Community-based local development strategy ─ results of a collaborative decision-making process in the Hungarian public sector

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Abstract

In Hungarian local governing there is an urging need for solutions to ensure the compliance with the legal requirements on the one hand, and the growing community demand for economic development - job creation, better services, healthier living conditions, and a more optimistic vision of the future -, on the other. This study provides the analysis of a recent project involving 77 small communities nationwide in a highly interactive learning experience to facilitate community building and collaborative strategy development. The analysis is based on the empirical evidence of a research carried out in the closing phase of the project.

Keywords: community-based, collaborative, decision-making

Introduction

By the end of the last century several alternative theories of economic policy had been developed in response to the shortcomings of the classical theories. One of them is the theory of the collective (or community) decisions, which is built on the fundamental assumption that the political players tend to behave as rational decision-makers who seek their individual interests and maximize usefulness. While politicians make efforts to maximize their chances for being re-elected, bureaucrats are trying to maximize the budgetary means at their disposal. In this approach citizens are generally passive, and exercise their right to democratic control mainly by voting. The latter is the means of representative democracy in which seeking the public good (commonweal) is not given much space.

However, according to the theory of the deliberative democracy the debate centers on the diverting views and ideas about the public good; the participating citizens are equal and their perceptions and opinions about themselves and the surrounding world are undergoing change in the course of the discussions. In the public debate citizens do not merely express their existing preferences, but also shape their standpoints in the discussion and deliberation. The objective of the public debate is reaching consensus, which is the final outcome of a decision-making process. If there is no consensus, the debate can even be closed by voting.

The result of deliberative democracy can be the creation of an inclusive local government that puts into practice the mechanism of dialogue between local authorities, local organizations, businesses and the members of the local community with the view to innovative and sustainable operation and development. In this process efforts are made to involve the wider possible circle of stakeholders, to address their needs and expectations, and provide better opportunities for the marginalized social groups. An

inclusive local government is acting as a responsible host of the community resources. It implements local strategies and organizes services while reducing poverty and boosting inclusive development. In order to mobilize the social capital, it supports the development and the involvement of the community groups, thus contributing to the improvement of local governance and territorial cohesion. Community-based participatory planning is a crucial element of the practice of inclusive local governing.

Although it seems fairly easy to rely on deliberative democracy in local governing, the implementation proves to be much more difficult, mainly in complex and divided societies. Besides theory, the practical implementation raises several issues and opportunities that result in various diverging solutions. Connecting citizens and local governments in ways that satisfy the changing needs of citizens, thus creating or recreating the sense of community is a big challenge especially in local communities in which there are no established traditions of citizen engagement in local decision-making.

New approach to local community development

The Hungarian Law on Local Governments entering into force in 2011 restructured the public and administrative tasks of local governments, redefined the responsibilities of the state in relation to local communities and the institutional operation of local governments. The jurisdiction and the competence of local authorities have undergone considerable changes since 1 January 2013 when the district government offices were opened as a final phase of a reform process, which started with the establishment of the county government offices.

As the scope of powers of local governments has been considerably restricted in terms of their responsibility for the operation of local institutions and administration, the activities of the mayor's offices have gradually shifted to local community development and city management, business development and community building. In this way the restructured tasks and responsibilities have opened up wider opportunities for local authorities to focus on management practices and the application of deliberative democracy, i.e. the creation of the inclusive and collaborative local government.

Building collaborative community requires "open and shared leadership, support for active citizens, trust in the judgment of nonexperts, motivated local government employee teams, rules for civic engagement, methods and forums for citizen involvement." (Walsh, 1999) To achieve the desired level of community-based local functioning needs considerable changes in attitudes to leadership and decision-making, new knowledge and experience, and often the adoption of out of the box solutions. In order to facilitate the expected changes, a project was developed and implemented in Hungary by the National University of Public Service (NUPS) in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior in 2014-2015 in the framework of a project entitled "Local government training in the convergence regions" funded by the European Union and the Hungarian government.

