

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE SELECTION OF SOCIAL INDICATORS CHARACTERISING REGIONAL DISPARITIES*

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Abstract. Identification and measurement of regional disparities is the decisive factor in solving the perceived disparities between regions. The key task here is the selection of correct and relevant indicators in terms of the final aim. The main goal of the article is, with emphasis on the broader theoretical and systemic salient points for the selection of indicators, to present basic and most frequently used indicators for the assessment of social regional disparities. The knowledge of the relevant indicators of social, socio-pathological and socio-demographic nature, based on general analysis of the differentiated aspects, attributes and statement value to research are presented. The paper is focused on the presentation of individual indicators, their contents, broader aspects and implications as far as the subject of analysis is concerned, their assets, drawbacks and possible modifications.

1. INTRODUCTION

Like in other post-communist countries of Central Europe (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland), social regional disparities in Slovakia became evident in the 1990s in consequence of the political and economic situation, which exposed until then disguised low living standard of part of the population on one side, and brought about some new phenomena which caused poverty (unemployment, increase of economic, social and income inequalities) on the other. The principal reforms in five key areas (tax system, education, health care, public administration and social security) also contributed to the negative social consequences for certain population groups, some of them being more vulnerable than others. In spite of positive changes in many ambits of society's development on national and international level, numerous problems, above all in the socio-economic sphere, emerged, the depth of which was not expected and which concern many of the inhabitants of these countries in their everyday life. The gradual diversification of the socio-economic situation in these countries caused not only distinct changes in the stratification of society, but also an increase of social regional disparities. Naturally, there are some national specifications, but the basic trends are generally the same in all these countries.

The identification and measurement of regional disparities (hereafter RDs) is a decisive factor for the solution of perceived disparities between regions. The selection of indicators for the identification and measurement of RDs is the key role of its research. However, a successful solution of this task is complicated by uncertainties connected with different approaches and contradictory trends. The EU Member states apply a scale of different ways and methods of RD identification and gauging (OECD 2003). The issue of gauging regional cohesion in the EU runs into the problem of a correct choice of indicators. There are several ways to approach indicators and their definitions (Brüngger 2004). Indicators are statistical variables, which facilitate the transformation of data into relevant information. They are important for the definition of conceptual systems and serve to specific analytical purposes. Since social regional disparities concern life quality, the rank among dominant regional disparities. They reflect different forms of disparities and result from the distinct economic conditions of regions.

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They are expressed by inequalities in the socio-economic and socio-demographic status of population, living standard, infrastructure and amenities, level of household equipment and the dimension expressed by socio-pathological parameters. At present, the indicators of social (specifically socio-demographic and socio-pathological) nature are among the frequently used indicators gauging the social level and depth of RDs. A correct selection of indicators depends on many factors: the aim and purpose of the analysis, territorial scale and specificities, the value of indicators and possibilities of their evaluation. The selection of indicators of social regional disparities is often affected by various problems relating to information sources and statistical data. Officially monitored social indicators do not always truly reflect and capture the relevant aspects of RDs; they are often inaccessible and their value, reliability and comparability are not always satisfactory. Problems of their spatial interpretation, or the fact, that the data are not on the required geographical scale, can also emerge. The paper, apart from the theoretical and systemic circumstances of the selection of indicators and gauging of regional disparities, also concentrates on the description and assessment of their suitability or modification, especially regarding some specific conditions in the socio-economic development of society in Slovakia. The aim of the paper is to emphasize the broader theoretical background and empirical knowledge and to present basic and most frequently applied indicators of assessing social RDs relying on the basic systemic classification of regional disparities. This aim also requires the identification of their pros and cons, nuances and modifications in the light of the spatial specificities characterizing post-communist countries in Central Europe.

2. THEORETICAL AND SYSTEMIC BACKGROUND OF A CORRECT SELECTION OF SOCIAL INDICATORS CHARACTERIZING RDS

The basic attributes of RDs also include the sphere of their occurrence, territoriality (geographical levels), their measurability and time dimension. The multidimensional level of investigation of RDs characterizes the following attributes; they present a wide spectrum of views of RDs and produce systemic salient points for understanding and approaching, their research. From a geographical point of view, the territorial aspect associated with both the vertical and horizontal classification of RDs is interesting. Vertical classification estimates disparities in geographical units of different size (world, Europe, state, region or municipality). The aspect leans on the knowledge that disparities change in accord with the geographical scale. Disparities, as a rule, increase with the diminishing territorial scale. It means that a different rate and different view of the observed disparity level is obtained from different territorial scales. The horizontal classification of disparities is connected with the subject-matter sphere of their occurrence. The horizontal aspect normally draws on two classifications, depending of their substance, namely material or non-material, and if the sphere of occurrence in a territory is taken into account they are territorial (physical), economic, and social (Wishlade, Yuill 1997).

