Оценка на конфликтните потенциали на администрацията – предизвикателство пред управлението на устойчивото развитие

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Резюме: *Решаваща роля за постигането на целите на устойчивото развитие на териториите има държавната администрация. Конфликтните потенциали на административната среда, в повечето случаи се явяват бариери пред устойчивото развитие, тъй като структурата и визията на администрацията, и качеството на административното обслужване, в голяма степен определят нивото на ефективност на институциите, благоприятна бизнес и социална среда, конкурентоспособността на икономиката, както и за прилагането на зелени политики.*

Ключови думи: *управление на устойчивото развитие, конфликтни потенциали, административна среда, публична администрация*

Assessment of the conflict potential of the administration – a challenge for the management of sustainable development

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Abstract: *State administration plays a decisive role in achieving the goals of sustainable territorial development. The conflict potentials of the administrative environment mostly act as barriers to sustainable development, because the structure and vision of the administration, along with the quality of administrative services, largely determine the level*

of institutional efficiency, a favorable business and social environment, the competitiveness of the economy, and the implementation of green policies.

Keywords: *sustainable development management, conflict potentials, administrative environment, public administration*

Introduction

The aspects of sustainability are quite different and interrelated, varying from preservation and restoration of the integrity of natural systems, from the reasonable use of resource or providing better and more accessible services, education and health care for people from all settlements of the country, to changing attitudes and the economic models of development. The provision of choice, opportunities and access to decision-making, social equality, freedom of movement of people, food security, geopolitical consensus, etc. needs to be added.

The sustainable development is not a closed process of production and consumption. It should be considered in its dynamics and interrelated dependencies on the economic, environmental, social and administrative and management aspects, from where its application actually stems.

However, there are visible discrepancies between the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 [13], the means to achieve them and the actual results. The weaknesses and conflicting potentials of the administration and management can also form unfavorable conditions for future investments, for innovations as well as for operations on a single market, etc. At the same time, they can also lead to positive changes, or create conditions for long-term problems solution, as well as to overcome institutional crises, and speed up administrative reform..

Some Challenges to the Management of Sustainable Development

The development and application of a concept for sustainable development has increased by uniting the three main aspects of it - ecological, social and economic. Significant responsibility was also assigned to the best management practices. During the transition years, socio-economic problems have accumulated in places, that can not be solved without the development of local self-government. The system of self-government needs to work not only as a relatively autonomous administrative unit, but also as an active management system [7]. The state administration, both on central and local levels reflects the institutions as well as the way the state functions. It also helps political leaders for the sustainable economic prosperity, social cohesion and people's well-being and also has a strong impact on the public trust. The knowledge society needs adequate, fast, competent and correct administrative services [10].

The sustainable development faces many challenges such as the different development models; preservation and creation of goods; multiple and interrelated requirements; complex integration between individual areas; difficulties in the unification of rules and procedures; diversity and differences in all spheres; unpredictability and surprises, etc.

The models for development have changed, regardless of the fact that policies have moved to a circular economy. In this regard, the popularity of the development model has increased. However, the resource-intensive economic models being environmentally, socially and economically unsustainable still prevail. The problems with hunger, poverty, social exclusion and protection of consumers and workers, etc. have not been solved yet. The results of the modern intensive technological and economic progress, due to the significant qualitative improvements of the living environment, are indisputable. However, not a few sustainable failures in the development of the territories, especially of the smaller municipalities, as well as to a deepening ecological crisis still exist.

The main idea is to limit the irrational use of environmental resources and find opportunities to be replaced as well as switching to less resource-intensive and energy-intensive productions. The search for opportunities to reduce the degradation of natural resources such as water, soil, air, forests, oil fields, etc., as well as providing solution to the above-mentioned and other social problems, are one of the biggest challenges to achieve a dynamic balance in the development of territories [1]. In this regard, " the sustainable development" should be considered in its development of a society, which responds to the changes in its internal and external conditions, by forming a new equilibrium corresponding to these changes, both within itself and in the entire environment of its existence [3].

The management of sustainable development is associated with the protection and preservation of the produced goods and living environment, of cultural diversity and traditional values. It also brings changes and progress to create a better world. Both the protection of goods and the creation of new goods are related to the implementation of reforms and the introduction of innovations in the public institutions and socio-technical systems. Through innovation, many undesired effects created by existing technologies can be reduced [9]. On the other hand, the automation of a number of activities, as well as the entry of artificial intelligence into all spheres of life, bring new risks and challenges, especially in the labor market. Each community has its own current and future priorities to overcome labor market mismatches. However, four main perspectives appear: creating viable training and career pathways to address skills shortages, improving access to jobs in dynamic growth hubs, revitalizing and supporting shrinking labor markets, and increasing labor participation rates [8].

