project is part of UNICEF's Community Based Services (CBS) Programme in Romania. The CBS focus is on the preventive approach in social protection system. The chore of UNICEF project consists in developing institutional capacity to provide social assistance prevention services in the rural area, by employing social workers in one hundred vulnerable communities (communes) in the following counties: Bacău, Botoșani, Buzău, Iași, Neamț, Suceava, Vaslui and Vrancea. In order to identify and select the communities the current paper has

elaborated a specific selection methodology for targeting UNICEF social intervention.

This article aims to substantiate the selection of communities to be involved in the programme. The question guiding the selection process is how to best target UNICEF project on *Support for Invisible Children*, namely to identify which are those communities where on the one hand, the project is mostly needed in terms of social vulnerabilities and, on the other hand, the project has increased success opportunities, mainly related to the municipality's attitude towards social problems. As the focus of this paper is rather on the triangulation approach of communities' selection than on development of theoretical models, the paper will center on the process of selection and start by a methodological description of the model's two stages. The section on results presents the distribution of the selected communities using, firstly, a quantitative selection and, secondly, qualitative methods, while the discussion part highlights the key findings. Conclusions section summarizes the lessons learned and the steps for future research.

Method

The methodology developed in this project for targeting social interventions in the area of prevention services is a two-stage process, using triangulation, beginning with theoretical selection on the basis of quantitative data already collected,[4] followed by a qualitative study, mainly with validation purposes, conducted through interviews with institutional representatives.

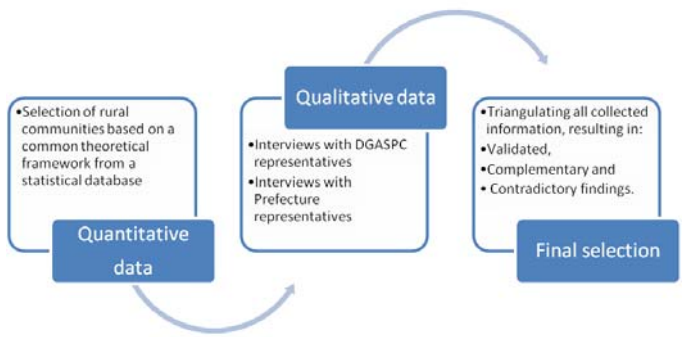

Figure 1. Triangulation model used for targeting social interventions for at-risk-children

[4] Data sources used for compiling a SPSS database with all the communes from eight counties include: the National Institute of Statistics (INS), a census of mayoralties conducted in 2009 by a consortium led by the Romanian Centre for Economic Modeling (CERME) and the Local Social Development Index computed by Dumitru Sandu (2010).

The quantitative selection combines a needs-assessment approach with proxies for predicting project success at community level. The needs-assessment part is based on elaborating indexes of local development in the social and economic domains, together with controlling for a high share of children (the project target group) in the total population. An 'open' attitude of the municipality toward social problems is used as a proxy for the project future success. The whole list of variables, including their definition and the computation method, is shown in *Table 1*.

A first step of the selection, called statistical selection, was performed. It resulted in a first list of selected communes with: a relatively high share of children in the total population, a low level of social and economic development meaning a high level of social risk factors, and a municipality that allocates resources to deal with the community social problems and vulnerable groups.

Table 1. The model used for the statistical selection

	PRIMARY INDICATORS	FIRST AGGREGATION LEVEL	SECOND AGGREGATION LEVEL	Selected communes (method 1)	Selected communes (method 2)
1	Educational stock at community level (Census 2002)			Compared to all the 656 communes from eight counties, the selected communes (1) are simultaneously fullfiling the following conditions	Compared to the communes from their own county, the selected communes (2) are simultaneously fullfiling the following conditions:
2	Average age of persons older than 14 years (INS, 2008)				
3	Life expectancy at birth (INS, 2006-2008)	**IDSL at commune level**			
4	Vehicles per 1000 inhabitants(2007)	Local Social Development Index			
5	Average area of dwelling (2008)	*(D. Sandu, 2010)*			
6	Gas consumption per inhabitant (2008)	*Factor Score*			
7	Size and residency category of locality				
			Social Risk factors	**High level**	**High level**
8	Share of employees in the population of 15 years and older (INS, 2008)	**IDEL at commune level**	*Factor Score*	*Relatively low level for IDSL and IDEL*	*Relatively low level for IDSL and IDEL*
9	Local budget own revenues per inhabitant (MFP, 2008)	Local Economy Development Index			
10	Share of own revenues in the total local budget own revenues (MFP, 2008)	*Factor Score*			
			Mayoralty's attitude towards social problems		
11	Number of public personnel specialized in social assistance working in projects on vulnerable groups or social inclusion	**IAP at commune level**	*Factor score*	**Medium-high level**	**Medium-high level**
12	Mayoralty offers voluntarily services, facilities, suppport for disadvantaged groups, other than the national programs such as the Minimun Income Guarantee (MIG) or the heating subsidies	Index of mayoralty's attitude towards social problems *Factor Score*			
			Share of children		
13	Share of children (under 14 years old) in the total population (INS, 2010)	**KIDSPO**	*Score*	**Medium-high level**	**Medium-high level**