The project was meant to contribute to the establishment of a new decision-making culture and ultimately the participatory democracy in the practice of Hungarian local governing. Its main objective was to establish a "Local Community Academy" network comprising districts, local municipalities, and economic, cultural and civil organizations. 77 communities with a population size below 5000 were involved in the programme ensuring opportunity for them to work out their community-based local development strategies and to equip them with the competences that ensure the sustainability of the learnt methods and techniques.

The underlying idea of the project dates back to a proposal published in 1941, in which Zoltán Magyary, the most outstanding and internationally recognized researcher of Hungarian public administration initiated the "public administration clearing", a nation-wide network for sharing experiences. Time has proved that the collection and dissemination of best practices are among the most efficient motivators of development.

Present study intends to share the best practices of the project with an international professional audience, and to contribute to the development of innovative and efficient solutions to strengthen democratic local governance.

Project design and methodology

To achieve the set objectives, the NUPS 24-member training staff (including the authors of this study) provided methodological support to local governments and civil organizations in the framework of three workshops held in each local community aiming at the improvement of competences of local municipalities in strategic planning and community building. The methodology of the community-based strategy development was presented and applied. The starting point was the revision and the evaluation of the existing local strategies.

The interactive workshops involved the stakeholders of the local and partner governments, government employees, as well as interested local citizens. They arouse the sense of common responsibility of all the local players for the development of the communities, explored the opportunities and the resources that could be mobilized, and guided the participants through the process of defining the common values, setting the goals and objectives, planning the actions to attain them, and developing the monitoring procedures. The content of the experimental programme covered the following main themes and activities:

- development, piloting and finalization of the recommended framework methodology with special focus on the training methods and techniques to be used at the workshops;
- preliminary analysis of the existing strategic documents and other sources of information by the participants of the Local Government Advisor special study programme of the NUPS (implemented within the same project);
- creation and continuous development of the online knowledge base of the project – HKA-online – as the most widely accessible internet-based resource of theoretical, methodological and practical knowledge for all participants;
- development of the local strategic documents as a result of field work involving 4 lead trainers and 20 trainers, local government advisors, as well as the interested members of the local communities and the editorial groups selected from among themselves;
- closing events providing opportunity for presenting the results of the workshops locally to a wider audience within the community and to invited guests from the neighbouring villages and small cities involving them in group work, relying on their opinions and sharing the experiences with them;
- synthesis and finalization of the methodology of the community-based strategy development based on the experiences of 231 workshops in the participating communities, partly even recorded on the video;
- closing conference for the demonstration of the project results, sharing the experiences and best practices, and introducing the best performing local communities.

The expected specific outcomes affected the following fields:

- training and preparation of community leaders and shareholders for the development of Community-based local strategies;
- preparation of the strategic documents in the participating communities, and the adjustment of the documents to the system of community planning;
- providing practical field assignments in local development for the students of the Local Government Advisor special study programme of the NUPS;
- creation and dissemination of a nationally applicable methodology of community-based strategy development;
- laying the institutional foundations of a local development knowledge sharing network for the regular and systematic collection and dissemination of results.

The empirical research presented in the study was based on document analysis of the training staff's written reports and reflections on their workshop experiences in the 77 participating small communities, in geographically diverse locations throughout Hungary. Diversity was also reinforced by the fact that the population size of the participating communities ranged from slightly over 200 up to 5000, which essentially determine their financial position and development potentials, as well as the access to relevant expertise, and their future prospects.

Research findings

The closing assessment of the project outcomes in the 77 local communities is based on the trainers' reports addressing the following benchmark criteria:

a) the planned process of finalization and approval of the *strategic document* by the local representative body and its incorporation into the local economic development programme;
b) *community building* efforts to be made to ensure the sustainability of the involvement of the strategy-making community core group;
c) providing *publicity* by Internet-based information sharing;
d) *multiplier effect* in relation to neighbouring small communities.

a) *Strategic documents*

Two months after the final workshops slightly over 60% of the participating communities have completed their local development strategies, while the others are still working on the development of the draft strategy produced by the groups during the workshops and further elaborated by the so called editorial committees bearing responsibility for the completion of the written materials.