The authors of this paper focus on social disparities, which are considered to be the most significant (Dunford 2009, Michálek 2010), because they are outputs of the economic development and they directly reflect the living conditions of the population and social climate in regional societies. Regional social disparities manifest themselves in a wide spectre of phenomena and processes that can be measured and evaluated (Michálek 2012a). Such measurement and evaluation must rely on the selection of correct indicators. They are significant in the framework of the defined conceptual systems and the applied methods and they serve specific analytical purposes (Michálek 2012b). A suitable choice depends on the aim of the particular analysis, territorial scale specificities and weight of indicators, etc. Social indicators as tools helping to observe the nature and level of social phenomena and processes, development, change and trends should also be analytical, penetrating the substance of the phenomenon, significant and comprehensible (clear, brief and simple), comprehensive (covering the whole statistical unit or geographical region), trustworthy (low statistical error), inherently comparable (comparison of the same indicator for subgroups), and comparable in time.

They should be simultaneously accessible in terms of existing data, fluent in terms of introducing a temporal order, i.e. identical regarding the reference period and modifiable regarding spatial specificities. The choice of indicators for the identification of social RDs and descriptors obviously plays an important role in the nature of final results, their explanation and an overall view of the issue. The basic material applied to the choice of indicators was the European System of Social Indicators, as a methodological tool for gauging the social status of a community (Noll 2002). The System applies six relevant theoretical social concepts: welfare, quality of live, social quality, liveability, social cohesion, and sustainability. In the EU, stress is laid upon the policy of social cohesion and inclusion. The indicators of these dimensions are the most prioritised, elaborated and most closely watched over. Conclusions of scientific and political discussions show that two relevant dimensions exist in the framework of the social cohesion policy and its aims. Firstly, there is the dimension of Inequalities with the corresponding aim to reduce disparities, inequity in opportunities and social exclusion. Secondly, there is the dimension of Social Capital which involves the strengthening of social contacts, interactions and bonds (Berger-Schmitt 2000, 2002).

The quoted principles and criteria for the formulation of indicators, adopted from the theoretical and systemic spheres or empirics were observed while generating and selecting the indicators for the identification of regional social disparities in Slovakia, as an example. It is also important and necessary to integrate (merge) the basic indicators into homogeneous, acceptable for the system and logical groups. The integration of indicators is possible by applying different methods. Correctly integrated indicators represent homogeneous wholes, such as labour status, social status or health condition.

Individual indicators of regional social disparities should reflect the most significant aspects of the social climate in regional communities, relevant demographic as well as socio-pathological characteristics in the studied regional units. While considering candidate indicators, one must bear in mind that they have been determined by the socio-economic development after 1990 and the basic circumstances it implied. The economic transition and the associated reforms brought about some deep changes in the demographic social and socio-pathological area. New phenomena, processes and tendencies appeared along with new conditions in the population's life, increased inequalities becoming the features of economic development. In a short period of time, a series of phenomena which had not been here before, like unemployment, cohabitation would soon emerge, while others (crime) or tabooed (poverty) were repressed. Socio-demographic disparities include the ones determined by economic conditions and inequities. They are the disparities connected with the labour market and with demographically relevant population characteristics and structure. Individual indicators of socio-demographic regional disparities should reflect the most important aspects of social climate in regional societies and relevant demographic characteristics of population in the regional units studied. The labour market and the demographic phenomena are among the most important dimensions affecting the level of social disparities and their fluctuation, because they are simultaneously controlling many other phenomena and processes nationwide (Michálek, Podolák 2011).

3. CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF RD INDICATORS DETERMINED BY THE LABOUR MARKET

The situation in the labour market is one of the most important factors controlling the level of social disparities. It seems that the most important indicators, in terms of relevance and data accessibility, are those associated with unemployment. Slovakia experienced the emergence and dramatic increase of unemployment already in the early 1990s and it has remained the most important problem of the country's economy, as Slovakia is now one of the EU countries with the highest unemployment rate. The unemployment rate is a symptom of economic prosperity of a region, it has an impact on the income and situation of individuals and points to the rate of social disparities. Unemployment, especially long-term, is a great problem not only of the labour market, but also of regions. Several stressors are connected with unemployment, more or less directly related to the

economic, territorial, social and personal life. Long-term unemployment affects selected aspects of the population, such as quality of life, poverty, and increased incidence of socio-pathological phenomena in affected regions. A high spatial concentration and incidence of regions where the population cannot find jobs is characteristic of Slovakia since 1990s. These are the regions where more than a third of the available population is not economically active.