A crucial role for the sustainable development of the regions is performed by the territorial structure, being directly related to the strategic planning and organizing of the resources, infrastructure and activities of the region in order to achieve a balanced and sustainable growth. The sustainable development is paramount for the region as it focuses to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to cover their own needs. It includes economic, social and environmental aspects aimed at long-term viability and well-being as Mihaleva & Enimanev, 2023 discuss [2]. The sustainable development is based on the effective and long-term integration of social, economic and environmental factors, as well as good management performed at all levels from the global to the local. Due to the complexity of the interrelationships between factors and objectives, difficulties and emerging challenges inevitably require compromises, on managerial side too. The current traditional practices diverge significantly from the potential sustainable behavior. That’s why good results can be achieved through shorter-term, even less perfect actions. The aim is to recognize the interconnectedness and importance of social, economic and environmental imperatives and to find ways to support them [9]. The application of a differentiated approach is a way to deal as it does not treat them equally, but makes reasonable and conscious choices that permanently strengthen the development of the territories.

The Policies for sustainable development should be aligned with the detailed development of sustainability rules and the definition of appropriate procedures in the relevant context for accepting or rejecting options and trade-offs. It is necessary to foresee the place and time, the performers, as well as the people who will live with the changes made. The development of approaches can be adapted to complex local characteristics, to promote local potentials and greater commitment to sustainable development goals. The sustainability is global by its nature but is also linked to understand the regional specifics and behavior that corresponds to the overall concept. It is possible for a conflict to arise between globalism and regionalism provoked by different interests, needs, attitudes and logics of action [6]. The contradictions

provoked by the stated premises are difficult to resolve, they usually deepen and lead to unpredictable consequences and conflicts.

The management of the sustainable development of the territories needs to take in mind the diversity as it combines different ways to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals 2030. On the other hand, a danger of numerous administrative inconveniences exists. The diversity is a source of knowledge and a resource base for adaptation and reorganization. In this regard, it would be good to preserve it in its various directions such as socio-cultural, economic, technological, natural, etc., so that to satisfy the diverse needs and preferences of the local population. "Diversity increases adaptive resources and limits the risks of environmental change. This again shows that it is a key element of sustainable development" [11].

The sustainable development requires caution and adaptability. Clear and understandable goals and objectives are a guarantee of the available and feasible alternatives to achieve them. The pursuit of sustainable development in a multidimensional world of complex dynamic systems is associated with multiple risks and surprises and the impossibility of predicting future outcomes. Many of the emerging issues may lack even evidence and have an unpredictable impact on the socio-ecosystems.

One of the key environmental benefits in the application of the principles of sustainable development is the conservation of natural resources. The spatial development plans helps to effectively manage and protect natural resources such as forests, water bodies and wildlife habitats. By demarcating certain conservation areas and implementing sustainable practices in those areas, territorial arrangements warranty the long-term availability of these resources for future generations such as the creation of protected areas, the introduction of sustainable forestry practices and the promotion of responsible water management strategies [2].

The management of sustainable development needs to be subordinated to the principles of transparency and social commitment. In the context of the benefits and risks of diversity, and the inevitability of surprises, awareness and active public engagement are necessary conditions for achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals [13].

Achieving sustainable development requires specific and clear rules, processes and resource justification when making management decisions. The goal of sustainable development solutions is to find positive and optimal benefits in all areas of territorial development. It is an illusion to claim that the results achieved have added value and provide goods and benefits for all. Though it is logical that there are satisfied and dissatisfied parties. Achieving a consensus on the implemented policies not infrequently necessitates political compromise, usually forsaking a long-term goal for the sake of short-term advantage [9].

The sustainable development includes not only a significant transition to a broader understanding and a more ambitious set of goals, but also to more coherently interconnected institutional structures and processes of planning, governance, markets, traditions and choices of all scales. This is not a quick and easy transition process. The challenge for the administration and its management is to assess what are the real possibilities to conduct such a transition and what tools need to be developed for the successful management of sustainable development.

