

THE ROLE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATORS IN RURAL INSTITUTIONS

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In rural areas where life is slower but social problems tend to be deeper there is a need for urgent, pro-active and professional area-orientated development decisions. Due to challenges posed to agriculture by economic globalisation and sustainable development, both theoretical and applied scientific research is necessary for improving agricultural and rural development policies as well as their management. It should be highlighted that the demand for professional and innovative activities is significantly higher in rural development compared to the other sectors. The aim of this research is to explore the role and the functions of rural development administrators in rural institutions. The methodology of this research is based on the positive research paradigm, analysis of content and descriptive analysis, empirical study methods, logical and systematical reasoning, abstract and other methods. In order to assess the role of rural development administrators, three groups of experts (professionals, NGO and leaders of government organisations) were selected. Their opinions enabled the comparison of assumptions regarding the behaviour of rural development administrators as well as their participation in the process of rural development. The findings are expected to be useful for local, regional and national rural development policy makers and other actors interested in management of rural development innovations in public sector.

Key words: rural development administrators, innovations, rural development policy and management.

JEL Codes: R58, Z18.

1. Introduction

The main challenges of today are globalization, economic competition, social and political unrest, technological changes, threat of terrorism, constantly changing labour market, increasing demand for public administration (Reconstructing..., 2010). Rapidly changing public administration environment is marked by a post-recession economy, changing workforce, new tools and technologies, and new demands for outcomes, transparency, and engagement (The 2016 Public..., 2016). Globalization spurred the importance of local specificities and material and non-material assets on which the competitiveness of regions is based (Vanthillo, 2012).

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The European Union adopted the notion “smart” in new growth strategy “Europe 2020” stating that Europe should become a smart, sustainable, and inclusive economy. “Europe 2020” puts forward three mutually reinforcing priorities: smart growth – developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation; sustainable growth – promoting a more resource-efficient, greener and more competitive economy; inclusive growth – fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion“ (European Commission..., 2010). Any management success depends on the institutional structure and competence of the persons executing their functions, but the leaders must develop a strong understanding of how to effectively manage and pace the transformational changes.

When seeking to innovatively manage the changes of rural areas, to put them in desirable direction there is an increasing need for smart administrators of rural development, able to think strategically, to make decisions based on the evidence from public management, to effectively use the resources of rural areas and to create the potential for areas’ development. Even though rural communities and non-governmental organisations become braver, accept initiatives more professionally and try to develop social innovations, they still face difficulties when taking decisions related to development of the area, experience failures in implementing their ideas, face various risks of short-term investment. It is also important to stress that functioning public administration institutions providing public services delegated by national level institutions tend to lack innovative solutions. Consequently, rural areas still lack professional leaders, especially in a local level. This supports the idea that the need for modern rural development agents/actors, their role and realised functions are not sufficiently analysed in both scientific and policy levels. The role of rural development administrators as specialists in rural areas is manifested by these features: they know the situation of rural area and people living there the best, they are able to identify positive/negative features of rural functioning, represent or should represent local governments in relation to the public sector institutions of other territories’ and national government. The question is whether there are people in new professions able to help understanding, developing and implementing new regional development strategies. Effective implementation of rural development as a multidimensional process involving reorganization and reorientation of entire economic and social systems requires an interaction among various technological, biological, social and economic institutional organizations.

All the above mentioned arguments allowed defining the *research problem*: how does the changing situation in rural areas affect the role and the functions of rural development administrators? *The object of this research* is the role and the functions of rural development administrators. Consequently, *the aim of the research* is to explore the role and the functions of rural development administrators in rural institutions. In order to reach this aim both theoretical and applied scientific research methods were employed. These methods are necessary for improving agricultural and rural development policies and their management.

The article consists of several parts: in the first part the theoretical approaches describing the role and the functions of rural development administrators are analysed; in the second part the prepared research methodology is described; in the third part the empirical research is carried out and the results are disclosed. In the end of the article conclusions are presented.

