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**The “Rural-Sensitive Evaluation Model” for evaluation of
local governments’ sensitivity to rural issues in Serbia**

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Abstract

In the search for an adequate set of indicators to measure the level of pro-rural aspirations of Local Governments (LG), the main existing approaches to endogenous development have been examined. However, the conclusion must be that none of them seem to fit the needs completely. For this reason, a new index, the Municipal Rural-Sensitive Index (MRSI), has been developed, representing the base for the Rural Sensitive Evaluation Model (RSEM). The MRSI integrates the key features of the LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement Rural) philosophy, consisting of 41 rural-sensitive indicators, grouped into 3 categories and 7 sub-categories. The resulting MRSI scores allow a quick comparison between LGs, show changes over time and assists in establishing a framework for institutional and guided rural development advancing towards set standards. This paper outlines the development of the RSEM and methods of use, including the calculation methodology. It also shows the main features of the RSEM as demonstrated from its application to test cases.

Keywords: Evaluation, Model, LEADER, Local Government

JEL classification: C52, C54, H11, O21, R58.

1. INTRODUCTION

Making public sector organisations work better is one of the most persistent and difficult challenges in development and development cooperation. At the same time, according to the European Commission (EC, 2005), nothing is more crucial for achieving sustained progress, growth and poverty reduction. Furthermore, as Barquero (2002) emphasized, institutional development is a major step towards economic growth and structural transformation.

New Public Management (NPM) is the theory behind the most recent paradigm change in how the public sector is to be governed (Lane, J-E., 2000). One of the most important strongholds of the NPM concept is the significant change in the relationship between government institutions (central and local) on the one hand and citizens on the other. This relationship is changing in favour of the citizens who are treated as customers, clients and main beneficiaries of the public sector that is, at present, more oriented towards assessing its performance (Vigoda-Gadot, E. et al. 2004, referring to Thomas and Palfrey, 1996).

Baum, S., and P. Weingarten (2005, p. 218), and Maier, G., and F. Tödling (2002, p. 195) express the need for a coherent analytical framework capable of guiding and visualizing the impact of rural development (RD) policies and also of defining the role of governments. The increasing importance of sub-national actors in RD, as expressed through decentralization and transfer of power from higher to lower levels of government, is noticeable (OECD, 2006) and perceived as efficient, effective and more economical. OECD (2006a), referring to Bryden (2005), provides a rationale for such a tendency depicted by five key words: Transparency, Subsidiarity, Competitiveness, Heterogeneity and Cost savings.

Decentralised planning and implementation in RD, consequently, require deep-seated changes to the attitudes and practice of administration, especially at the local level. Local government should be judged according to the difference it makes in people's lives (Galvin, 1997).

While a vast amount of institutional policy case studies and institutional assessment models exists, institutional developers have not yet developed standardised procedures for using this information to foster institutional changes towards rural issues. A range of government policies and institutional organisations do not focus on the specific needs of rural areas and which apply the same criteria for both rural and urban areas. Referring to Ostrom (2007), Theesfeld et al. (2010) highlighted diverse and complex relationships between economics and political science which has challenged the interdisciplinary field of institutional analysis. However, these authors have still advocated for scientifically well-founded ex-ante policy assessment from an institutional perspective, rather than for the assessment of the impact of institutions features and the ways in which institutions can be altered to deliver more reliable policies.

Serbian context has been facing a slow decentralisation in RD policy definition and implementation. Referring to Haggblade et al., (2002), Bogdanov (2007) stressed the importance of local initiatives. She said that local initiatives and support always bears more weight than state policy and state programs, because local authorities focus less on development inequality in their own environments, have a better understanding of resources and problems and are more efficient in program implementation. Additionally, she elaborates upon the low level of local capacity development in the Serbian context, and trust in local/rural structures and organisations. According to her findings, local administration is characterized by insufficient organisational order within its structures. Moreover, approximately 60% of Serbian municipal authorities have no clear view of their own role in solving existing problems of the rural population. This situation is often argued as a result of the modest central support as well as LGs' budgets but also a strong mistrust among key stakeholders of local economic development.