Study of the Conflict Potentials of the Administrative Environment

Whether the directions of administrative modernization meet the needs of socio-economic relations and whether they are consistent with successful models for the implementation of policies for the sustainable development of territories arose as questions. Are the actions taken by the responsible people and institutions in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and to what extent are they relevant to the local specifics? How ready is the

administration to carry out the necessary activities and deal with emerging contradictions and conflicts in order to meet the needs of both businesses and citizens, as well as to implement policies for sustainable development at the local level. It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that emerging conflicts of an administrative nature, with their strength and dynamics, have a negative impact directly and indirectly on the socio-psychological atmosphere of civil society, the development of business and the country as a whole [4].

The ability to work with conflicts in the administrative system requires knowledge of their real dimensions, frequency of occurrence in an administrative-management environment, as well as identifying their main causes. The impact that conflicts have on individuals, groups and organizations, as well as the behavior of their participants in the way of achieving sustainable development of the territories needs to be studied [5].

The object of the study are citizens and groups of administrative employees, taking different positions in the decentralized organizational structures of Bulgaria, as well as legal entities - clients of public services, possessing specific "local parameters" for conflict situations arising in their relationships.

The subject of the study is the conflict of the environment, the negative attitudes, the dissatisfaction with the performed administrative and management activities, the insufficient capacity, the connections and dependencies in the performance of administrative and management tasks related to the sustainable development of the territories.

The aim of the empirical study is to establish, on the basis of the collected and analyzed information, the level of conflict in the administrative environment as well as the effects it has on the management of sustainable development. The main hypotheses of the empirical research are:

A. The conflict of the administrative environment is a barrier to the successful management of sustainable development.

B. The conflict potentials of the environment represent prerequisite for the implementation of constructive changes and are source of development.

The research was conducted in two stages over a four-year period, the first stage was in the period February - July 2018, and the second stage, in the period March 2023 - July 2023. 720 people participated in the survey. The collected primary data is the basis for the derived generalizations and conclusions. The study was carried out on a territorial basis in the Varna region. Several structural units from the public and business sectors, and random citizens, users of public services, were selected. The selected organizations have the characteristic parameters of decentralized structures.

The study aims to integrate the indicators, to discuss dependencies and their relation to the dimensions of administrative conflict and to determine its specific manifestations in the management of sustainable development.

The analysis of the results of the first integrated indicator "Degree of formality/informality" shows significant differences in the attitudes, relations and organization of work between small municipalities and in the administrative units of a large municipality. "Family-type" service relations are still observed in small municipalities. Typically, employees wait to familiarize themselves with and comply with changes in the regulatory framework, as well as other work-related changes. They prefer to work in the traditional way rather than adopting and implementing innovative solutions. Frequent inspections are the reason for extreme formalization of activities in order to be "according to the rules", which often worsens relations. Respondents tend to change their job only in cases of a promotion.

The analysis of the data in the large municipality shows a high degree of formality, but not extreme formalism. Regarding the access to the necessary information, most of the employees answered positively as they receive it in time by e-mail. There are cases of files and other documents, from the internal document flow, which are delayed "on the floors", but according to them this is a result of the huge volume of work. It is considered that once a fully electronic document flow is introduced, these weaknesses will be overcome. All of the respondents have observed changes in the regulatory framework in the department in which they work, which takes time. Most of the employees of a large municipality do not deny the need for a normatively regulated hierarchy in the organization. It is considered that the difficualt coordination between hierarchical units make work difficult, which negatively affects the final results. According to the respondents, the frequent checks and controls create tension and stress, as they further burden their activities and they often have to work overtime to "bring the current documentation in order" that meets the regulated requirements; on the other hand, it helps to improve relations and coordination between horizontal units. Employees hope that with the introduction of digitalization, a large chat of the forms of control will be carried out through software products, which will ease the administrative work. Regarding a change of workplace, a large part of the respondents said that it often happens, especially when their colleague is absent. According to them, this gives them the opportunity to gain competences in other specific areas of administrative activity. Those who are averse to such a change argue that they feel they are experts in what they do. To sum it up, in a large municipality there are clearly established and written rules of relationships in a vertical hierarchy and on a horizontal level. They receive official and other information in time, which is a condition for constructive relationships. The deficits here are caused by the large volume of work, short deadlines and working under pressure and stress. The specified features are a prerequisite for increased conflict in the environment and the emergence of informal interpersonal and formal-administrative contradictions and conflicts.