2. Conceptualisation of the Public Administration Environment, the Role and the Functions of Rural Development Administrators

Institutional structures of rural development could be described as a system of collective solutions intended to form and implement national rural development policy, as well as develop and carry out sustainable development strategies and projects. Public sector institutions and organizations are still central in managing intensive changes and processes of rural areas. In local level, public sector institutions play a critical role in affecting socio-economic transformations. They influence rural human resources and their overall wellbeing as well. Juknevičienė (2008) justified this approach by pointing out that the relationship between democracy implementation and human resources in public administration is close. In addition, she pointed out that changing features of the role of human resources in public administration in contemporary processes of democratic development are interrelated. This supports the idea that the role of human resources in public administration in processes of contemporary democracy development is changing. Human resources are involved in establishment, determination, consolidation and development of democracy and democracy makes a great impact on human resources in public administration through democratic values and their system.

Institutionalization is implemented by politicians applying different public programmes and projects as well as by determining the public services rendered by different institutions in a form governed by central and local authorities. *Institution* is a rule described as a statement specifying obligatory, admissible and forbidden actions in particular situation or for particular actors. There are two types of institutions: formal institutions (actors are able to reflect them) and informal institutions (actors could not reflect them, but they could still experience their impact through the emotions of guilt and shame). *Institutionalization* is a foundation or a process of institutional structure (or the results of the process) ensuring stable social structures of social actions.

Discussion on the relationship between democracy in rural public administration institutions, changes in competences of local human resources and modern local government lead to a requirement of a particular level of education which should be possessed by the specialists of rural development. In this context, as Subrahmanyam and Ravichandran (2013) noted, the relationship between higher education and rural development governance is becoming an important policy concern, particularly in countries where the rural areas undergo a critical challenge. Some scholars (Alam,

2009; Subrahmanyam, 2013) already examined the role of agriculture in rural development processes and challenges, but demographic challenges, changes of social capital, need for better governance in rural areas reveal that rural economy is just one of the elements of rural socio-economic system. Consequently, rural development administrators play/could play a broader role than just solving the economic problems. Moreover, the mission of rural development studies with the focus on public administration emphasizes specific education where community of farmers is not the only audience that should be educated in rural areas.

Public governance, local public institutions could not exist or function positively without high-level specialists (Reconstructing..., 2010; The 2016 Public..., 2016). Periodic discussions among scientists, communities, local government representatives and other local actors characterise the participative culture and possible improvement in involvement of public administration specialists in order to maintain conducive industrial climate for higher productivity and growth of rural development institutions. Thereby with the strengthening competences of public administration specialists, functions, plans and measures are created to improve the competitiveness of communities' members (Vaidyanathan, 2011). Various approaches from the aforementioned authors enabled us to highlight the idea that rural development administrators should be capable to implement both managerial and consultation functions in rural areas. It is very often that the fields of their activity are related to the territorial changes, integration of vertical and horizontal communication and management among various rural institutions and actors. Probably the role of the rural development administrator could be most accurately described in their twofold activities: firstly, when they suggest innovations enhancing the changes in rural areas; secondly, when they act together to carry out innovations with local action groups, self-governing institutions and rural communities in order to enhance the entrepreneurship of rural inhabitants and the management of citizenship. Table 1 represents what kind of functions are or could be applied to local rural development administrators in comparison to rural development consultants in regional level.

Table 1. Specific functions of local rural development administrators and rural development consultants in regional level (made by the authors based on (Alam, 2009; Vaidyanathan, 2011; Vanthillo, 2012; Subrahmanyam, 2013))

Specific functions of rural development administrators <i>in local level</i>	Specific functions of rural development consultants in <i>regional level</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To manage quantitative and qualitative rural changes including local inhabitants and institutions; • To manage networks and network organisations of rural development actors; • To plan and to organize the provision of public services to rural inhabitants; • To administrate the European Union and national support for rural development actors; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To consult rural inhabitants on the questions related to their problems or needs (for instance: job search, search for psychological assistance, directing to particular institutions, etc.); • To consult persons pre-

Specific functions of rural development administrators <i>in local level</i>	Specific functions of rural development consultants <i>in regional level</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To organise training courses and seminars for rural communities and local government specialists; • To solve social conflicts in rural areas and to do prevention work, to strengthen the feeling of community and citizenship; • To contribute to reduction of rural poverty; • To promote social inclusion and to enhance entrepreneurship among rural inhabitants; • To initiate the creation of rural communities and partnership organisations; • To initiate and to prepare the projects for rural socio-economic development, to implement social innovations; • To evaluate the vitality of rural area – to gather data about local resources (social, economic, environmental, cultural), to analyse and to assess them, to implement their monitoring; • To implement inhabitants needs' surveys, public relevant information about the area to society etc. 	<p>paring and implementing the projects of rural development;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To consult on solving the problems related to human relationships, attitudes, changes of behavior and etc.

