

This paper was prepared for the Workshop on "Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives" held at the World Bank in Washington, DC on February 4 and 5, 2003.

CITIZENS' EMPOWERMENT THROUGH FIGHTING CORRUPTION

**An Empirical Case Research in Romania
for Distilling and Testing Indicators and Measurements**

Dr. MARIA BACANU (Cobianu)

Senior Researcher
Institute of Sociology of
Romanian Academy

Dr. SORIN M. RADULESCU

Senior Researcher
Institute of Sociology of
Romanian Academy

Introduction

Our paper responds to the invitation of the World Bank to frontally address issues of empowerment not only in development projects and practice, but also through social research. We have been directly inspired by Deepa Narayan's book about *Empowerment* about to *Voices of the Poor*, and by the World Development Report (2001) that made a path breaking theoretical and policy link between empowerment and poverty reduction.

The challenge to me and to my colleague/co-author, Sorin Radulescu has been to place the empowerment issues within the Romanian context and Romanian realities. As you all know, it is a lot easier to speak and praise empowerment than to actually capture, "measure" and quantify, it sociologically as a distinct variable.

We thought hard on how we can identify what is usually named a "strategic research site" which would enable us to lay our hands more directly on this process of empowerment, to kind of "capture it in action," grasp it, measure its emergence, dynamics, and manifestations. Finally, our search for a strategic research site resulted in a choice that holds great interest on its own.

This is the phenomenon of corruption in the public administration arena, of which we have plenty in Romania (more than we would ever want or need even for research purposes!) The paper we prepared for this conference, within Deepa Narayan's conceptual framework, is at the confluence between concepts and trends familiar to us all, such as: corruption; dis-empowerment; participation; empowerment. Our hypothesis is the following: in public administration corruption undermines democracy, robs people of the options to exercise their rights, and dis-empowers them. Therefore, when corrupt individuals and practices can be eliminated from a certain unit of public administration afflicted by them, the citizens may be empowered to exercise their voices, rights and entitlements. Finding a significant case of eliminating corruption will therefore enable us to measure the effects in terms of empowerment and design good indicators for such measurements.

The case identified was that of an ultra-corrupt Mayor of one of the Capital City's (Bucharest) large districts, who was caught, tried, imprisoned, and replaced. The new Mayor's office introduced indeed a different style of governance with citizen's gaining much more access to the levers and seats of "power". This is the empirical case we have analyzed. Our paper talks in detail how we have done this. I'll offer in this brief presentation only an abstract.

Corruption during Transition: Dis-empowerment

The transition process in Romania brought about a range of important social-economic and political changes, but also an unprecedented amplification and intensification of the corruption phenomenon in most public administrations activities.

Besides its un-ethical character, corruption is a powerful impediment to reducing poverty and social inequalities. It has a negative impact on development programs and, policies, and, last but not least, on strategies aiming at democratic empowerment of the poorest strata of the citizenry.

Typical cases of corruption in Romania are what we call as "service offences", perpetrated by some mayors as the local power representatives. According to the Romanian criminal law, these offenses include: taking or receiving bribery; traffic of influence; abuse of power; and embezzlement of public funds for personal interest.

In Romania the office of the Mayor, called Primarie, the (Local Authority) is one of the most important institutions in people's life. It is mandated to solve the community problems and priorities, and contribute to the elimination of poverty, and to a better management of local resources. Given the objectives of the transition, implementing the law on restitution of the agricultural and forestlands and enabling the people to regain their confiscated properties is a principal task of local power representatives. Unfortunately, it is exactly in this field that most of the abuses and corruption acts in Romania are perpetrated though the Mayors and the representatives of Local Councils.

An opinion poll carried out 2 years ago showed that though the majority of people (75%) recognize the crucial role of the Primarie and of the Mayor in their life, only 15% of respondents

regard the Primaria and the Mayor as credible institutions. Most of them motivated their answers saying that the mayor and other representatives of local power are corrupt. They commit countless abuses in their functions, for personal gain and advantages. “Only if you bribe the mayor he gives your land back. He makes the law”, the respondents said.

Because central authorities have not taken any actions against abuses perpetrated by mayors, despite many signals, the majority of the citizens feel discouraged and abandoned, powerless and voiceless to central their own elected Mayor’s to influence Primaria’s decisions, or to participate in the decision-making process. They are deprived of information. They have no access to the mechanisms for transparent decision-making concerning community life, and cannot hold the local representatives accountable for the policies that affect their well-being.

In this situation, their voicelessness, powerlessness, distrust, and incapability to change abuses and corrupt acts of local power representatives may be considered the key concepts for understanding and measuring the level of dis-empowerment in some communities in Romania. Conversely, we hypothesize that by fighting corruption the citizens “empower” themselves, that is, they gain the courage to express their needs, disagreements; they become conscious of their rights and entitlements; they organize themselves in associations to be better heard by those powerful.