The hypothesis we considered in this paper is the following: "If the problems of rural communities and the actions taken by local decision makers to resolve these problems are

identified, than rural "welfare" will be improved". In this paper we argue that with the confluence of questioning RD objectives and the devolution process in Serbia, it is important to develop more effective and multi-dimensional means of evaluating LGs' rural-sensitivity. By this paper we elaborate the Rural-Sensitive Evaluation Model (RSEM), (Milic, 2009), a tool for assessing how LG works to promote wider RD objectives.

Despite a great need for them, similar models have not been tested in Serbia until now.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE RSEM

A broad range of rural experiences across the EU and the changed role of local actors in development processes, have been factors for re-thinking the previous RD approach. Accordingly, the EC wanted local actors to work together in a community-based approach to find innovative solutions to rural problems which could reflect what is best suited to their areas (Woods, M., 2008). In response to these aspirations, LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement Rural) was launched in 1991 as a method of mobilising and delivering RD in local rural communities, rather than a fixed set of measures to be implemented (EC, 2006).

The EU posed unequivocal objectives for rural actors applying LEADER (Milic, 2009). It was (a) partnership instead of individual behaviours, and (b) innovative solutions to meet rural problems instead of old fashioned approaches through transferring non-applicable development models or repeating the same actions whether they yield results or not.

A number of studies analyzing the applicability and efficiency of the LEADER method have been undertaken. Shucksmith et al. (2005) has stated that ÖIR (2004) aimed exactly at analyzing the issues of whether and how (far) individual LEADER features of the method as a whole are applied in the "classical" RD measures. The overall conclusion was that the LEADER method is applicable to a whole range of RD measures. There are positive outcomes with respect to institutional changes as well, especially (a) regional value added, including, the development of soft factors like participation of different groups of actors, or efficient decentralized management and financing, (b) production of synergies with other regional development measures, and (c) feasibility of the different features of the LEADER method.

The implementation of the LEADER initiative is followed by the decentralisation of governing and the increased importance of sub-national actors in RD.

Encouraging involvement of local actors in the development process, as a main pillar of the RSEM, matches the main principles of the LEADER philosophy. A decision on what should be measured in order to define a community as a rural sensitive community, accordingly, has its roots in the LEADER philosophy and related key features (Milic, 2010): area-based approach, bottom - up approach, public - private partnership, integrated approach, innovation, cooperation and networking (Table 1).

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Table 1: Inter-relations between the LEADER approach and Rural-sensitive evaluation model (RSEM)

LEADER	RSEM		
Key Features	Overall Questions	Goals	Rationales
Area-based approach	<i>To what extent has the area-based approach been applied?</i>	Fostering of endogenous development. Rethinking rural territorial unit.	Rural areas with potential for endogenous development are attractive regions for development (Barquero, A., V., 2002, 165-169).
Bottom-up approach Public-private partnership	<i>To what extent has the bottom – up approach been applied?</i> <i>To what extent has the participation of rural population in the development processes been supported?</i>	Participatory designing of development processes.	Local development policy is based on a new form of regulation of the relations among economic, political and social actors. (OECD, 2006). It is important to go over the benefits to be gained from change to good practice, and to get local actors to change their priorities.
Integrated approach	<i>To what extent have RD issues been considered integrally?</i>	Balancing and integrating the social, economic and environmental components of life in a rural area.	Definition of Local Development Strategy (LDS), EC (2005): <u>a coherent set of operations</u> to meet local objectives and needs implemented in partnership at the appropriate level.
Innovation	<i>To what extent have the innovative approaches been applied?</i>	Leading the local administration in a new and unique approach of local RD issues maintenance.	A term “losing area”, defined as a consequence of increasing competitiveness among different areas can be defined as a geographical space that lost a “systematic comparative advantage” (Seri, P., 2003). Many traditional rural communities that are currently unable to cope with innovation and modern competition are actually “losing areas”.
Cooperation Networking	<i>To what extent have the inter-territorial cooperation, networking and/or cross-border cooperation been supported?</i> <i>To what extent has the organizational capacity of rural communities been supported?</i>	Reinforcing influence and activity of cooperating parties.	Human relationships are the pillar of all economic activities (Putnam, R., 2000). The more the different actors in a region merge their individual problem-solving efforts, the higher the problem-solving capacity will be within that region. Development cooperation, therefore, should assist in improving the networking capacity between regional actors (Rauch, T., et. al. 2001).