An important indicator connected with the labour market pointing at disparities is wage. Although its share in a household income decreases, it is still an important factor that sets the rate of disparities between economically active persons. Real wages distinctly dropped at the beginning of transition, influenced by economic reforms and lagged behind inflation. Low wages (price of labour) on one side has increased the presence of foreign investors in the country, but it also led to the pauperisation of a considerable part of the population. At present, wages are one of the most obvious forms of inequalities, the cause of increasing discontent in some regions. Increasing wage inequity and very low wages in some regions make people refuse working, hence further increase of the unemployment rate (sometimes it pays better not to work and live on unemployment benefits), part of the economically active population remains idle or goes abroad. Demotivation via wages hinders the development of a region. The optimal combination of wages and the rate of wages inequity is an important factor that may influence the satisfaction of population in terms of consumption. Regions with a low level of wages are often hit by negative phenomena, such as social dependency, low purchasing power, poverty, social exclusion, emergence of subcultures, etc. Apart from macroeconomic effects (economic level and options of development), wages and labour price in Slovakia, the possibilities and conditions of employers are also controlled by individual factors which, in turn, depend on efforts, education, capacities and the options of individuals participating (competing) in the labour market. Obviously, lack of certain skills leads to increased demand and increases the level of wages. Higher education, qualifications and skills may in some circumstance lead to the reduction of wage disparity (if the concerned individuals are working in regions where they reside).

Unemployment and/or low wages determine and directly affect the number/proportion of individuals suffering from material poverty, which is an important indicator of the socio-economic level of a region. The growth of the economy and of work productivity in Slovakia increased the State's income, which might have led, apart from others, to lowering the proportion of individuals in material poverty² not only on national but also regional level. The EU policy of eliminating poverty and supporting social inclusion has also been targeting regions with a high proportion of people in material poverty. On the other side, the above-mentioned high unemployment level, big investments in the economy, non-paying management and "wild" privatisation in the 1990s, followed by retrenchment in time of the rightist reforms, did not reduce the socially dependent population group. It even became another impulse that increased social disparities in regions with low educational and working potential.

4. CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF SOCIO-PATHOLOGICAL INDICATORS OF RDS

Socio-pathological disparities are those produced by the negative impact of the historic transition and reform, of new, often misinterpreted, options of freedom and democracy. Individual indicators of socio-pathological disparities between regions should reflect the undesirable negative aspects of such disparities. The increase of inequalities in all the spheres of economic and social life has manifested

² "Material poverty is the status when the citizen's or physical persons' income is lower than the living minimum pursuant the special provision and the citizen and physical persons considered along with the citizen cannot obtain or increase the income by proper efforts. The material poverty benefit pertains to a citizen suffering from material poverty and physical persons considered along the citizen for provision of basic living conditions" (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic 2013).

itself through social exclusion and poverty of comparatively large groups of population. Lack of finances and material resources on the side of potential perpetrators and increased “opportunities“ in a richer society with privileged groups along with the increase of social disorganization, gaps in legislation and other factors, contributed to the increase and concentration of crime. Lack of financial and other sources, failure to participate in the labour market, deficient or no social inclusion, weakened both formal and informal social control have led to various anomalies in some regions. They manifested themselves in increased morbidity (cardiovascular diseases, cancer and especially increased occurrence of psychic disorders). Among the most conspicuous factors that influence the level of socio-pathological disparities are the phenomena connected with social exclusion (poverty) and with safety (crime).

Poverty is the attribute and cause of social exclusion and simultaneously the factor determining the level of social disparity. Already at the beginning of the 1990s increase of poverty in Slovakia became evident. Some regions of the country belong to the poorest of Europe even today. It is a “new” poverty, which is closely connected with the labour market. High unemployment and low level of wages is typical of poor regions. These are accompanied by underdevelopment, poor human potential in terms of qualifications and skills, experience and demographic parameters including population structure. Poverty is inherited here and the majority of inhabitants, who do not move on, are trapped. The level of poverty in regions is an indicator *par excellence* of social (socio-pathological inequalities) in Slovakia. Poverty indicators in this county are most frequently represented by all poverty indicators capturing the essential attributes of poverty or of a wide spectre of deprivations.

