

ASSOCIATIVE AND VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN ORADEA. A PATH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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In this paper we will investigate the associative and voluntary participation in Oradea, on several levels: the participation rates by citizens, the type of associations in which oradeans participate and the profile of these NGO's. We have collected data both regarding the associative participation from citizens and from associations active in Oradea. All this data is presented in the light of community development and the role citizens through NGO's may play in development.

Keywords: community development, associative participation, non-governmental associations

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Introduction

Community development is a salient element of the political and economic discourse and of the policies promoted within the European Union. It is one of the goals of the EU to develop all its communities as to provide economic sustainability and welfare for all its citizens. Starting with its establishment the European Union has set a goal to sustain the development of its “least favoured regions” (The Treaty establishing the European Community, Title XVII) and the regional policy integrates strategies and instruments to achieve this goal.

Consequently it is important to understand the way different approaches of development take effect in a certain communities, which are the actors and how they act for the benefit of a particular community. Generally we understand community development as the process of planning and implementation of actions which contribute to the welfare of all its citizens. We consider relevant the approaches promoted by the World Bank and their emphasis on the role of social capital in developmental programs (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

In this paper we will first analyze the main theoretical approaches to community development with a special focus on the participatory strategies and the role played by NGOs and voluntary work for the implementation of this approaches. In the empirical section of the paper we investigate the forms of associative and voluntary participation of Oradeans considering an indicator of the role our NGOs may have on development. The final section investigates the main findings and their implications on the way one can understand the effect of NGOs activities and voluntary work have or may have on the development of our community.

Role of NGO's and voluntary service in the community – theoretical introduction

Community development can be best defined as the “orientation of a country / region/ community or institution towards the achievement of a desirable state, set as a goal, through a process planned in tome and realized through a set of actions.” (Zamfir, 2006).

This general view regarding community development emphasizes the fact that it is a planned and consequently coherent and aimed process. The practice shows, in line with this broad definition, that there are different approaches to how a community can be developed depending on its size, its resources, the actors involved, the direct beneficiaries and other factors. We thus can see community development conduced by governmental institutions and agencies with little participation of the final beneficiaries or we can have local initiatives undertaken by a few

stakeholders in a particular context. In other words there are up-to-bottom strategies as well as bottom-up approaches which should be combined and not seen as opposite.

A perspective which brings together the economic and sociological approaches to development is the one focusing on the role of the social networks and the norms of trust and reciprocity of a community. The theories on social capital, as diverse and sometimes confusing, bring strength to the aspects a developmental strategy should consider – the role of the social context, the networks existent in a particular context, the norms and historical ground which define that context, the relations between individuals, and between the community and the state in which a certain actions are intended, all play an important role in the success of those actions.(Woolcock, 1998).

A particular approach to community participation is the participative one, in which the emphasis is put upon the role and forms of citizen involvement in this process

Participative community development, an approach promoted by The World Bank can be defined as “the process through which the interested actors influence and share control over the development initiatives as well as over the resources and decisions which are involved” (Banca Mondială 2006, apud Hatos 2007). In this manner we have a clearer distinction regarding the type of involvement one may expect from citizens, and a better understanding of the sustainability provided by the actual involvement of the collectivity at least as a result of the process of social learning undertaken by them.

D. Sandu defines community participation as the process of engagement by the members of a community in actions “that aim the satisfaction of needs with local character, predominantly local and public” (p. 43). There are several actions as well as different types of actors which may get involved in the general type of processes. The actors of development can be thus distinguished on different levels: political representatives, experts on development, public functionaries and representatives of institutions (public, non-governmental or private), the citizens engaged in the implementation of development programs and the final beneficiaries of these programs which sometimes have a merely recipient role. The role given to each of these actors is determined by the type of programs implemented. Often from the perspective of community development programs the role of the citizen is not clearly defined – we refer to them as beneficiaries and sometimes as active actors solely as participants at public debates - a rather formal role in decision making process regarding the development strategies undertaken by a community. Yet several researches conducted mainly in the tradition started by Putnam, Almond and Verba and others point out the importance of NGOs, local clubs and other types of associational life both for the strength of democracy and the level of development of the community, region or state.