The main limits of the statistical selection relate to the data availability but also to two aspects specific to the UNICEF project. The first major limit is that the index targets the underdeveloped rural communities (with a high-level of social risks) but does not distinguish the child specific problems, risks and vulnerabilities. A commune in which child specific problems such as child abandonment, child negligence, child abuse, child exploitation, children in need for special protection, school dropouts etc. have not been recorded should not been included in the UNICEF project even if it complies all criteria shown in table 1. The second major limit refers to fact that the index does not capture the need for specialized training of the local social workers. Thus, a rural community with

sufficient and well-trained social workers should not be targeted (for the project) although it might meet all criteria used for the statistical selection.

In order to overcome inherent weaknesses related to the quantitative approach as well as the limits previously described, the selection process was completed with a qualitative phase, based on interviews[5] conducted with representatives of the local institutions, which are defined as project stakeholders in the UNICEF programme, namely the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) and the Prefecture.

In addition, in all eight included counties, a data collection process[6] has been carried out with the support of three institutions at county level. The DGASPC provided, for each of the 656 communes, information on the human resources working in social assistance in March 2011 and on the number of children in the protection system[7] in 2010. The General Public Health Directorates offered data on the number of medical assistants and Roma health mediators at commune level. The County School Inspectorate supplied information regarding school dropouts, school absences and school mediators for each commune. These data have been used to inform the qualitative results, in particular for checking the needs-assessment part for the communities which have not been selected in the first stage (quantitative selection), but were proposed for inclusion in the project either by DGASPC or by Prefecture.

By triangulating the data collected in the research phases described above, all three possible types of situations have resulted: (i) validation, data collected through interviews confirmed the results of the statistical selection, (ii) complementary, the interviews with local stakeholders introduced new communities where for instance community development is quite high, but child related problems are also numerous, especially in what concerns negligence and abuse cases (e.g. winery areas) and (iii) contradictory results, where quantitative data have not provided accurate estimates of community development due to the high levels of local informal economy (e.g. mountain areas from Vrancea county).

Consequently, the initial list of rural communities (resulted from the statistical selection) has been classified under three categories: (a) *selected* (confirmed from the initial list by institutional representatives or proposed by institutional representatives and validated with data on child vulnerabilities), (b) *subject to decision*

[5] Interviews with representatives of all eight counties have been conducted by a team including the two authors together with Cristian Moisoiu, Researcher with the Institute of World Economy, the Romanian Academy.

[6] This process has been coordinated by UNICEF project coordinator. Data collected have been included in the database used for the statistical selection.

[7] Cases of child abandonment, teenage mothers, child abuse, violence or negligence, children with one or two parents left abroad for work, requests for foster care, children given in foster care, children with severe disabilities, children receiving social canteen.

(proposed by only one institution and not validated by the second one or by the data provided by DGASPC) or (c) *excluded*. The final list of communities where the project will be implemented, especially in what concerns those 'subject to decision', rests with the UNICEF programme coordinators.

Results

The theoretical selection produced a list of 136 communes distributed in eight counties (*Table 2*). The differences in the number of selected communes show significant inter-county disparities, mainly related to the social risk factors. Almost one third of the communes are located in the poorest county of Romania, Vaslui, followed by Botoșani, with 19% of all selected communes in the first stage.

Table 2. Distribution of the selected communes after the first phase (statistical selection) by county

County	Number of communes theoretically selected
Bacău	16
Botoşani	25
Buzău	8
Iaşi	15
Neamț	8
Suceava	10
Vaslui	38
Vrancea	16
Total	**136**

In the second phase of research, interviews with institutional representatives were organized. The positions of the interviewed institutional representatives varied from General Director and Chief of Service in the case of DGASPC, to the Prefect, Chief of Office and Chief of Roma Programs in the case of Prefecture. Both institutions received the results of the first phase selection and confirmed, added or excluded the communes presented in their own county lists. The representatives of DGASPC and Prefecture used different criteria for validation. Most DGASPC representatives used the number of children in the protection system and the need for training of the local social workers as the main criteria for validation. Unlikely, most Prefecture representative had a special focus on the Roma communities and on the isolated poor communes (regardless the child specific problems).

All institutional representatives provided input on the municipality's attitude and institutional capacity to handle social problems. The DGASPC representatives focused on the child related issues and classified municipalities according to their working experience and collaboration in previous projects ("very good, always

helping", "excellent collaboration", "a mayor genuinely interested and willing to solve child related problems" or "a mayor who speaks a lot but never takes action"). The Prefecture representatives avoided comments but paid more attention to "a political balance" according to the mayor's party.