Crime in Slovakia reflects the socio-political, socio-economic and historic-cultural development plus the dramatic changes after 1989. Economic problems connected with the transition and reforms (unemployment and its increase, loss or reduction of social guarantees, existential problems and drop of the living standard, etc.) pressure a considerable part of the population while some of them infringe legal standards. Among the consequences of abrupt social changes, social self-control has been weakened, value orientation confused, aggression increased, first of all in the marginalized population groups, increasing violent crime. The opening of frontiers made Slovakia became a crossroads for drug traffic and drug market. Some new forms of crime, which require not only material and technological preparedness, but also international cooperation did emerge. The period that followed 1989, is characterised by a distinct increase of crime, only its quantity (volume) but also its quality (structure, methods and composition of perpetrators, etc.) changed. New possibilities of drawing on various funds and sources from international programmes, aiming at the restraint and suppression of crime in risk regions and localities, opened up when Slovakia accessed the EU. Conditions for the reduction of regional disparities in the level of crime were created along with allotted finances. The outlined trend should also show, apart from reduced criminality, in reduced RDs in terms of crime³.

5. CRITERIA FOR THE SELECTION OF DEMOGRAPHIC INDICATORS

The demographic dimension, especially the basic demographic characteristics that have considerably changed after 1990, is an equally important factor of RDs. “New” demographic characteristics (phenomena, processes and tendencies), which appeared and comparatively rapidly spread in recent years, influencing different aspects of the social development in regions, deserve a special attention.

The population of Slovakia has reached another stage of long-term demographic development characterized by a distinct shift in the values of individual indicators of its development and structure. These changes are to a great extent influenced by the power and rate of socio-economic development

³ Some specific types of crime may be and probably are spatially concentrated due to global development and local conditions.

at country regional level. Demographic development became more varied. Models followed by population for decades, which boasted a clearly established order of individual demographic events (education – marriage – fertility – economic activity, etc.) changed into highly complicated individual life courses, where it is often problematic to generalise and estimate the sequence of individual steps. They are influenced by the different preferences of citizens in different stages of their lives. In this way, the development of individual demographic indicators is much more varied and influenced by a wide spectre of socio-economic and psychological conditions. It is appropriate to consider the following clusters of problems that reflect the changed socio-economic conditions and their development while selecting relevant indicators of social disparities in Slovakia:

- Changed models of family and reproductive behaviour, which influence the indicators of marriage, divorce, fertility and natality rates.
- Development of mortality rate and health condition in the population, which affects the specific and standardized indicators of mortality rate and consequently (along with other impacts) the age-structure of the population.
- Changed models of migration behaviour influencing (beside others) the development of regional social disparities in Slovakia.

All quoted changes in Slovakia possess not only the temporal, but also the spatial dimension and in this sense it is justified to monitor their manifestations in the regional context via several indicators. The following indicators were selected from the point of view of relevance and accessibility of reliable data; each of them captures and expresses the relevant aspect of population as a carrier of social disparity:

6. CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF INDICATORS OF FAMILY BEHAVIOUR AND REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR

The change of models of the population's family behaviour depends on many more demographic implications connected with increasing individualism and diminishing uniformity of an individual's life course as far as the temporal sequence of individual steps and ways are considered. Apart from demographic agents, there are also others that contribute to the abrupt changes in the population's demographic behaviour. Apart from material factors, an overall social climate, which reflects the attitude of the population to reproduction and can, in certain circumstances, increase/reduce the prestige of family and child, plays an important role in demographic developments. These facts that characterize reproductive behaviour and indexes both qualitatively and quantitatively, find their reflection in models. The distinct change of family behaviour models is all-European in nature, these tendencies having first appeared in some western and northern European countries several decades ago, while in Slovakia this happened in the 1990s. This trend manifests itself by an increasing tendency to other than marital forms of coexistence – cohabitations (increasing number of single males and females as a consequence of low or decreasing marriage rate), increased age of partners entering into marriage, and that of parents at the birth of the first child. The process is also accompanied by increased extramarital fertility and proportion of babies born outside wedlock and increasing proportion of such babies in the overall number of born children.