Regarding volunteering, social science researchers have developed two main approaches in order to find reasons for people involved in volunteering. One of them is focused on individual and local resources and points out that people who have more resources (in terms of income, human capital and social) are more involved in voluntary work because they have more to share with others, and because they are more attractive for organizations volunteers.

A second approach gives attention to volunteer’s beliefs and values and emphasizes cultural dimension is more important for voluntary work. Studies that may be included in the first approach have focused on several types of individual or social resources such as capital, human capital, income, etc. Capital is very important to volunteer because it is voluntary participation and cooperation and requires trust in other people.

The involvement and the effects of NGOs as well as voluntary actions in community development depend on several aspects: socio-political context, social support as well as their domain and type of actions initiated (Frazer, 2005). One can not make a clear cut into what is important and what is not regarding the voluntary actions organized by NGOs on community development, mostly as most of their actions are socially oriented on improving the conditions of a group or a whole community. Yet there are several general links we can draw between NGOs and community development:

- NGOs are fundamental elements of civil society which contribute to the strengthening of democracy which has a positive impact on the well-being of citizens,
- They are agents of development through actions with community impact, often voluntary actions with a bottom – up approach,
- NGOs are contexts that stimulate social capital, or considered forms of social capital, which also it is shown to have positive impact on the development o a community.

Voluntary service in Oradea

To highlight the situation of volunteerism, we analyzed the activities of two of the most active volunteer centers in Oradea in 2008: Unique Volunteer Center of the ASCO Oradea (Social Community Administration of Oradea) and a Volunteer Center run by a NGO.

Unique Volunteer Center of the ASCO had 11 major events organized for volunteers. Actions aimed at: young, elderly, youth and adults with mental disabilities, refugees. Involved volunteers are from 36 institutions and NGOs. Their number is about 800 volunteers. Number of volunteer hours is about 2000. Actions have been mostly charitable, philanthropic.

In 2008, an NGO in Oradea which involves volunteers had a total of 33 volunteers registered. The main activities in which they involve volunteers are organization of events, home care services, promote social services. An average monthly active volunteer is 26 persons and the number of recipients of voluntary services is 370 people.

The number of activities in which volunteers were involved, and the large number of hours devoted to volunteer activities, reveals the interest of citizens of Oradea for voluntary actions. In other words, the demands for volunteers in the activities offered by organizations have found the offer and we can predict that this sector can be strengthened by a coherent frame of organization.

To capture the features I had to source volunteer research conducted in the research project funded by the EU Framework Program 5 (Re-Etgace 2004). From interviews with 10 individuals active in public life of Oradea, it shows that community involvement require primarily a mix of qualities of character and a mixture of reason and irrationality, asceticism which in any case cannot be found for all. Characteristics of the assets are, according to respondents: responsibility, perseverance and diligence, commitment, vocation and passion, courage, organizational skills, diplomacy, idealism, naivety, foolishness, self-confidence, etc. In other words, participation is not a matter of skills, competencies, but personality.

Participation in NGOs

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.

For the data presented here we used a data base from the CEEX research grant conducted by conf. univ. dr. A. Hatos with the title "Leaders, participants and viewers. Determinants of community participation in urban Romania". The data is based on questionnaires applied to a random sample of 461 people from different areas of Oradea, in October 2007. In this section we will synthetically present the levels of civic participation on the same data set, considered along with most analysis of this sort, as membership in formal non-governmental organizations.