Source: Authors

In addition, the RSEM considers two more aspects: the position of women and youth in rural areas and the impact of local administration employees on the overall goals of RD. Accordingly, the RSEM intends to answer to the related overall questions: to what extent has the local RD policy contributed to improve the situation of women and youth in rural areas?,

and to what extent has the local public administration contributed to the improvement of the rural situation?

Since the clients of public services differ in their demands and expectations, it is necessary to orient services towards these differences in order to be efficient. The gender- and youth-sensitive approach to local policy design and implementation has contributed to a better identification of rural needs, strengths, possibilities, threats and weaknesses within a territory.

Rauch, T., et al. (2001), in analyzing the ways of securing target group and gender differentiation within regional RD policies, stress that those policies have to: (a) be based on information on different population groups; (b) specify which population groups will receive special attention; (c) design exclusive services and support measures tailored to the situation of such groups; and (d) involve representatives of disadvantaged groups in planning and implementation.

The RSEM treats the local administration as the bearers of local political and economic changes. To increase responsiveness in public administration organizations, it is essential to constantly evaluate the citizens-clients' perceptions of various service providers (OECD 2006a, referring to Vigoda-Gadot, E., 2000b). According to Vigoda-Gadot, E., (2003), a responsive politician or bureaucrat must be reactive, sympathetic, sensitive, and capable of feeling the public's needs and options. Since the needs and demands of a heterogeneous society are dynamic, it is vital to develop systematic approaches to understanding that society.

Lower overall resources capacities, including lower population density and lower business outcomes, result in the provision of services being less dense in Less Favoured Areas (LFA)¹ than in non-LFA areas. Accordingly, the RSEM introduces two different approaches for two different types of rural areas, by setting up requirements for LFA municipalities to be considered as rural- sensitive at a lower level.

3. CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE RSEM

The RSEM is composed of the Municipal Rural-Sensitive Index (MRSI). The MRSI is determined by its structure and scoring system (Table 2, Table 3 and Scheme 2).

The first step in designing the MRSI was a decision on what should be measured in order to define a LG as a rural-sensitive, i.e. the determination of data types, necessary for this purpose. Accordingly, a group of principles related to the criteria for selecting the MRSI indicators have been taken into account.

¹ Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management Republic of Serbia has defined Serbian LFA in 2005. The criteria for defining these areas are not completely compliant with the EU requirements.

Van de Kerka, G., et. al. (2008), referring to a group of authors (Nagelhout, 2006; Bell and Morse, 2003; Meadows, 1998; Guy and Kibert, 1998), has stated that indicators have to be selected carefully, and must be: (a) relevant for the issue; (b) measurable; (c) available from public sources, scientific or institutional; (d) reliable; (e) recent and regularly updated; (f) independent from each other. Referring to the previous work of several authors and practitioners (Palfrey et al., 1992; Winkler, 1987; National Consumer Council, 1986; DHSS, 1979), Vigoda (2003) highlighted suggestions to elaborate which performance indicators could be considered good indicators of public policy outcomes. The results of monitoring these indicators can help to: (a) understand and establish public needs; (b) develop, communicate and distribute public services; and (c) assess the degree of satisfaction with the services.

In order to follow the statements above, each of the phenomena in the LG's relations towards rural issues and each particular change are defined in three-level structure of the MRSI (Table 2, Table 3, Scheme 1):

1. Type of indicators (ToI)
2. Indicators' Area (IA)
3. Indicator²

Three main ToIs are composed of seven IAs which contain a set of minimal conditions, required for each LG to be treated as sufficiently rural sensitive (MILIC, 2010) (Table 2, Scheme 1).

ToI/I pertains to monitoring the extent and manner in which LG changes over time. Additionally, ToI/I measures the level of participation and coordination of activities amongst relevant stakeholders. Five IAs (1-5), contained in ToI/I, are based upon key features of the LEADER approach.