The above table reveals the multifunctional role of local rural development administrators. This given list is not limited, though it indicates the main activities of rural development administrators. It should be mentioned that the role of these specialists differs depending on whether they are active or passive, and the situation of the particular rural area. When discussing the role of rural development administrators and consultants it should be understood that they are expected to constantly analyse the situation of rural area, to keep contacting and consulting researchers as well as establishers of national policy. In addition, they should take part in experimental and other research enabling them to warn local government specialists, rural communities, and partnership groups about unfavourable incidents or changed conditions. Moreover, they should help fighting the no-confidence feeling and be able to identify specific problems to be solved. To sum up, the role and the functions of rural development administrators should cover these aspects of their activity (Maria Goea, 2009):

- to help rural development subjects in analysing current and favourable future situation;
- to provide more knowledge, to help systemizing current knowledge and to understand the essence of the problems as well to evaluate and to improve the skills of opinion formation and acceptance of different solutions;
- to help gaining proper knowledge and skills related to finding the solutions of problems and their outcomes;
- to increase the motivation of rural development subjects while implementing the chosen solution.

If rural development administrators want to implement their functions, to feel stability in their work and to compete successfully they must permanently improve

their knowledge and adopt this knowledge in their work. Accumulation of knowledge becomes a learning process through all the life (Atchoarena, 2004; The Local..., 2015). Management of their personal career challenges means ability to take the best possibilities for learning and to adopt them in their career. Following the opinion of the authors of this article, the specific profession of rural development administrators requires them to be flexible and receptive to new knowledge since knowledge and information become the main work resources in their profession. This point of view is closely related to the need analysis of these specialists in local governments with specific focus to particular studies. Based on some documents (Lithuanian..., 2017) the need for rural development administrators in local government institutions (municipalities, elderships) is grounded by the Lithuanian Rural development programme (RDP) 2014–2020 certified by the European Commission decision Nr. C (2015) 842 taken on 13th February, 2015 and last time modified on 28th August, 2017, where such needs for Lithuanian rural areas are detailed for the period of 2014–2020:

- to reduce the risk of poverty in rural areas by creating more employment possibilities;
- to support the maintenance and creation of work places that require qualified labour force especially not in agriculture;
- to enhance the rural and urban integration by supporting cooperation projects between consumers and producers;
- to enhance development of local food markets by strengthening the relationships between consumers and producers as well as by implementing innovations;
- to create favourable conditions for settlement of the youth, to create new businesses and to increase employment in rural areas;
- to implement training, spread of experience and consultation in rural areas;
- to create opportunities with NGO projects in order to enhance the entrepreneurship and employment as well as to assure the succession of local initiatives.

To foster the local development of rural areas and the creation of businesses and jobs, the RDP will focus on support for LEADER, business start-ups and non-agricultural business' development. It is planned to create 2,055 jobs, 960 of which should be created under LEADER (Factsheet on..., 2017). In addition, investment in small-scale rural infrastructure is planned.

The challenges to rural areas in the period of 2014–2020 concern various characteristics which appear in the role of rural development administrators. It should be noted that the need for rural development administrators is relevant not only to the local self-governing institutions that are solving local areas' issues, but also to regional, national and international organisations whose activities are based on agriculture and rural development. Going from local to national levels a strong argument is Common Agricultural Policy where the development of rural areas is highly emphasised. For instance, 6% that are given from all RDP 2014–2020 financing in Lithuania cannot assure successful new opportunities for professional local governments and management of rural areas (Factsheet on..., 2017). Finally, it should be under-

lined that it is a challenge to achieve sustainable and smart management of rural development without modern policy and managerial solutions, as well as without direct interventions in regional and local levels. Consequently, education and science institutions preparing rural development specialists should be supported by national and international actors as well as policy makers who make decisions on human resources in rural areas. Perception that professional rural development leaders are administrating and executing political solutions in rural areas affect the potential wellbeing of all rural society in the future.

