

**USERS' ACCESSIBILITY TO SERVICES
OF GENERAL INTEREST IN ROMANIA. A
CASE STUDY IN THE NORTH-EAST
REGION**

Abstract

Starting from the role that services of general interest play within the territorial cohesion policy, this paper proposes a case study focusing on the sewage services, addressed from the perspective of users' accessibility. The analysis is undertaken in the North-East region of Romania, being based on questionnaire distributed to localities of the six counties of this region. The results indicate, in general, a difficult access to the sewage services in the North-East Region of households, individuals, and businesses, both at regional and county levels. Also, important disparities at county level in terms of users' accessibility to sewage services are highlighted.

Keywords: services of general interest, sewage services, user, accessibility, Romania

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**ACCESUL
CONSUMATORILOR LA
SERVICIILE DE INTERES
GENERAL ÎN ROMÂNIA.
UN STUDIU DE CAZ ÎN
REGIUNEA DE NORD-EST**

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Rezumat

Pornind de la rolul pe care serviciile de interes general îl au în cadrul politicii de coeziune teritorială, prezenta lucrare propune un studiu de caz axat pe serviciile de canalizare, abordate din perspectiva accesului utilizatorilor. Analiza este desfășurată asupra regiunii de Nord-Est din România și are la bază un sondaj bazat pe chestionar distribuit în localități din toate cele șase județe ale regiunii. Rezultatele au indicat, în general, un acces dificil al gospodăriilor, indivizilor și întreprinderilor la serviciile de canalizare în regiunea de Nord-Est, atât la nivel regional, cât și la nivel de județ. De asemenea, la nivelul județelor sunt evidențiate o serie de disparități în ceea ce privește accesul utilizatorilor la serviciile de canalizare.

Cuvinte cheie: servicii de interes general, servicii de canalizare, utilizator, acces, România



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1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of territorial cohesion, acknowledged as an explicit dimension of the cohesion policy of the European Union, the services of general interest (SGI) are conferred a special place, being a key element of the European model of society. Thus, territorial cohesion, which is complementary to economic and social cohesion, aims to ensure the balanced distribution of human activities across the EU, translating the sustainable and balanced development goals into territorial terms (ESPON, 2004). The Article 14 of the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that "the place occupied by services of general economic interest in the shared values of the Union as well as their role in promoting social and territorial cohesion" and mentions the concerns of both the EU and of the Member States with the fulfillment of their mission (TFEU, 2010). In fact, SGI were firstly taken into consideration in a comprehensive manner in 2001, when a Communication from the Commission was entirely dedicated to "Services of general interest in Europe". On that occasion they were defined as "market and non-market services which public authorities class as being of economic interest and subject to specific public service obligations" (CEC, 2001, p.23). The same document also mentioned the services of general economic interest that "would tend to cover such things as transport networks, energy and communications" (CEC, 2001, p.23). However, social services of general interest are included in the SGI as well, referring to education, health care, child care, social care, labour market services, etc. Moreover, the area of the services of general economic interest has been expanded to other services such as water, postal service, waste management, etc. (Rauhut and Ludlow, 2012). In order to ensure the access of European citizens to the best services in terms of availability, quality and affordability, a proactive policy at European level is considered in this respect, based on a large partnership between the EU and local, regional and national authorities (CEC, 2001). Based on these overall considerations, this paper proposes an analysis of the users' accessibility to SGI in the North-East Region (NER) of Romania. It reflects a part of the research results of an ESPON project entitled "Indicators and Perspectives for Services of General Interest in Territorial Cohesion and Development (SeGI)", in which Bucharest University of Economic Studies has been one of the 11 partners involved, under the coordination of the Royal Institute of Technology of Stockholm.

The project aims to support the adequate policy formulation at all governance levels involved for the effective delivery of SGI, observing the specific features of various EU territories. With this objective in view, nine regions have been chosen for a highly relevant case study with regard to SGI provision in the EU countries, so as to reflect the particularities determined by the distinctive features of various types of EU territories (Table 1).