The analysis of the results of the respondents and business structures shows similar values. It becomes clear that they accept formalism as far as rule-keeping is concerned. They don't mind friendly, smiling and official employees. When they are refused, they assist in filling out documents and refer them to a counter where this service is provided for a fee. Citizens pay (to the company providing the service) because in the majority of the forms some of the required details are written unclearly or the arrangement is complex and illogical, and the hand writing sections are small and insufficient in volume. Most citizens assume that employees indulge in wrong practices, while business representatives convincingly argue this. In all cases mentioned above the administrative disputes and conflicts arise, which requires time and resources. Controversies that are within the scope of the Code of Conduct for Civil Servants in the State Administration have the possibility to seek out-of-court methods for their resolution in cases of a violation of the law, according to the relevant action or inaction of the administration, the court must rule.

The identified features represent a prerequisite for conflict tension and administrative problems. In most of the cases they serve as a barrier to the application of the principles of sustainable development. The results of the analysis of the first integrated indicator confirm the hypotheses:

A. The conflict of the administrative environment is a barrier to the successful management of sustainable development.

The analysis of the results of the second integrated indicator: "Career growth" shows relatively close dependencies in all studied administrative units. For the majority of respondents, good working conditions and timely pay are essential, as they are convinced that

whatever initiatives, knowledge and skills they apply, the opportunities for career growth are education and internship. Some of the employees view political and organizational-structural changes as an opportunity for career growth. Most of the respondents aspire to work on European projects, as this gives them additional qualification and pay.

It becomes clear that the quality of work and career growth is not related to the achieved results, nor to the personal initiative. The only requirement is to be at the work. A conflicting premise is the lack of personal responsibility. The administration is in a relationship with citizens and businesses, but it is impersonal. As the actions of individual employees are unpunished being hidden behind the administrative structure. So whatever they do does not affect neither their pay nor their career growth. It is a prerequisite for poor treatment of citizens especially in small municipalities, where citizens and businesses are irritated and even offended by the attitude of administrative officials. They consider the activity of the administration as "unacceptable", which creates conflicts. In the small municipalities, more than 60% of those who participated in the research had more than 10 years of work experience and only 4% had less than 5 years of experience. Over 70% of the respondents claim that they have no opportunity or need to increase their professional qualifications. In the structures of a large municipality, about 30% have less than 5 years of work experience, slightly more than 35% less than 10 years and about 35% have more than 10 years of work experience. This shows that the administrative system is open for young personnel and development, as more than 70% declare having the opportunity to improve their professional qualifications. The employees of small municipalities "traditionally know and can", which contradicts the ideas of modernization of the administration, the principles of "good management" and the increase in the customer of administrative services' expectations.

The results of the analysis of the second integrated indicator even more convincingly confirm the validity of hypotheses "A" for small municipalities and hypothesis "B" for large municipalities, namely:

B. The conflict potentials of the environment are a prerequisite for the implementation of constructive changes and are a source of development.

The analysis of the results of the third integrated indicator: "Working behavior when operating in market conditions and lack of market test", shows that the majority of respondents from small municipalities consider that their administrative unit does not have the potential to meet the market requirements, but they claim that they fulfill EU requirements. According to the respondents from a large municipality, the structures in which they work have the potential to meet the challenges of the environment for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030. They consider their activity as not market-oriented, but in accordance with the regulations and administrative and management rules and procedures. All respondents believe that their work is process-oriented, not goal-oriented and result-oriented, and all have at least once, explicitly or implicitly, refused to complete assigned tasks. The specified conflict features do not cause concern among employees, on the one hand, because they do not have competition, and on the other hand, they are not tied to their remuneration.

According to citizens and businesses, the administrative structures are unable to meet the challenges of the changing environment, and even less to assist in the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals formulated by the UN. All the respondents are dissatisfied both with the bad attitude of the administrative employees and with the extension of the deadlines for the implementation of the administrative services. They define administration as lagging because it does not function in a market environment and there is no competition.

Citizens believe that most administrative services can be provided electronically or in office, which would save them time and inconvenience from "unwinding from counter to counter". The business representatives believe that administrative burden and regulatory regimes impact negatively on their activity and are often a prerequisite for conflicts of an administrative nature, on the one hand, and on the other hand, they create conditions for corrupt practices, which categorically contradicts the principles of sustainable development.

The analysis of the results of the third integrated indicator confirms the working hypothesis "A".