3. Research Methodology

In order to assess the role of rural development administrators, three groups of experts were selected (professionals, NGO and leaders of governmental organisations). Their opinions enabled to compare the assumptions regarding the behavior of rural development administrators, their participation in rural development process. This research is based on the positive research paradigm, analysis of content and descriptive analysis, empirical research methods (online and direct questionnaire methods), logical and systematical reasoning, abstracts and other methods.

The period of empirical research, when the questionnaire was given to respondents', is 2017. 51 questionnaires were filled contacting the respondents directly and 141 respondents took part online – 192 questionnaires were filled in total. The main criteria for selecting the respondents (experts in local public governments) was their activity in public sector institutions, their knowledge and competences used in rural public governments, work experience in public sector, especially in solving the questions of rural development management. The sample is characterised with the age varying from 23 to 80 years, 80 women and 61 men, and 51 respondents not indicating their gender.

The questionnaire about the role of rural development specialists/administrators in rural areas was made of 13 open-ended and open questions. Different questions were given with the purpose to identify what type of institution the experts represent, what are or could be the competences of rural development administrators, what level of education they have/expect to have, what type of model should be applied to enhance and maintain the rural development study programmes.

The following research limitations were identified: not all the questions were completely answered, respondents were not very precise with the open question and for some there was a difficulty describing what kind of rural specialists their public institution really needs. Not all the experts, who took part in the research, understood the importance of rural areas development management and its spontaneous process, as well as that separate attempts and activities of rural actors will not help to meet the needs of people in rural areas and will not make these areas sustainable.

4. Research Results

The empirical research that was carried out enabled us to come up with the findings regarding the identification of rural development administrators' role in rural public institutions. Since the respondents were from different types of public institutions, most of them (53%) described themselves as representatives of local government. This shows that their main activities were related to various functions realised in local level (municipalities, elderships). In addition, respondents revealed (in the "other" type of the answer) that in public sector their activities are closely related to: solving various socio-economic problems, representation of local community solutions in higher government levels, being a part of rural community, maintenance of cultural activities in rural areas, spreading the information important to local inhabitants and etc. These insights show that in local governments rural development administrators hold or should hold an important position in local government institutions.

As it is widely known local government (The Local..., 2015) includes various positions in separate public institutions. These positions in rural development context are/should be directly connected to the capability to identify and carry out the activities which could contribute to promoting positive rural development processes and show high competence of public servants in these public institutions. The research participants had to identify the positions that were directly related to administration of rural development management in their institutions (Figure).