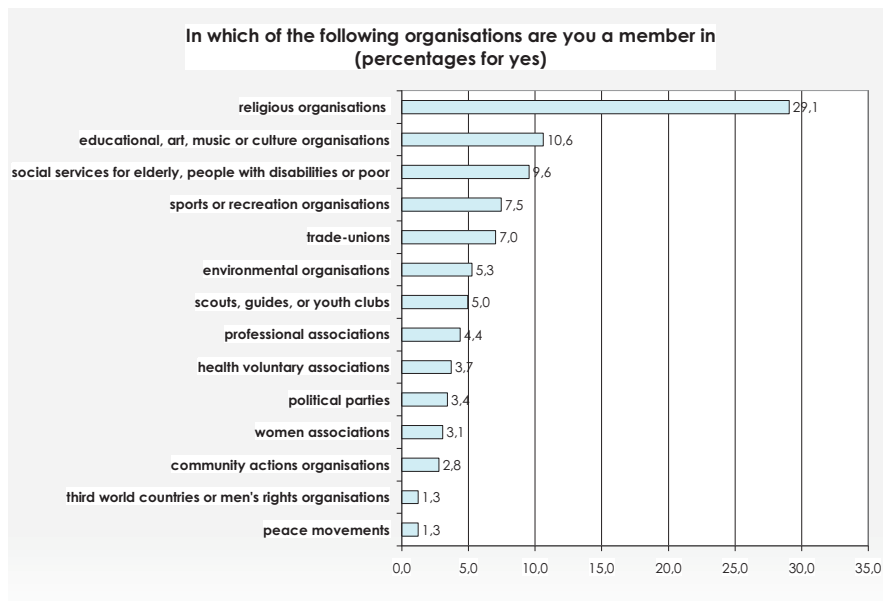


Chart no. 1 – Membership in NGOs

Oradeans are little involved in the NGO sector. The only domain which has an important number of adherents (29%) is the religious one, yet unfortunately we have no data regarding the religious background of our respondents. Less, but still important are the educational, artistic, musical or cultural organizations which also have an important number of adherents, followed closely by the ones dealing with social services for disadvantaged people. These are also the directions in which participation is higher at national level, the domains for civic participation being derived from these domains of activity of these NGOs.

One of the directions which has little public participation are the NGOs dealing directly with “community actions” – only 2.8% declare they are members of such organizations. It is also true that other NGOs may have activities dealing with the development of some sectors of our community yet it is important to see how the members see the profile of their NGO. It is possible that religious NGOs have developmental programs at community level, yet if members identify the NGO as religious rather than its community action profile it shows that their main reason for involvement is not the interest in contributing to community development. Yet these discussions can not be taken further without information regarding the actions organized by these NGOs and qualitative data regarding involvement and participation in NGOs, as it is highly relevant to see how active these respondents actually are in the declared NGOs.

Observing chart number 2, one could say the levels of participation increase inversely with the distance of the beneficiaries of these NGOs: less support is given to peace movements and third world countries and much more to social services for the people close to us. Distinct from this observation would be the community action organizations which on the other hand are only a few active in Oradea, or are not explicitly defined as such. These generalizations can not be made without a relevant analysis on the active NGOs at local level, as well as on the type of actions these NGOs organize at local level.

A complementary information regarding civic participation is provided by the analysis of the type of activity taken by our respondent, for which we have the distinction between voluntary member vs. paid employee of the NGO (see chart no. 2). We assumed that to be employed in an organization entails a more constant and more engaged participation, while being a volunteer proves a certain interest and preoccupation in the specific domain of activity.

From the analysis we found that these two types of involvement are somewhat excluding each other: there are organizations which have rather employees on the one hand, and organizations supported by voluntary work on the other hand, and for one to conclude about the differences one would need an in-depth look of the types of NGOs and the way these are organized. We can only note that there is a more balanced situation in this data set then in the one gathered in the same project one year earlier – when the voluntary work is predominant, and the structure of the distribution of employed vs. voluntary remains mostly unchanged.

Most employees are in peace movements (yet here we have 1.3% of membership, most of whom are paid), and also in women organizations followed by professional associations and trade-unions. For the last two types, especially for professional associations we need to note that there are several such association which are mandatory for the people in the specific profession (such as Doctor’s Colleges, Lawyer’s Association, etc.). Further interpretations can not be made without a close look to the organization profiles in Oradea, including an analysis of the type of services provided by each.