In the fourth integrated indicator "Insufficient administrative and management capacity to implement EU requirements for the modernization of administrative systems", significant dissonances were reported between the results obtained from the small municipalities studied and the administrative units of a large municipality. In small municipalities, the majority of employees have a bachelor's degree (66%), but less than half have an education in the field of administration. Of the 27% masters, about 20% have a master's degree in the field of public administration. In small municipalities, there are also employees with secondary education (7%) who are in administrative positions. In a large municipality, 22% have a bachelor's degree and 78% have a master's degree, with over 70% having completed training in public management; There are no employees with secondary education. Regarding foreign language skills, only 22% of respondents from small municipalities use a foreign language, and 15% of them claim that they "fluently speak Russian". Almost half of the surveyed employees from a large municipality (48%) speak English and note that this is a mandatory condition when working on programs and projects with European funding, especially in the implementation of the National Plan for Rebuilding Sustainability, as well as when communicating with foreign partners. 27% of respondents noted that they do not know a foreign language, but have a desire to learn.

According to the employees from the small municipalities, the Bulgarian administration does not need to be modern, but to comply with the procedures and rules. However, the respondents from a large municipality believe that more and more administrative activities and services are being modernized and the overall vision of the administration is gradually changing, without contradicting this of the regulatory framework. Regarding the EU requirements for the modernization of administrative systems, only 17% of the surveyed employees from small municipalities believe that the requirements are appropriate. Everyone else expresses a clear distrust of the EU. According to them, the introduction of digitalization "will take away the human aspect of the administration", but will strengthen control. The respondents have no opinion regarding network management and management with market mechanisms.

More than half of the respondents from a large municipality (63%) accept the EU requirements. They hope that the digitalization of activities will be introduced in the administrative systems as soon as possible. They are reserved regarding the need to change the hardware of the computer systems, associated with a significant financial resource, but is imperative in order to be able to introduce the new software. According to respondents from a large municipality, with the introduction of digitalization, network management of administrative systems will also be possible. The issue of management with classic market mechanisms will not be relevant.

More than half of the respondents (67%) from the small municipalities believe that there will never be a real functioning electronic government in Bulgaria. It is also supported by the citizens of these municipalities (77%). While 54% of surveyed employees and approximately 30% of citizens of a large municipality believe that e-government will be operational in the

next five to six years, about 38% assume that it will happen by 2030. About 30% of citizens and representatives of businesses are skeptical. They believe that we will never have e-government, as most of them are familiar with the EU criteria for "good management".

The analysis of the results of the fourth integrated indicator shows that the insufficient administrative and management capacity is a basic prerequisite for conflicts and increasing the conflict of the administrative environment. The inferred deficits related to the capacity of employees of different ranks from administrative units of a large municipality are in relation to specific competencies. The main deficit of employees from small municipalities comes from their general competencies related to administrative and management capacity, which is a conflicting factor with constant magnitude.

The analysis of the results of the fourth integrated indicator gives reason to confirm working hypothesis "A".

The analysis of the results also for the fifth integrated indicator: "Acceptance of contradictions and conflicts", reports significant differences between the investigated administrative structures. Most of the emerging contradictions and conflicts in small municipalities (53%) are informal and result from the personal relationships of employees, inside and outside of work. While in the administrative units of a large municipality, 64% of the conflicts are related to work, by being formal by character and related to the fulfillment of the set tasks, being transformed into constructive relationships. A significant part (68%) of employees in small municipalities believe that they are protected in the event of disputes, and 42% that the working atmosphere is calm and equal. A large part (71%) of employees from a large municipality are convinced that they will not be protected, and for 48% the working atmosphere is tense and conflictual.

When contradictions and conflicts arise, the employees from the small municipalities either do nothing or defend their position to the end by all possible means. Only 20% are willing to negotiate and seek a mutually acceptable solution. Negotiations are considered as a suitable tool for more than half of the respondents (73%) from the surveyed units of a large municipality.

Over 50% of respondents from small municipalities perceive conflicts as an undesirable phenomenon. 38% of respondents believe that their leaders manage through conflicts and thus achieve results. Only 12% of employees believe that conflict can be a catalyst for settling relations and changing established old rules and norms with innovative ones. The respondents from a large municipality consider conflicts as an unwanted phenomenon (30%), conflicts interfere with work for 28% of the respondents who do not accept them as an opportunity for change. It is also considered that the conflict can be used as a managerial tool.

Conclusion

Managing sustainable development poses long-term challenges to government policies. The identified conflict potentials of the administrative environment are perceived as a huge barrier to the application of the principles of sustainable development in an administration and its management [12]. The identified deficits can be overcome through adaptation of the policies to the capacity of the relevant administrative structures responsible for implementing the specific policies for sustainable development. The competences and motivation of the administrative employees should be increased to reach a level in which they will see in emerging conflicts, not problems, but opportunities for constructive changes and development.

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