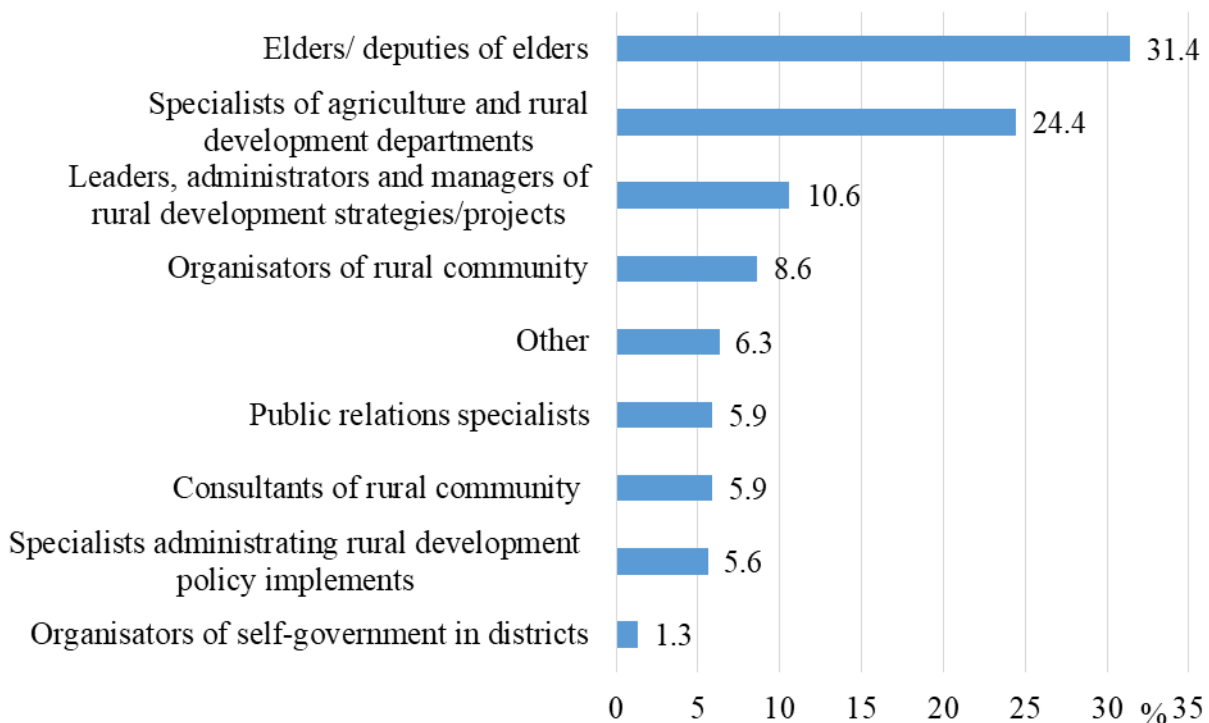


Fig. Experts' opinion about positions directly related to administration of rural development management, % age (remark: respondents had a possibility to choose several suitable answers)

Figure 1 shows that the possibility to have a certain rural development administrator in local public institution seems to still be a goal, but not the reality. This position is reflected in other positions mentioned with possibly specific functions corresponding to rural development issues. 60% of respondents stated that only about 10% of their public institution positions are created for rural development specialists. Interestingly, the answer “other” was quite detailed with different positions such as “agricultural specialist”, “specialist of eldership” or just “specialist”. Moreover, one expert revealed that in most of the elderships there are no rural development specialists/administrators, so the existing specialists work with separate rural development issues. This allows stating that creation of a new position of a rural development administrator could be a positive change in some rural institutions – these specialists could concentrate on sustainability and specific issues typical to rural areas. This observation is closely related to education and consultation process of specialists in local government institutions. Respondents agreed that rural development administrators should have university education (at least bachelor level (27% of experts mentioned this) or master level (26%)). The same tendency was identified when analysing the data concerning the specialists’ education in local level public institutions. However, the same situation was observed in both levels (national and local): there is a requirement for rural development administrators, managers or leaders to have at least bachelor degree in a field related to rural development administration. It enables concluding that the requirements and competences of specialists in local public institutions increase with the changes in rural areas, increasing problems and etc.

Rural areas where the way of life is slower and social problems tend to be deeper require quick, proactive and professional decisions orientated towards development of the territory. Capabilities, concentration and partnership of local institution (government and NGOs) leaders and specialists in developing local economies are notably an important driving force in the process of managing the changes in rural development. However, the results of research revealed that very often the leaders of rural institutions do not possess the potential (resources, competences and capacity) to integratively and sistematically solve different problems of rural inhabitants: unemployment, social inclusion, cooperation, creation of work places and etc. Consequently, it is obvious that the need to improve the rural development competences of local leaders as well as the level of their entrepreneurship is increasing in both institutional and individual levels.

One more meaningful insight from the analysed topic is related to the services bought by the local public institutions where the experts work. The most important services delivered by local public institutions were ranked in the following way: 27.7% stated that their institution usually buys rural development training and consultation services, 22.0% of experts mentioned that, if there is a need, they buy services for preparation of public projects and applications to get funding from the European Union, and 13.0% of respondents mentioned services that are used to prepare local strategies and plans. The experts do not tend to pay for consultations concerning the

implementation of partnership organisational mechanisms (only 1.8% of experts mentioned this); 2.4% named rationalization of management of territorial changes and almost 5.0% indicated evaluation and selection of strategies and projects. The identified percentages reveal a lack of specialists with particular competencies which could solve the problem of deficient services in local public institutions.