In Romania, a special case which attracted great attention to citizens’ involvement in fighting corruption was named the “Lutzu case”. As mayor of the 4th District of the Bucharest Municipality, Marin Lutzu perpetrated from 1996 until February 2000 - when he was removed and arrested – many abuses and corrupt acts. The most serious abuse was the appropriation - through a fake auction - of 6 agricultural-food markets from the South of the capital, the biggest and the richest markets of Romania. The Mayor, together with his daughter, the secretary of Primaria and 30 (out of 32) Counselors of the Primaria established a new business having as object of activity, among others, the modernization and exploitation of these markets. Then, through an “official” decision, signed by the Mayor, secretary and counselors, the business “won” the auction and, on this “legal” basis, obtained the concession over those 6 agricultural-food markets for a period of 20 years.

This was only one of the multiple onerous businesses of that Mayor, suggestively nick-named by the press “Octopus Lutz”. In fact, as it was proved later, within a short time of his mayoral mandate Marin Lutz became one of the richest individuals in Romania.

Further on, we demonstrate, in the paper how hard it is in Romania to fight corruption, considered a “fatal inevitability”. The numerous complaints, grievances, and letters sent by citizens and merchants to various authorities remained without any answer. Like other members of the state apparatus accused of corruption, mayor Lutz enjoyed his “immunity”. For his many illegal acts he had received only a simple reprimand from the ruling party to which he belonged. As a consequence of this perpetual refusal of the authorities to take actions against him, a group of citizens, businessmen, owners and small shopkeepers, hurt by fake auctions and other illegalities of the Primaria, resorted to different forms of protest. They organized public meetings and wrote “manifestos” widely disclosing to the public the abuses of the Primaria’s leaders.

In brief, the case of this corrupt Mayor has been turned into an opportunity for the citizens of Bucharest’s 4th District to unite in the fight against one blatant case of a wide, endemic phenomenon. This helped crystallize a “collective conscience” against the abuses of corrupt public officials.

In our opinion, it is possible to distill and test indicators and measurements of such empowerment through evaluation of community involvement and participation in fighting corruption. These dimensions could be operationalized.

As any social problem, corruption involves two main elements:

a) **An objective condition**, whose real content can be quantified by measuring: damages caused to public resources and interests; conditions in which it is perpetrated; institutional positions of authors of corrupt acts;

b) **A subjective condition**, which consists in the concerns, motives, attitudes, stress, fears, etc. of many persons. These are more difficult to quantify, but they are meaningful for the people's perception of a phenomenon that affects public interests. We know that there are accepted sociological instruments and methods to measure attitudes that can be employed.

Only when the members of a community become conscious that their interests are hurt and, consequently, they mobilize themselves to fight against a corrupt mayor, for instance, it can be said that corruption is not only an undesirable reality, but also a veritable social problem. In this case, the attitudes and opinions of insiders are more important than those of outsiders.

All social problems, including corruption, have a "natural history", that suggests that people become more and more aware of their gravity, depending on the stages of their evolution. Any new stage brings new elements. We can conceptualize the following stages as the most important in the case of communities' involvement in fighting corruption:

a) **The stage of making people conscious of something: Gaining Awareness** - The most characteristic effect of this stage represents the genesis of a new collective awareness determined by the idea that "We have to do something to solve this problem. This situation is unbearable". The "Lutzu case" and others cases, for instance, could not have become visible without the citizens' actions that -- exasperated by the authorities' silence and passivity -- addressed the press. The media, through their signals, were in turn successful to catalyze a flow of "public opinion" favorable to fighting corrupt mayors.

b) **The stage of reactions concerning the already mentioned problem** – Awareness about the "corrupt mayors" problem as a societal problem became a constant object of public debates. It increasingly engaged on the one hand, public opinion reactions and, on the other hand, authorities' reactions. Public debates, hosted by mass media, parliamentary interpellations, etc., tried to answer the question: "What must be done concerning the corrupt mayors problem?"

c) **The stage of citizens' reactions to authorities' non-response**. Incapability of power the central power to take firm measures against corrupt mayors deepened citizens' discontents,

determined protest actions, formation of different anticorruption associations. The expression “local barons” gained circulation, communicating the criticism against those with discretionary powers over people’s communities, who succeed in and strongest individuals at the grassroots level.

d) **The stage of action - following public debates – which implies citizens and authorities’ mobilization**, with the aim to organize actions and advocate improved policies. Unlike previous stages, this one is characterized by dynamic actions and community mobilization, meaning that people pass from simple consciousness of to the organization of collective actions. Such actions, like in the “Lutzu case” and other corrupt mayors, have been upheld in an institutionalized form by different ad-hoc created associations, and also by some authorities.