ToI/II measures the influence and participation of sensitive groups within the rural population on/in overall management of the LG and includes IA6.

ToI/III incorporates IA7 and measures the impact of LG administrations' features on the overall RD objectives and their willingness to foster changes endogenously.

41 indicators are classified into seven IAs and reflect the minimum conditions, quantifying the extent to which a particular indicator is met. 35 indicators are obligatory while 6 are optional (Table 2, Scheme 1). Additionally, each particular IA, except IA7, has one "Primary" indicator (Scheme 1). For greater accuracy, the MRSI introduces 110 indicator variances (IVs), allowing deeper LG insights and precise quantification of differences among LGs.

² For the purpose of the Municipal Rural-Sensitive Index, definition of the term "indicator" could be explained through the definition provided in the OECD's glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation (OECD, 2002) as follows: "Quantitative or qualitative factor or variable that provides a simple and reliable means to measure achievement, to reflect the changes connected to an intervention, or to help assess the performance of a development actor".

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Table 2: Content of the Municipal Rural-Sensitive Index (ToI-Type of indicators, IA-Indicator area, I- indicator)

ToI1	Indicators pertaining to the functioning approach
IA1	Area-based approach within the local administration
I1	Population (No, density, age structure) of the area
I2	No of initiatives launched by the LG that affected the rural population of the neighbouring LG(s)
I3	No of self-initiated consultative meetings with representatives of other LG(s) and with representatives of the ministry, with the RD as a topic
I4	No of initiatives pertaining to the continued work on joint creation of local policies launched by the LG
I5	No of initiatives pertaining to the continued work on joint creation of local policies launched by others and accepted by the LG
IA2	Bottom-up approach within the local administration - influence of local administration on cooperation and partnership
I6	Existence of a special board responsible to create local activities/decision making/strategic selection of new programs related to RD
I7	No of local social groups included in the boards responsible for local activities/decision making/strategic selection of new programs related to RD
I8	No of initiatives (training, active participation, promotional set, a common lobby, etc.) launched by the LG with the aim to unite local stakeholders from all three sectors/in the current year (CY)
I9	Establishment of direct cooperation between the local actors, representatives of at least 2 sectors supported by local actors' representatives of the third sector/CY
I10	Application of transparent criteria by LG in selecting the actions/programmes/projects/designed in a participatory manner, in the process of defining, all three sectors of local actors, took the part
IA3	Creation and implementation of strategic documents related to RD
I11	Existence of a local RD strategy or one that is currently being designed
I12	Existence of a strategic and/or planning document that is not directly related to RD, but in which RD is one of the key development areas of the LG
I13	Representatives of non-governmental sector and business sector have been consulted during the design of strategic and/or planning documents through the active participation of their representatives and formal membership in the working groups and other bodies responsible for planning and defining the strategic documents
I14	Representatives of rural population have been consulted during the designing of strategic and/or planning documents through the active participation of their representatives, and formal membership in the working groups and other bodies responsible for planning and defining the strategic documents
IA4	Application of innovative approaches in RD planning and implementation
I15	No of free of charge trainings aiming to increase capability to apply innovations in rural environment and/or lower costs of training for the rural population/CY
I16	No of innovations supported by the LG and No of households/rural communities influenced by the innovation/CY
I17	No of activities related to adaptation of administrative procedures for the rural population (transportation, supply, timely information, etc.)/CY
I18	No of cultural activities in the rural environment that contributed to promotion of the local identity and tourist attractions/CY
I19	No of activities aiming to increase awareness on the importance of innovative approach to RD and its own