TABLE 1 - CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REGIONS INCLUDED IN THE ESPON – SEGI PROJECT'S CASE STUDIES

Country	Region	Region's territorial aspects
Austria	Eastern Austria	Border, Mountainous, Urban/Rural
Germany	Ruhrgebiet	Urban, Metropolitan
Hungary	Dél-Alföld	Rural, Border
Iceland	Northeast	Island, Coastal, Remote, Rural, Sparsely
Norway	Finnmark	Remote, Border, Sparsely, Mountainous, Coastal
Poland	Mazowsze	Urban/Rural, Metropolitan, Intermediate
Romania	Northeast	Border, Rural, Intermediate
Spain	Navarre	Mountainous, Metropolitan, Border, Coastal, Intermediate
UK	South Gloucestershire	Coastal, Intermediate

Source: ESPON (2012a), SeGI Scientific Report – Draft, Annex 9, p.127 (Version 18/10/2012)

Note: Region's territorial aspects have been defined starting from the types of regions derived from the compilation of the ESPON typology on NUTS3 level.

For this paper the sewage services have been chosen, the accessibility issue being particularly discussed. The analysis of sewage services in the NER has a twofold significance for the whole project: on the one hand, this region is the least developed NUTS2 region of Romania and the last but one among all EU regions; on the other hand, the EU is deeply concerned with the ensuring of a minimum level of SGI to everyone, in line with the national ideology, institutions and macro-economic performance as well as life style aspects such as demographic structure, income distribution and consumer behavior (ESPON, 2012a). Thus, it is interesting to see how accessible are the sewage services – of a crucial importance for a civilized life – in a lagging behind EU region.

2. BRIEF METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The paper outlines a series of results obtained through a complex field research with both quantitative and qualitative parts carried out during February – April 2012 within the ESPON project - SeGI. The paper mainly focuses on the quantitative part of the research, the issues specific to the qualitative part not being addressed in the paper. In what concerns this part of the research, the main method for data collection was the questionnaire-based survey.

The administered questionnaire was developed by the Polish coordinator of the project in charge with the case studies elaboration and it had three parts designed in order to gather a series of information on various SGI related issues such as accessibility, presence, the state of development, and the quality.

It was distributed in different localities belonging to all the counties in the NER; localities were chosen based on different criteria such as the inclusion of the locality within urban/ rural environment, the area of the locality compared to the locality average in the county, the density of population within the locality

compared to the locality average in the county, the rate of population aging within locality, and the locality landform (ESPON, 2012b). The targeted sample was composed of representatives of public administration, a total of 108 respondents being reached in the end.

3. ACCESSIBILITY TO SEWAGE SYSTEMS AND SEWAGE TREATMENT FACILITIES – MAIN FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Users' accessibility to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities was investigated both from the perspective of households and individuals and the perspective of businesses at regional level and also at county level. Regarding the first category, respectively households and individuals, in general, it is considered by the majority of respondents (34%) that their accessibility to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities is not relevant in the NER, or even very bad (21.4%).

Furthermore, it can be assessed that the general perception of respondents regarding households' and individuals' accessibility to the sewage services in the NER embraces a more negative orientation than a positive one. The same negative perception is encountered also in the case of businesses' accessibility to sewage services in the NER. In general, respondents assessed it as being very bad (22.3%), or not relevant (31.1%). Considering the analysis of the accessibility at county levels, it can be observed that in Bacau and Neamt counties the situation tends to a positive orientation, accessibility of households and individuals to sewage services being assessed as quite good. On the other hand, in Botosani and Vaslui counties most of the respondents considered the accessibility to these services as very bad (41.7%, respectively 32.5%). The other two counties in the NER, respectively Iasi and Suceava are, in general, placed in the "not relevant" category in terms of households' and individuals' accessibility to sewage services; however, the overall image is more negative than positive. In case of businesses' accessibility, Botosani and Vaslui counties are once again remarkable in terms of their bad accessibility to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities. Iasi, Neamt, and Suceava counties are characterised by the irrelevant businesses' accessibility to the sewage services; however, if in general the overall perception of the respondents is quite positive in case of Neamt county, in case of the other two, their perception tends to be more negative.