The rate of extramarital fertility is an important indicator in the context of research into social disparity. The distinct increase of extramarital fertility values is one of the basic manifestations of the changed reproduction pattern of the entire population. It is evident that these manifestations are socially and regionally differentiated in the two groups of women accounting for the trend. On one side, extramarital fertility is connected with young women with low education and income levels and to the Roma women (Šprocha 2007). High extramarital fertility became the synonym of marginality

and social exclusion. The second social group consists of women with medium level and university education. Although in absolute values they are not a dominant group, yet the highest increase of this indicator was observed precisely in this group. This development is connected with the fact that the institution of marriage is losing its significance and the alternative forms of partnership are becoming popular. This is the reason why observation of the extramarital fertility indicator is relevant for the research of social disparities. Some additional indicators are fertility and natality rates (in the context of a difficult social situation for large families), marriage indexes (namely on the decrease), increasing number and rate of divorce (in the context of a difficult social situation for single or large families).

7. CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF INDICATORS OF THE POPULATION DEATH RATE AND HEALTH CONDITION

Indicators of average life expectancy also have a high statement value. It is the most frequently used global characteristic for evaluating death rate. Given the differentiation of death rate in males and females, individual values are quoted separately. The evaluation of the whole population is subject to high degree of generalization and it is applied in international comparisons where there are no data from some developing countries are available.

The most frequently used indicator is average life expectancy (ALE) at birth (of males and females), it revealing the mortality rate in the whole population. When interpreting the values, one must bear in mind that specific death-rate values in individual age-categories differ and are inherent to the level of average life expectancy at birth. The statistical increase of ALE values in Slovakia is secured by the dominantly positive development in infant (below 1 year of age) mortality rate and less so by higher life expectancy in our population (statistical probability of survival) even in senior age categories. The analysis of ALE values at the age of 50+ (or 65+, 80+) may provide a more detailed picture, as it takes into account the mortality situation (or its development) only within the framework of specified age categories and is meaningful in evaluating the population's ageing processes, their regional differentiation and social consequences (Jurčová and Mészáros 2010).

A suitable indicator, which combines the benefits both of objective and subjective identification of the population's mortality rate and health condition, is the health-adjusted life expectancy (Rychtaříková 2006). A certain drawback of this indicator in Slovakia is that regional comparison can be made only on the NUTS 2 level (Mészáros 2010). It can be expected though that after an appropriate recording system of the population's health condition established it will be possible to exploit this characteristic for comparisons on the lower regional level as well, just like they do in the economically developed countries of northern and western Europe.

Regarding the high rate of regional differentiation in terms of population number it is appropriate to use standardized mortality rates (overall mortality and that caused by selected diseases), which partially compensate the biggest differences. The statistical results reached can be considered more relevant than gross mortality rates. The highly revealing indicator, which also reflects the social situation on the regional level, is the standardized rate of reversible mortality. This method is based on observation of selected death causes that led to premature deaths (Burcin and Mészáros 2008, Newey 2004). Such diseases can be cured by therapeutic or preventive methods (for example appendicitis) or death can be postponed (hypertension therapy), or they can be avoided by preventive measures (giving up smoking, alcohol abuse, and changing the diet). Accretion of indicator, in this case standardized death rate, measuring mortality rate due to the above-mentioned causes, can point to the poor quality of health care, or poor preventive measures or their deficient adoption by certain population groups. The standardized rate of reversible mortality represents a very suitable indicator of the role of health care (both from the view point of the provider and the beneficiary) reflecting in regional differentiation.

The infant mortality rate can here be used as a supplementary indicator. Although the values of this indicator are dropping in the majority of regions, there are still several “extreme” regions where infant mortality values are increasing. The phenomenon is closely connected with the social situation in some parts of Slovakia (regional aspect) or with some social groups (vertical stratification of society). The result of reproductive behaviour, the mortality situation and health condition of the population in combination with the rate of migration in a particular region is the population’s age structure. Routinely used characteristics in the analysis of age-structure are various age indexes which correlate with individual age groups, for example: the economic burden, the Billeter index, the dependency of elderly population index, mean age index, etc. The population group in the post-productive age is given increasing attention in the context of accelerated ageing of the population and its social consequences. This is justified in view of the increasing absolute figures and relative representation of the elderly and their generally acknowledged unfavourable social situation. Usually the oldest age-categories are associated with the need for special care, social or family support. As State-provided social care in Slovakia (compared with the advanced European countries) is distinctly inferior, the oldest citizens are often wholly dependent on the care of their families. From the socio-demographic point of view, the significance of the potential social support index (Dlugosz and Kurek 2009, Káčerová *et al.* 2012) is obvious. With respect to certain demographic trends and demographic parameters of the population in Slovakia, it is useful to use the age-limit of 80 years in relation to the 50–64 age population group (the category that very often takes care of their parents).