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	capacity to take initiatives/CY
I20	No of marketing activities aiming to involve stakeholders in the process of innovation/CY
I21	No of considered measures, related to the RD, not taken into account by other policies or other programmes at the national level/CY
I22	No of activities supporting the integration of European standards whilst, at the same time, preserving local distinctiveness/CY
I23	No of activities supporting the adaptation of administrative and financial frameworks to better fit the special needs of rural population/CY
I24	The initiative for these activities has been launched by the LG itself
IA5	Multi-level cooperation and networking
I25	No of joint activities among LG(s), regions within a country/partner LG(s), rural areas, regions and/or local actors from neighbouring countries/CY
I26	No of inter-municipal, regional, inter-territorial projects/activities directed at rural areas, networking activity and cross-border cooperation on RD issues/CY
I27	No of exchanges in RD among the administrations in Serbia and agreements on further cooperation/CY
I28	Existence of the LG's web site in Serbian, English, language of the most represented national minority within the territory and/or in the language at least 1 of the neighbouring states (if this country does not use the language of the most represented national minority within the territory of the LG, as its official language)
ToI2	Indicators pertaining to the impact of social inclusion on the overall objectives of sustainable RD
IA6	Position of women and youth (W&Y) in rural areas
I29	Participation of W&Y in the process of decision-making (through direct participation) as well as in the boards responsible for decision making/CY
I30	No of activities and/or decisions made by the board responsible for decision-making directed towards improving the situation of W&Y in rural areas/CY
I31	No of activities and/or measures directed towards the definition of special, more favourable conditions of employment of W&Y from rural areas and/or to encourage quality of life in rural areas/ CY
ToI3	Indicators pertaining to the impact of local administration personnel on the overall objectives of sustainable RD
IA7	Personnel's approach toward RD
I32	Commitment to the rural issues/Motivation
I33	Proactive, focused direction
I34	Just-in-time resourcing
I35	Flexibility/Adaptability
I36	Long-term thinking
I37	Team work/employee influence/sharing information
I38	Credibility/Competence
I39	Comprehension/A broad understanding of rural issues
I40	Creativity/A unique perspective - one not provided by any other LG
I41	Continuous improvement

Source: Own elaboration

The RSEM is supported by a scoring system (Table 3, Scheme 1). Indicators and IVs carry a certain number of points. Compared to correlated indicators, IVs carry a different number of points defined by adding or, in three cases, by reducing extra values. The scoring system is structured for each IA in four levels:

Level 1-correlates to achievement of priority indicators or IVs (Scheme1). This minimum value is intended to show that a municipal administration has achieved the basic minimum, but still considers RD issues as specific issues and has a basic, previously established orientation towards RD which is in accordance with the MRSI.

Level 2-represents the threshold at which a municipality can be described as being sufficiently rural-sensitive and proves that conditions set by obligatory indicators are achieved. The achievement of not-obligatory indicators shows a higher degree of sensitivity to rural issues. Each of the IA's bears the same value (5.00) necessary to declare a municipality as sufficiently rural-sensitive.

Level 3-represents the maximum score for a particular IA that can be attained by a municipality. This score proves that all requirements for particular IA are fulfilled.

Level 4 -the maximum number of points, 100 (sum of the maximum number of points within each IA), represents the MRSI.

Table 3: The scoring system in the Municipal Rural-Sensitive Index

Stage	Number of points	Indicator Area						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Minimum required to be evaluated	1.00	1.00	0.75	0.5	2.00	1.50	1.00
2	Minimum required to be rural-sensitive	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
3	Maximum	8.00	7.50	11.00	18.00	12.50	7.00	36.00
4	Municipal Rural-Sensitive Index (MRSI), \sum Level 3 IA's (1,2,3,4,5,6,7)	100						

Source: Own elaboration

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Scheme 1: Structure, content and scoring system of the Municipal Rural-Sensitive Index with depiction of primary (P), mandatory (M) and non-mandatory (N) indicators