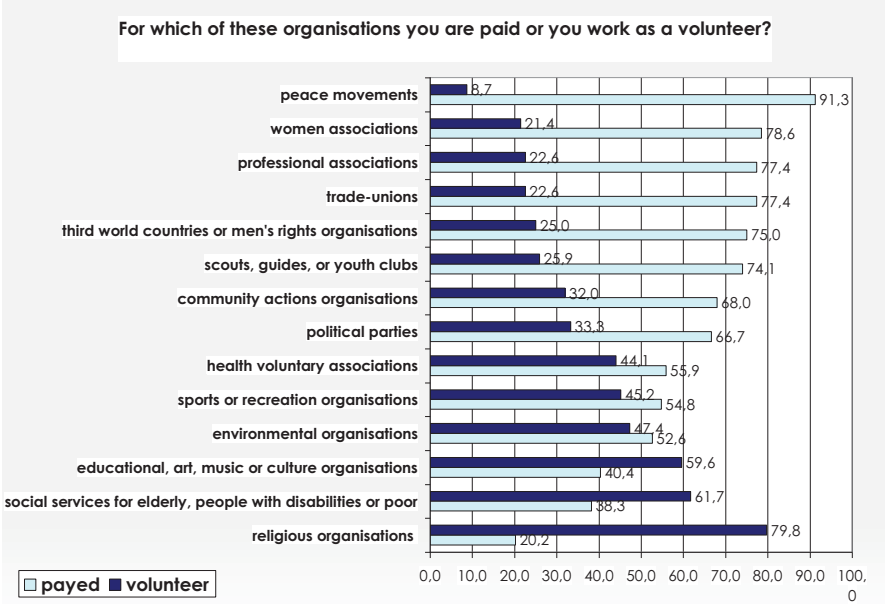


Chart no. 2 – Type of involvement in NGOs

Most voluntary support is given to religious organizations (where only 20% of members are paid), social services organizations and educational, artistic, music and cultural organizations, which are also the ones with most adherents in general. We could conclude that these are domains which trigger the most interest for our subjects which are closely related to community participation. This data also supports the conclusion from the analysis of community participation that our subjects are more opened to charity and help for the needing, mostly when related to church. As seen in chart no. 2 the NGOs dealing with community actions rely more on voluntary support yet have a fairly important paid personnel (22%), yet we should remember that the number of people involved in these NGOs is rather small.

Conclusions

There is a higher interest in involvement in helping others as activities in non-profit sector. The forms of participation which involve actions towards public administration or openly actions with development goals is yet limited in Oradea. These are the actions which should be promoted stronger and be more opened to the large public as areas where the public administration can work together with NGOs at local level in providing a good life and a sustainable development

for the region and the city. It is yet a gap between these sectors which has to be analyzed and understood better, along with making efforts towards collaboration and joint actions.

The implications of NGOs and voluntary work in concrete community development are not as direct nor as explicit as one may expect. The data regarding the rates of participation of citizens in different types of NGOs represent one side of the story and the low levels of participation is an indicator of their limits. More, it is important to acknowledge that the highest support is for the NGOs dealing with religion and support for others which may entail a dependency on behalf of their recipients.

All results show that activism is appropriated mainly by experiential learning (empirical). Citizens should be provided opportunities for better activism thus stimulated, facilitated and become active. This requires incentives for participation, an increasing number of NGOs and their diversification. Moreover, long-term solutions should be created to support the development of various organizations in this area should be allocated adequate resources to facilitate and support best practices in civil society.

Further investigations are needed first as an analysis on the NGO sector in Oradea which would allow more interpretations and generalizations regarding organizational membership presented in this paper, and also analysis of social and cultural capital for our subject which might allow us to test other general theories used in the analysis of engagement in community life. Another important dimension which should be investigated is the impact on community of the community actions undertaken by our subjects if we need to test the relevancy of these actions as opposed to classical civic participation.

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