Prior to implementation of this research it was expected that the experts would identify what kind of rural development specialists they would prefer having in local public institutions. The results from open questions showed that only a small part of participants were concerned with this situation or their competencies were not sufficient to make this evaluation. Despite of that, there were some discerning opinions: “rural development administrators or specialists should have a degree in specialised rural development studies, because now everybody works as they perceive their functions”; “potential employers do not have specific information about rural development specialists in need so the information gap becomes the main issue when searching the right specialists”; “there is no national systemic understanding of what type of rural development specialists are needed”.

5. Conclusions

1. Rural development administrators implement regional policy; take care of the welfare of rural communities and the identity of the areas. They are rural entrepreneurs, specialists of state and municipal institutions analysing, evaluating the environment of rural development, rural and regional resources, predicting socio-economic changes in rural areas and preparing strategies, programs and projects for managing these changes. They are local self-governed experts, experts in innovative management techniques, and makers of professional breakthrough.

2. Insufficient preparation of rural development specialists has a negative influence on the general qualification of human resources in rural areas and their economic activity, employment and entrepreneurship. Consequently, these factors have an impact on unemployment and migration issues of rural inhabitants.

3. The role of rural development administrators in rural areas is distinguished by several features: they know the situation and the problems of local inhabitants and are capable to identify the positive and negative features of rural functioning; they represent the relationships/partnerships of local governments with public sector institutions of other territories as well as with national government.

4. Capabilities, concentration and partnerships of the leaders and specialists of local institutions in developing the local economies are important driving forces in the process of managing the changes in rural development. However, the results of this research revealed that very often the leaders of rural institutions do not possess the potential (resources, competences and capacity) to integratively and systematically solve different problems of rural inhabitants: unemployment, social inclusion, cooperation, creation of work places and etc. Consequently, it is obvious that the need to

improve the competences of local leaders in rural development as well as the level of their entrepreneurship is increasing in both institutional and individual levels.

5. The empirical research results showed that not all the experts, who participated in the research, perceived the importance of managing the development of rural areas. They tend to see it as a spontaneous process, where separate attempts and activities of rural development actors should help to satisfy the needs of rural inhabitants as well as the sustainability of development of rural areas.

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KAIMO PLĖTROS ADMINISTRATORIŲ VAIDMUO KAIMO INSTITUCIJOSE

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Santrauka

Kaimo vietovėse, kur gyvenimas ne toks intensyvus, bet socialinės problemos labai įvairios ir gilios, svarbu priimti skubius, proaktyvius ir profesionalius sprendimus joms spręsti. Dėl didėjančios ekonominės globalizacijos žemės ūkyje ir darnios plėtros svarbos tiek teoriniai, tiek empiriniai tyrimai yra būtini gerinant žemės ūkio ir kaimo plėtros politiką ir jos instrumentus. Tai reikalauja profesionalų inovatyvios veiklos, kuri ypač svarbi valdant kaimo pokyčius ir procesus. Tyrimo tikslas – nustatyti kaimo plėtros administratorių funkcijas ir vaidmenį kaimo institucijose. Tyrimo metodika grindžiama pozityviają tyrimų paradigma, turinio ir aprašomąja analize, loginiu argumentavimu ir empiriniais tyrimo metodais. Vertinant kaimo plėtros administratorių vaidmenį kaimo institucijose buvo atlikta specialistų apklausa, kurioje dalyvavo šios srities profesionalai, NVO ir valdžios atstovai. Jų nuomonė leido pagrįsti kaimo plėtros administratorių dalyvavimo kaimo plėtros procesuose svarbą. Tyrimo rezultatai reikšmingi savivaldybių, regionų, nacionalinę kaimo plėtros politiką formuojantiems ir įgyvendinantiems bei kitiems suinteresuotiems asmenims, kurie domisi valdymo inovacijų diegimu kaimo institucijose.

Raktiniai žodžiai: kaimo plėtros administratoriai, inovacijos, kaimo plėtros politika ir valdymas.

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