ToI										57.0	
IA 1, 8.0		IA 2 7.5		IA 3 11.0		IA 4 18.0		IA 5 12.5			
I 1, M, 1.0, P	I 2, M, 2.5	I 6, M, 1.0	I 7, M, 1.0	I 11, N, 5.0	I 12, M, 3.0, P	I 15, M, 1.0	I 16, M, 3.0	I 25, M, 2.5	I 26, M, 3.0, P		
	I 4, M, 2.5	I 8, M, 2.5	I 9, M, 3.0, P	I 13, M, 1.0		I 17, M, 3.0	I 18, M, 1.0	I 27, M, 4.0			
I 3, M, 1.5	I 5, N, 0.5	I 10, M, 1.0		I 14, M, 2.0		I 19, M, 1.0, P	I 20, M, 1.0		I 28, N, 3.0		
							I 22, N, 1.5				
						I 23, M, 3.5	I 24, N, 1.0				
							I 21, N, 2.0				
ToII					7.0	ToIII					36.0
	IA 6 7.0			IA 7 30.0 + 6.0							
I 29, M, 1.5, P		I 30, M, 3.0		I 31, M, 2.5	I 32, M, 3.0	I 33, M, 3.0	I 34, M, 3.0	I 35, M, 3.0	I 36, M, 3.0		
					I 37, M, 3.0	I 38, M, 3.0	I 39, M, 3.0	I 40, M, 3.0	I 41, M, 3.0		

Source: Own elaboration

4. THE USE OF THE RSEM

Once it had been determined what changes are to be measured, the next step was to decide how to measure them, i.e., how to apply the RSEM.

Although the RSEM is clearly and precisely defined in all its parts, it is expected that plans and research methods should be approached with a certain level of flexibility as well as informality. RSEM anticipates that evaluators, who are deeply involved in the communities, will use semi-structured interviews. On-the-spot analysis should be a part of evaluators' approach to the topic. It helps evaluators to constantly review and analyse their findings to decide how to move forward. This approach builds on the increasing understanding that the team builds up over time and allows a change of focus as issues emerge. Accordingly, the approach itself is semi-structured and is revised as the fieldwork proceeds.

Application of the RSEM involves three key steps:

1. Assessment of the current situation in LG.
2. Observations of information gathered.
3. Provision of guidelines and recommendations for overcoming/improving the existing situation.

The RSEM assumes that the first step will be applied directly, during the process of "in-depth" evaluation through questionnaires, semi structured interviews and focus groups. A team of experienced and sufficiently trained evaluators for using the RSEM is required.

All three steps in applying this model are greatly facilitated by questionnaires and software, two key auxiliary tools which are, at the same time, integral parts of the RSEM.

4.1 Questionnaires

A set of key multilevel question areas are used to collect the rural-sensitive findings with each question level associated with a particular IA and/or particular indicator.

The RSEM questionnaires distinguish five types of questions (Scheme 1):

1. Overall questions accompanied by a particular IA trying to provide broad, first impressions related to the certain IA.
2. Specific questions help to determine the specific activities launched by municipal administration which guide us towards conclusion whether the municipality is rural sensitive or not. The group of questions also enables us to define the deficiencies that the municipal administration has to overcome in the coming period to be considered to have paid enough attention to rural issues.
3. Quantitative questions aim to quantify activities and corresponding sub activities defined by the group of questions at the second level. The underlying questions that appear in this

group of questions are the questions: "How many?" and "Number of activities". The 'hard figures' produced by quantitative methodologies are crucial to building the case for addressing the municipalities' sensitivity level on rural issues, but also rural–urban differences, even if these figures are often contested and subject to interpretation.

4. Qualitative questions have the aim to qualitatively evaluate the quantitatively expressed activities and enable the evaluator to get a thorough picture of the activities undertaken by the municipal administration. Qualitative methodologies, in contrast to quantitative ones, enable a more in-depth examination of 'quality' of activities (those that are already taken, in progress, and those that are planned, as well), lying behind the figures such as social processes, social relations, power dynamics, level and the 'quality' of awareness towards rural issues, quality of equalities, all of which are difficult to measure with quantitative methods. Questions that suggest the qualitative evaluation within the RSEM are mainly related to the question "How?", "What is the purpose of activities?", "By whom the action was taken in each stage?", "Who initiated the activity?" "What are the main results?" and so on.

While the first four types of questions are aimed at evaluating the situation in LGs, the fifth type of question is aimed at self-evaluation of the RSEM.

5. These questions aim to assess the respondents' views on the RSEM itself, its structure, accessibility and model's key features. It also serves as the base for the RSEM's further adjustments.

Despite a clear structure of the RSEM's application approach, it is required to proof the data gathered and indicators achieved by a list of available documents.