Table 3. Distribution of the selected communes after triangulation by county

County/ Number of communes ...	Selected	Subject to decision	Excluded	Total
Bacău	10	8	5	23
Botoşani	15	1	14	30
Buzău	10	5	3	18
Iaşi	8	7	7	22
Neamț	10	1	0	11
Suceava	11	7	0	18
Vaslui	10	7	2	19
Vrancea	9	8	12	29
Total	**83**	**44**	**43**	**170**

The initial list of communes selected in the first phase (statistical selection) was triangulated with the information collected from field interviews and the data gathered from the county institutions. The resulted rural communities were classified into (1) selected, (2) subject to decision or (3) excluded, as presented in the previous section. The distribution by county of this final list of rural communities is shown in *Table 3*.

Discussion

The methodology on targeting improvement of institutional capacity for development of community prevention services uses a two-stage triangulation approach. The model is based on a complementary methodology, with a qualitative stage reinforcing the quantitative one, combining statistical data with interviews with different institutional stakeholders. The key-findings can be summed up as follows:

(1) Qualitative results mostly confirmed the quantitative selection.

(2) Both the quantitative and the qualitative phase of research have limitations. For instance, the statistical selection used as proxy indicator for the mayoralty's attitude towards social problems data from a census of municipalities performed in 2009. The response rate to this census was 94%, however 6% of the country municipalities did not answer. If the representatives of one locality did not respond to the census, the community automatically did not comply a selection criteria (medium-high level of the mayoralty's attitude factor score), hence it was not selected in the first phase of statistical selection. 33 (out of all 656) communes were in this situation. On the other hand, data regarding municipalities obtained from interviews with institutional representatives are also limited. Both the atti-

tude and institutional capacity of municipalities were assessed in each county and by each evaluator in a non-standardized (thus, non-replicable) manner according to factors such as personal experience, personal relationships, political affiliation and individual preferences. Finally, data gathered from the county institutions are also "weak". For example, the DGASPC statistics are based on estimations of the social workers or of the persons responsible with social assistance in each municipality. A low number of cases on child problems might as well indicate a low institutional capacity for identification of vulnerabilities, rather than a community with a low level of child-related needs.

(3) The institutional representatives spontaneously used selection criteria rather similar to the ones included in the theoretical frame for the statistical selection, which are community needs and openness of the municipality to the project implementation. However, the DGASPC representatives understands "community needs" as number of cases related to child problems. In addition, they also refer to the needs for training of the human resources dealing with social problems in a specific community. By contrast, the Prefecture representatives interpret "community needs" in a much broader way, close to the one used for the statistical selection, and have scarce (if at all) information regarding the human resources available at the local level for social assistance. Consequently, most communities included in the selection in the second research phase (the qualitative study) have been proposed by the DGASPC representatives and were only partially confirmed by the Prefecture.

(4) The interviews carried out with the key county stakeholders show a rather positive attitude towards project implementation, with a significant difference in information, interest and expertise between DGASPC and Prefecture. The project clearly targets DGASPC institutional mission and offers a valuable opportunity for supplementing either the organizational scheme or the skills of the persons in charge with social assistance problems at locality level. The Prefecture's prior expertise is based on social risks related to Roma problems and their validation has been partially influenced by this. The role assumed by the Prefectures is that of facilitating communication with mayors in each selected community. However, the role played by both DGASPC and Prefecture in the future programme implementation strongly depends, in varying degrees, by the openness of the institutional leading position - General Director or Prefect.

(5) Triangulation has been designed as a consultative process that was positively perceived at the country level, which adds value to the project from the incipient phases by increasing participation and ownership. It,

however, does not ensure sustainability as it does not include a clear commitment of the selected municipalities to be part of the programme.

Conclusions

The paper provides a methodological approach for substantiation of targeting social interventions in rural areas – development of institutional capacity to provide social assistance prevention services at community level. The proposed methodology is based on a triangulation approach, in a two-stage model, combining statistical data with qualitative information from different institutional stakeholders.

Identification of communities where the project is mostly needed and has the best chances of success confirmed the quantitative selection based on defining the target community with the following characteristics: (i) a high share of children in the total population, (ii) a low level of social and economic development, meaning a high level of social risk factors and (iii) a municipality opened and interested in tackling the community social problems.

The qualitative study conducted with the institutional representatives is a useful process in what concerns at least two issues: (i) confirming the theoretical assumption and accuracy of quantitative data; (ii) introducing 'soft' variables which are not captured by statistical data. The latter information is related to either their previous work experience with the corresponding municipality or to the sufficiency, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, of municipality's human resources for child-related social problems.

Combining theoretical selection method with qualitative information from institutional representatives produced all three types of triangulation results – (i) validated, confirming quantitative data accuracy and the theoretical model, (ii) complementary – introducing new communities where for instance community development is quite high, but also child related problems are numerous and (iii) contradictory results, where quantitative data do not provide accurate estimates of community development. Consequently, triangulation proves to produce reliable results for targeting the local communities where the project will be both needed and successful. However, long-term project sustainability highly depends on county and local stakeholders' openness and involvement, which although addressed by proxy variables in the selection process, can only be confirmed by effective project implementation.

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