

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ORADEA

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In the current paper I will analyze the role citizens should play in community development programs. The community development ideology emphasizes the important role citizen's, or the beneficiaries of different development programs, play for the sustainability of community development. Yet, theoreticians from this field in Romania, refer to lack of interest, abilities and networks to explain the the small rates of citizen participation. In this paper, based on data collected through a CEEEX research grant "Leaders, participants and followers: determinants of community participation in urban Romania" coordinated by conf. univ. PhD Adrian Hatos, I will investigate the models and rates of citizen involvement, focusing on the link between these and the sustainable development programs. I will also present data regarding the limits of participation in community development programs from the research grant CNCSIS coordinated by lect. univ. PhD Nicoleta Chioncel "Education for active citizenship: community participation."

Introduction

Political and civic participation of citizens, social responsibility, community spirit, civic activism along with other concepts from civil society's rhetoric entered, along with the effort of entering the European Union, on the public agenda, being the topic of several studies conducted in this direction. The need for a strong civil society with citizens interested and engaged in the life of their community, oriented toward social and economic development is part of the same discourse of strong democracies described from different perspectives in the literature starting with Tocqueville, Alomnd and Verba, till Putnam and many others. Parallel with this line and the analyses derived by it, we have the studies and theories of community and sustainable development which are on the one hand oriented to developmental policies, regulations, institutional framework, but include also at methodological level aspects of civic involvement as participation in assessing community's problems, involvement in decision making as well as in the implementation of the actual measures considered. In this paper we will try to combine the two perspectives which overlap mostly in regard to social capital which is equally important in both.

Civic participation refers to the socially oriented individual's action for the production of a collective good (Dodescu, Hatos, 2004). The theme of civic participation can be found in the one regarding civil society, being complementary to political participation of citizens. It is most often measured (Badescu 2001, Uslaner 2003, Voicu 2006) as involvement in classical civil society forms: non/governmental organizations. The associative rates are the most common indicator for civic participation, even if for the production of collective goods other forms and mechanism can work as well. Collective actions, social movements as well as grass-root movements are aspects of the same theme yet a bit less operational.

Community participation gets the concepts more closely to the topics under study in the current paper by integrating also the actions of social actors in their community in addressing common problems.

In the first section of this article we will present different aspects of the forms of community participation in Romania, actions realized by a sample of people living in apartment blocks in Oradea. The items which we will present are selected after a literature analysis on research conducted in Romania regarding community participation and community development. The data presented in this paper is derived from the research activity conducted within the project **Leaders, Participants and Viewers: Determinants of Community Participation in Urban Romania**, CEEEX grant code 192, coordinated by conf. univ. PhD. Adrian Hatos, Faculty of Social Studies – University of Oradea, in which I am a team member.

In the second section we will present some results of a focus group conducted in Oradea on the theme of the limits of community participation and the identification of the ways to promote successful citizen's involvement, mostly considering the engagement in large scale programs such as social movements and development programs.

In the final section we will present some conclusions focusing on the modes in which different actors, public institutions, local authorities, non-governmental organizations or even chiefs of apartment buildings can use in order to stimulate the involvement of the passive ones and consequently to increase the chances of success of the actions meant to contribute to sustainable development of a community.

Forms and rates of community participation in Oradea

In this section we will present and analyze data regarding different forms of community participation, with the attempt to reveal their importance for sustainable development and even more important the ways through which one can sustain citizen's participation for the community development and the actors which could successfully contribute in the process.