One of the most important determinants of population’s development in terms of socio-demographic aspects is education with effects in all spheres and areas of social life. It is kind of a cross-sectional indicator interacting with other indicators of demographic behaviour both on the level of prevention and consequences. Incomplete or insufficient education limits not only options in the labour market, but also a responsible approach to life; it deteriorates living conditions, increases social risks and eventually deteriorates the individual’s health condition. Probably the greatest impact on the social aspects of human life is given by the boundary between elementary and secondary education. The more pupils continue their education at secondary schools concluded by examinations, the better the chances of a socially secure population. This is the reason why it is appropriate to use some education indexes, such as proportion of population with completed elementary education, proportion of university graduates, etc. when analysing regional social disparities.

8. CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION OF THE POPULATION’S SPATIAL MOVEMENT INDICATORS

The spatial movement of population is another important component of regional development. The analysis of individual components of the population’s spatial movement trends, implications and interaction with other areas of life in society, population groups and individuals, is an inseparable part of the geographical, social and demographic research of regional disparities. The population’s spatial movement indicators can also point to the attractiveness of some territorial units. In the population’s spatial movement, interactions occur between a number of social-economic, demographic, psychological and ecological conditions on one side and the actively/passively behaving subjects, on the other. Citizens try to improve their social situation by migration, but it should be borne in mind that the socially weakest ones usually cannot even pay for moving to prospering towns. In the context of spatial disparities it is appropriate to concentrate on the following indicators:

One of the basic values of migration statistics, i.e. net migration (migration balance) is an appropriate indicator of the effect migration exerts on the population increase in regions. An extra

simple construction and accessibility of data are the obvious benefits of this indicator. On the other side, the population imbalance in individual regions of the country may pose a problem no matter whether it is the case of statistical districts or functional urban regions (Bezák 2011). Elevated heterogeneity of population number may lead to the situation when even the very low absolute migration increase in the region with a small population number will reflect in extremely high values of the net migration rate. In contrast, a big migration movement may manifest itself as a relatively very low increase, given that it is relativized by the high population number in a particular region.

One of the possible and often described ways of expressing in greater detail the effect of migration on population distribution is the efficiency rates (for example Plane 1984, Podolák 1995, 2006, Blake *et al.* 2000). The migration efficiency rate can be used in the basic form or modified when only migration flows in a closed system are considered – in Slovak conditions, for example, excluding international migration. Such an approach is justified in some analyses. The use of migration efficiency rate is suitable if the position (differentiation) of regions within a closed system is considered, for instance characteristics of inter-regional migration trends in Slovakia. If migration efficiency is researched within a closed system (without taking into account international migrations) the value of results within the framework of the selected system is of a compact nature. The summarized characteristics of efficiency rates (such as dispersion, standard deviation and total net migration rate) facilitate the analysis and assessment of the level of regional differentiation and its development in the particular migration system (Bezák 2006). The characteristics of migration efficiency complement the basic indicator of migration change on the level of individual regions and make it possible to characterize spatial links and dynamics in the development of social disparity.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The issue of disparities, their identification and assessment is closely related to the selection of indicators, which lack the generally defined criteria. The representativeness and capacity to capture variability are of crucial significance for the selection of indicators (Kutscherauer *et al.* 2011). Integrated indicators that are able to capture and identify the rate of interregional differences and to provide relevant and comprehensive information seem to be practical and advantageous. The situation and options of choice of socio-demographic and socio-pathological relevant indicators were researched based on theoretical and systemic approaches, empirical knowledge and general analysis of attributes and statement value of differentiated aspects. Their relevance, aspects and relations to the object of the analysis (social disparities and their identification) value, benefits, drawbacks and nuances were studied in a broader context regarding some specific conditions of Slovakia. Several indicators capable of capturing and expressing the crucial aspects of social disparities were selected. Simultaneously, the context of indicators, which is an important part of the selection for a particular analysis is presented. The assumption that an indicator contains a number of inherent attributes, which emerge only under deeper scrutiny, was confirmed. This fact points to the significance of their detailed analysis as an indispensable condition for gauging (social) regional disparities. The demonstrated analysis of selected relevant indicators for the monitoring of social RDs could represent a sort of guideline for the selection of appropriate indicators necessary for the acquisition of exact results, identification, and measurement of social RDs.

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