4.2 Software

For the purposes of the RSEM, a database has been developed within the software package. Technologies used in the construction of the database are the following:

- PHP server-side scripting language, version 5.2.9
- MySQL database, version 5.0.81
- Flex Free Open source Framework, SDK version 3.3
- Apache 2.2.11 UNIX Server

Login information contained in the database:

- Manual data entry indicator check; the system supports simultaneous work of multiple users (evaluators/questionnaire users and supervisors/administrators evaluation forms users)
- Excel report tables
- CSV text report files

Data output comprises:

- 3 types of charts, PNG image displayed on the chart with the legend (Figure1), PDF format adapted for printing, with text and images indicator chart with legends
- Excel report tables
- CSV text report files

5 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

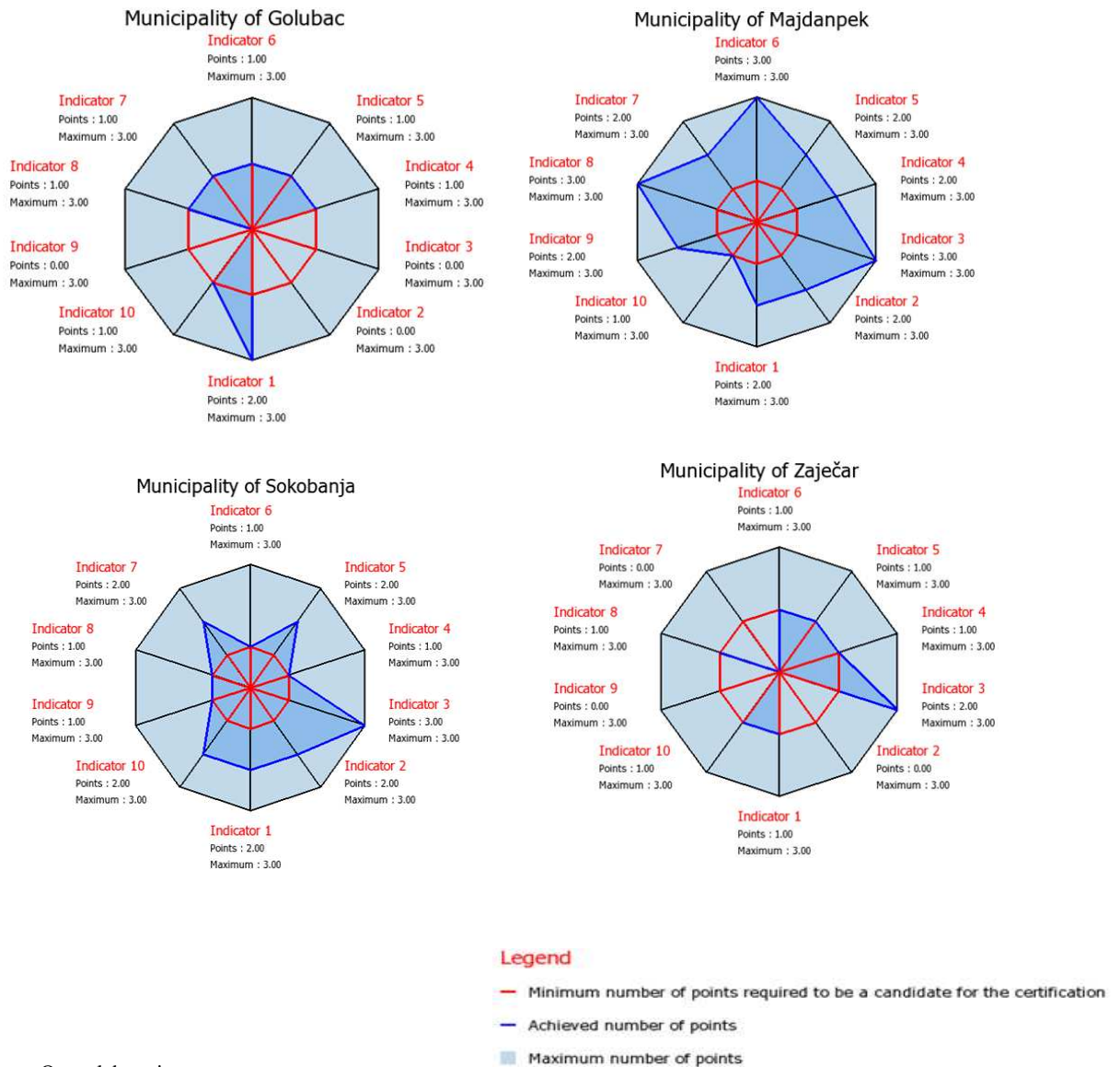
The RSEM has been tested by analyzing data gathered in four LGs in Eastern Serbia. The RSEM was tested and adapted until a satisfactory level of accuracy and logical reliability was achieved. Sixteen employees of LGs (Golubac LG-3, Majdanpek LG-6, Sokobanja LG-3, Zaječar LG-4), ranging from Deputy Mayors to Directors of Local Economic Development (LED) offices to RD experts, took part in testing the RSEM.