In the CEEX project presented in the introductory section, in the second wave of field work we have applied questionnaires to a random sample of 461 people from different areas of Oradea, in October 2007. The sample consists of 50% men and 50% women, aged between 18 and 86 fairly equally distributed on categories: 16.4% aged between 18 and 25, 8.4% - 26-30, 16% aged between 31-40, and 41-50 de ani, 11.3% 51 and 60 years old, and 31.9% over 60. Among our subjects 47.9% work with working papers, 28.6% are pensioners, 12.8% are students, the rest working independently, are working in house, unemployed or are working for season. Most of them – 37.4% are qualified workers, 12.3% are intellectuals, 9.9% are public officers, 7.8% managers (12.3% declare it is not the case – not working). In the studied households live 2 people in 31.6% cases, 3 people in 28.6%, 4 in 20.8 %, and 11.9% live alone (in 7 % of the households there are five or more people). Our subjects live for around 15.3 years in the same house, around 17.12 years in the same neighborhood and around of 27.4 years in Oradea.

Regarding participation at different actions, as can be seen in chart no. 1, the most frequent forms of involvement are the philanthropical ones: help for the poor and donations for church which were made by more than a half of our respondents. These actions have limited relevancy considering at least three aspects: in both cases we are dealing with normative actions which makes them desirable, so people may have reported higher rates than in practice; second, help for the poor may be as high also as a consequence to the beggars phenomenon in Romania (we may assume that a large part of the answers refer to help for them and not for larger charitable campaigns); and third donations to church are often organized by its representatives who go door – to – door making these donations less voluntary.

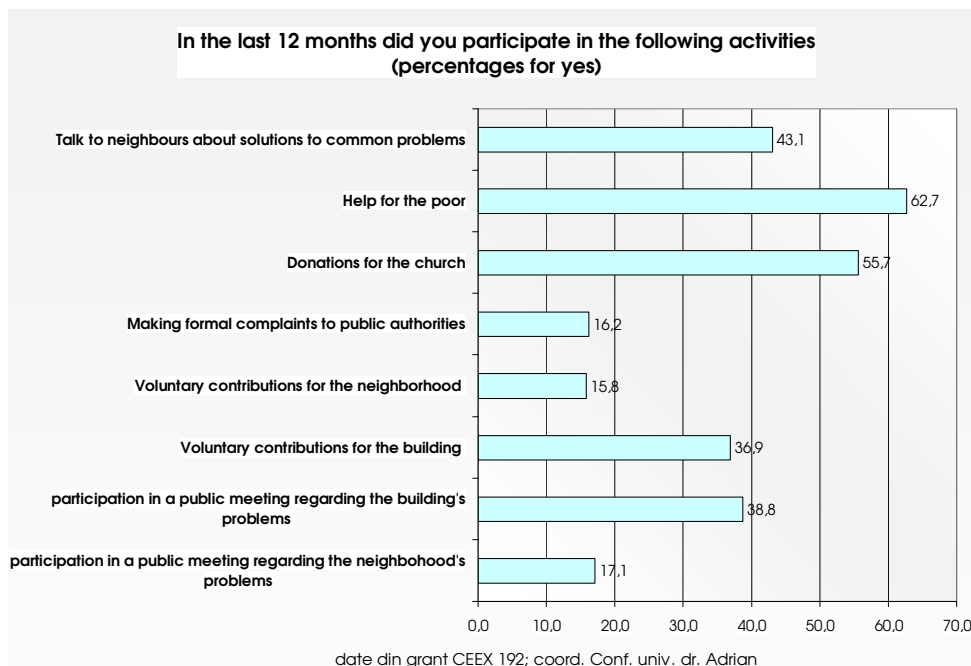


Chart no. 1 – Forms and rates of community participation in Oradea

The high participation rate in domains as support for others, beyond the limits presented above, indicate an important disponibility for involvement and also the fact that some initiatives which require the participation of citizens may be promoted also by using philanthropical motivations or be supported by the church from the community. Probably actions that can be promoted by church representatives would gain more support then others, of course depending of the type of action and considering the setting in which one can consider the church as part of civil society (Dodescu, Hatos 2004).

The next activity as a frequency of participation is represented by discussions with neighbors about solutions to local problems, which can be considered as a fist step for involvement. In the literature there was shown a positive link between membership in social networks (with neighbors in our case) and participation in solving common problems (Hatos, 2006). Awareness of problems and the identification of possible solutions may take place during these informal discussions, which may lead to revealing common problems the identification of possible contributions of all members of the network and thus may promote participation and empowerment.