Thus, considering all the previously mentioned information, one can state that a series of discrepancies arise among different counties in the NER in what concerns households, individuals, and businesses accessibility to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities.

Investigating the accessibility to the sewage services in the NER that different social groups have, the research has pointed out that households with low income encounter a series of difficulties in accessing

these services. Another social group with difficulties in accessing these services is represented by elderly people, as 12.8% of the respondents perceive. What is remarkable is immigrants' situation. If, in general, their access to different services is expected to be difficult, in case of the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities, only a very small share of the respondents (8.2%) consider that immigrants have difficulties in accessing these services.

Another studied aspect was the share of households, individuals and business that do not have access to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities. In this respect, in the NER an important share (50-100%) of households, individuals, and businesses do not have access to sewage services, as perceived by the vast majority of the respondents (45.6% in case of households and individuals and 35.9% in case of businesses).

Also, in case of the latter, the share of respondents (31.1%) that did not express their opinion regarding the inaccessibility of business to the sewage services in the NER is remarkable. Analysing the situation at county level, in almost all the counties the vast majority of respondents (41.7% in Botosani county 36.4% in Iasi county, 61.5% in Neamt county, 31.3% in Suceava county, and 52.5% in Vaslui county) assessed that a share between 50 and 100% of the households and individuals do not have access to sewage services.

Also, in case of Suceava County, the same share of respondents (31.3%) considered that only 0-10% of the individuals and households do not have access to sewage services. Bacau county is an exception to the mentioned situation, as in this case, most respondents considered that a share between 10 and 50% of the households and individuals in the NER do not have access to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities. In case of businesses' inaccessibility to sewage services, in Bacau County the vast majority of the respondents (80%) consider that only a share between 10 and 30% of the businesses do not have access to sewage services. In case of Botosani county, it is important to outline that 33% of the respondents did not answer to the question.

However, considering the ones that expressed their opinion, an equality between the share of respondents (25%) assessing that all the businesses have access to sewage services and the share of respondents assessing that a share between 50 and 100% of the businesses do not have access to these services, can be observed. In Iasi county, more than half of the respondents (54.5%) did not express their opinion; another important share of respondents (22.7%) considered that 50-100% of the business do not have access to sewage services. In Neamt and Vaslui counties, the vast majority of respondents (53.8%, respectively 45%) considered that 50-100% out of the businesses do not have access to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities, while in Suceva county, most

respondents (31.3%) assessed that only a share between 0-10% do not have access to the mentioned SGI.

Thus, considering all the previously mentioned information, it can be assessed that a series of discrepancies arise among different counties in the NER in what concerns households, individuals, and businesses inaccessibility to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities.

CONCLUSIONS

SGI represent an important element specific to the European model of society, being intensely addressed and debated in the last period, occupying key positions in the agenda of both scholars and policy makers, especially at European level. In this sense, various aspects associated to SGI, such as their presence in various regions, their quality, their accessibility, etc. are investigated and debated in order to be improved. The present paper approached a specific SGI related issue, respectively it investigated users' accessibility to the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities in the NER of Romania, by users being understood both households and individuals and businesses. The carried out analysis revealed a poor situation of households', individuals', and businesses' accessibility to the investigated services in the NER, both at regional and county levels. In general, the accessibility of households, individuals, and businesses to the sewage services in the NER is considered to be very bad or not relevant; the overall accessibility frame is more negative than positive. Furthermore, important shares (50-100%) of the households, individuals, and businesses in the NER are considered as not having access to the investigated services. Also, in what concerns the analysis at county levels, important disparities between different counties in the NER were highlighted. Thus, it can be assessed that the sewage systems and sewage treatment facilities needs to be paid a special attention and policy makers should concentrate all their efforts in order to ensure a proper minimum level of SGI to every individual, household, and business in the NER, in line with the European trend.

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