Based on the responses, the RSEM meets expected criteria. The RSEM structure can monitor dynamic changes, measure progress over time and determine differences in progress achieved in the rural-sensitivity level among different LGs (Figure 1).

Testing the sensitivity level of municipalities to rural issues revealed that none of the municipalities observed have made sufficient progress towards the requirements set by the RSEM. The detailed findings from the RSEM testing will not be elaborated in this paper, however we would like to introduce one example of the results that were obtained by using the RSEM.

The results of our research show that among the sensitivity factors analyzed, the biggest progress has been achieved in the field of the IA7 (Figure 1). Generally, the observed municipalities possess institutional and organizational capacities to foster RD issues. All parameters show a highly developed awareness of needs, weaknesses and problems of rural communities, as well as needs for their intensive participation in community development. Commitment to rural issues and motivation of the personnel to change the current way the LG administration functions and to achieve a greater impact on rural communities were expressed during this research. This can be explained by the fact that, in recent years, the municipal administration has been involved in activities, organized by national and international institutions, related to the promotion of rural development, local partnerships, social inclusion and a participatory approach.

Figure 1: Ex: Comparison of results obtained in four municipalities by using the Rural-sensitive evaluation model, Indicator Area 7 "Personnel's approach to rural development"



Source: Own elaboration

Moreover, the model makes it possible to simulate results according to different priorities defined. Accordingly, the use of RSEM is universal enough in interventions at all policy levels from state government, through development agencies, to the local level. As part of a self-monitoring

process, the model should serve as a tool to evaluate, monitor and measure the level of effects achieved and overall local policy goals reached. Monitoring and evaluating the rural-sensitive activities of local administrations through the RSEM reveals the gaps between their commitment and actual implementation and impact.

The RSEM provides a base for focusing policy debates, and potential future policy developments, allowing rural-sensitive findings to be used as a tool to lobby the Government and other agencies to adopt a more rural-responsive perspective. The RSEM can thus be used to hold decision-makers accountable for their actions or their lack of actions. Finally, it can also be used to measure the outcomes and impacts of non-rural-specific goals and activities on RD and urban/rural inequality.

According to the respondents' views, the RSEM contributes to encouraging local self-governments in their new role of rural governance. The RSEM is seen as a tool which helps to reinforce the internal cohesion of an area and, by boosting the local identity and image, consequently making better use of local resources. Also, respondents stated that the RSEM contributes to leveraging other RD actions and/or programmes and encourages exchanges with the outside world and opening-up to the global community.

Finally, the big advantage of RSEM is the fact that it is relatively simple to handle with key features, flexibility and adaptability.

The long-term impact of RSEM extends beyond the period of its application as established and specialized partnerships should continue to enable the sustainability of the RD support activities.

The lack of political will in considering RSEM's results could be a great threat to the effectiveness of RSEM. Moreover, data collection and analysis may be labour-intensive and time-consuming for both evaluators and those undergoing evaluation. Another threat is the way in which the RSEM is applied. One challenge lies with convincing non-rural specialists to use this tool. This testing exposed certain shortcomings of a purely questionnaire-based methodological approach. The RSEM should ideally be used by evaluators who are trained in using it, who are selected from various professional backgrounds and are personally rural-sensitive.

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