We also analyzed the forms of participation for the members of the households noticing the correspondence between the two groups. Regarding the disponibility for participation at the same actions, the distributions remains the same but the declared rates are much higher, which also suggests the significant potential for participation in Oradea, which needs to be stimulated by concrete actions addressing high interest issues for the citizens which need to feel they can change the situation.

The actions that have the smallest participation rates are voluntary contributions for the community, making formal complaints to public authorities and also participation to public meeting regarding the community's problems. One can notice that participation is stronger at the level of the building's problems and decreases for participation at local level such as participation in the decisional processes at the local level.

In the following section we will present some results from a focus group regarding these problems: why do citizens participate less and which are the means by which we can promote higher involvement and more support for development programs.

Limits of community participation

Within CNCSIS project "Education for active citizenship: community participation", coordinated by lect. Univ. PhD Nicoleta Chioncel, we have conducted a focus group with leaders of local community initiatives and representatives of oradean NGOs. The discussion was aimed at identification of social movements in Oradea which gained significant support, focusing on the mechanisms through which these managed to gain support, the role of the actors involved and mostly the mechanism by which active citizenship is learnt.

Discussing the reasons for the current situations there were several aspects addressed, among which education and experience for such actions, our participants emphasizing that oradean have no specific education, nor a tradition for active citizenship. Another important aspect noticed during the focus group was the access to information and special role played in this regard by local media both in the direction of correct information of citizens as well as for the promotion of involvement by presenting existent initiatives. Some local initiatives had a higher number of adherents and a higher impact, as the case of the trees from the Crisul Repede river bank, also due to support by the local media.

Even if it is considered a matter of social responsibility as well as responsibility towards self, our subjects, mostly the representatives of local initiatives referred also to the relationship with power, local or national institutions, sometimes even to corruption. In this context they noticed also the character of initiatives in Oradea which are rather re-active occurring as a consequence to problems and decisions of local administration contested by citizens.

Another layer of motivations for citizen engagement discussed by our participant referred to the object of the initiative and the identification with this object. In other words it is possible that citizens will avoid engagement in some actions with community benefit when they do not regard the problems addressed as important for them, or when they do not identify with the problem or the representatives of the movement. Another factor presented revealed the fear of involvement on behalf of citizens collaborated with the feeling of lack of power to change things, a problem which could be overcome by improvement of the relationship with local authorities and a better transparency from local leaders.

Conclusions

As a conclusion we will formulate some directions for action considered significant for social learning of active citizenship and promotion of participation:

- there is a higher disponibility for action in the direction of support for others. Consequently, some actions in which it is possible, the involvement of church representatives or using charitable motivations for involvement would probably gain more support for some collective actions.
- The forms of participation which involve the interaction with local authorities have the smallest rates, indicating that this relationship needs to be improved. Nevertheless, our study show that oradean have high rates of trust in the Mayor.
- In order to stimulate the involvement of citizens there is needed a proper formal education which has to transmit all the important information for engagement (civic competencies, duties, legislation), complementary to family education and personal example given by leaders of local initiatives: the promotion of civic values, social responsibility, the creation of a civic consciousness.
- Mass media can be an important factor in the process of social learning of active citizenship through two elements: dissemination of information regarding existent initiatives and information regarding decisions of local authorities, leading to awareness towards civic problems.
- Another aspect derived to some extent from this promotion is the increased awareness of local problems, the prioritization of these problems and thus the increased identification of citizens with these problems (which can be done by mass media, web sites, leaflets, public debates and also by personal communication).
- Raising of trust and improving the relationship between citizens and local authorities, increasing transparency of decisions is an aspect which needs special attention. Though these one can improve the feeling of efficacy and lack of power in from of local authorities and also decreases the fear of involvement by better knowledge of existent actions and their consequence.

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