In our opinion, the sequence of these stages (which can be translated into specific indicators) can be regarded as a relevant indicator of crystallization of a “communitarian consciousness” in fighting corruption of mayors, these “first community housekeepers”. Unfortunately, despite the seriousness of the corruption problem in Romania, the central authorities had found few solutions.

The formation and gradual affirmation of this communitarian consciousness giving room to identifying indicators for measuring empowerment.

- Extended corruption makes poor people powerless. The hidden corruption of government/public/local officials deprives the citizens of the rights and entitlements, which are granted to them formally, but are undermined through the corrupt practices of various official, powerholders. Therefore, fighting corruption successfully makes formal “rights” and “entitlements” more real, not only rights on paper. Therefore can measure the actual exercise of some such entitlements and rights.
- **Voice**. Fighting corruption gives more “voice”, which means more power to the powerless. Therefore, we can measure the “voice”.
- **Participation**. Fighting corruption effectively encourages people to “participate” more. Therefore, we can measure the forms of “participation” after success in fighting corruption in

a certain public administration or mayoral offices. The hypothesis that participation increases as a result of fighting corruption could be empirically confirmed or falsified.

- **Ownership.** Fighting corruption increases the sense of “ownership”- a psychological variable in this case - which could be materialized in the feeling of security, of being manager of his own business, in the sentiment of pride and human dignity.
- **Collective Action.** Fighting corruption successfully results in increased propensity for collective actions, in more social energy mobilization. People are more ready to contribute their energy and become less cynical. This again means empowerment, strengthening the posture of the poor as “stakeholders”.
- **Trust** Fighting corruption enhances trust, thus increasing social capital, social cohesion of the people. (Therefore, the measurement of trust levels is a way of measuring empowerment – the trust in the central or local government, in their institutions, in their leaders, in the citizens’ capability to reduce corruption).

Research Proposal on Measurements

Aware that real testing of indicators and measurements could be done successfully only through an empirical case research, we propose to continue investigations in the same 4th District of Bucharest after the sound removal of the mayor Lutz Marin. We intend to study if something changed for the better for those 300.000 inhabitants of this district in the new legislature (2001-2004) with a mayor representative of the new party in governmental (PSD-Social Democratic Party); whether the new mayor has learned something from the mistakes of the previous one; whether his program aims at the democratization and modernization of the Primaria’s.

The fundamental questions in our research project are:

- **After the removal of the corrupt mayor has the new mayor really tried to “empower” the population or not?**
- **Do the citizens in deed participate much more than before at the power exercise?**
- **Have the employees of Primaria become more accountable and responsive to the citizens petitions?**
- **Do the mayor and his employees enlarge the space of democracy inside and outside of Primaria?**

- **Do they use fruitfully this democratic space in the favor of the citizens?**

All these questionmarks, that can be formulated as formal hypotheses, must be researched. They could be confirmed or not empirically. We are subject to the “tyranny” of facts.

From a methodological point of view another range of questions surface:

- **What kinds of activities by citizens and employees are susceptible to empirical measurements?**
- **How could these measurements be made operational in the research process?**

The final conclusion and the core of our whole research program consist in finding out the answers to these questions:

- **Are the citizens put first?**
- **Are they more empowered now after the corrupt official was eliminated?**

Of course, the answers could not be a simple “yes” or “no”. They have to derive from many other insights to be gained from research.

The increase of the citizens’ trust in the Primaria’s staff and in its development program, expressed through their actual participation, would be a telling indicator that the climate and situation has changed radically in the Primaria of the 4^h District of Bucharest. These are, of course, working hypotheses, which must be verified in the field.

According to the four key elements (information, inclusion/participation, accountability and local organizational capacity), the empowerment process has many dimensions. These dimensions are a proper medium to discover the indicators and to measure them. In our conception, empowerment has the following dimensions: cultural-informative, political, social, economic, institutional, judicial and psycho-moral. They are intertwined, meaning that some indicators are common to 2-3 dimensions. But every dimension has its strong indicators, which define it and could be measurable by quantitative, qualitative and participative methods.

Concerning the Empowerment Framework, after an experience of 13 years of transition in Romania, we consider that for us the components must have another order of priority and position. We agree with the idea that the first step in changing the status of poor people from being excluded to be included in mainstream development activities is the reform of state institutions. But, in our opinion, the reform of the state apparatus must be simultaneous or at least followed by a deep, extended and real reform of the judiciary system, this demands imperiously citizens' participation and building of a true communitarian consciousness. Large administrative reform, must improve national and local government, to increase citizens' access to well-being, decision-making, information and education. Development outcomes are natural consequences of these crucial reforms' and they must confirm the effectiveness of reforms at the individual, community and societal levels.