The performance in this field is of key importance for several reasons. On the one hand local governments could make good use of the product, as they are obliged to adopt their development strategies, and relying on the ideas reflecting the public needs and opinions can make the plans more grounded and the implementation more successful. On the other hand the success or the failure of the efforts invested in the workshops and the common work could have a long-term impact on the support or the rejection of community approach to local decision-making. While the success can

motivate the communities to change their practise and switch to new methods, the failure would transmit a very disappointing message to the larger community.

The trainers monitoring the process of the development of the documents seem to agree on high quality, giving 4.35 average rate on a 5 point scale. Several local government bodies have already adopted their documents, and incorporated them into the local strategy and the budget plan. Wide range of community activities were directly encouraged by the project, for example online needs assessments, organising cultural events, the creation of working groups to help prepare decisions, organising training workshops for civil organisations, the involvement of children and young adults in common thinking about decisions affecting them e.g. the rebuilding of the school yard, etc.

Only very few communities reported that they did not want to rely on the project outcomes at all, mostly because of the low support of the local representatives and the poor quality of the documents. It is highly probable that these reasons have a direct influence on the quality of the outcome. Figure 1 shows the rate of support the project groups received from their local representatives, which is a crucial factor in terms of the adoption and incorporation of the strategic document. The high and average support together amount to slightly over 80%, which seems beneficial for the sustainability of the results and the local attitude to building on public opinion in collaborative decision-making.
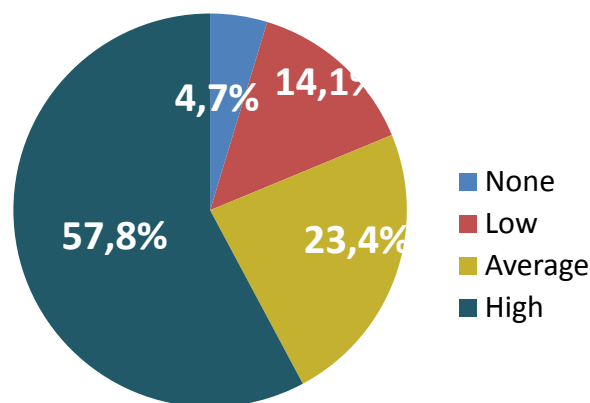

Figure 1 ─ Rate of support given by local government bodies

b) *Community building*

Figure 2 below shows that before the start of the project only less than 8% of the communities had core groups that closely worked with the local government in one or the other field e.g. most frequently organising local events. As a result of the project, community building has gained momentum, and by now more than 70% of the communities can boast of community groups dedicated to continue working, having regular meetings mostly supported by the local government, or in the lack of that based on civil initiatives. Consequently, the impact of the project can be considered very significant on citizen engagement in the majority of the participating communities. Findings also indicate the positive attitude of people and their need for meaningful engagement. These community groups primarily intend to improve and follow up their strategic documents, but they also plan to come up with new ideas indicating that during the project months they developed a strong sense of responsibility for local community

affairs. More than 60% of the groups expressed their need for further cooperation with the trainer and further support from the University to help sustain the results.
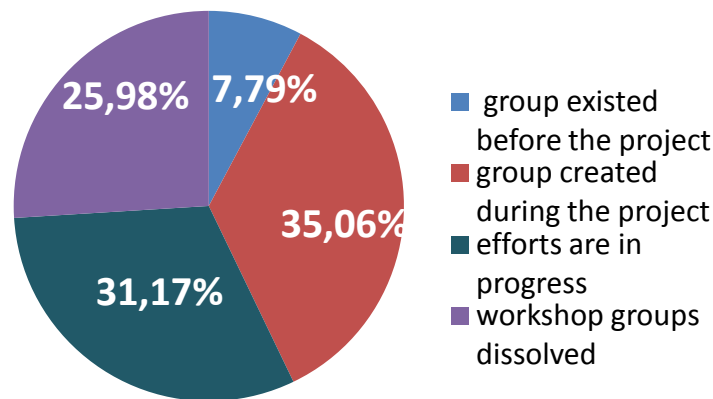

Figure 2— The development of community groups

Experience shows that community building was most successful in places where the mayor or the notary, i.e. the most influential local leaders were active participants of the workshops, and the local governments acted as good hosts of the project.

In the period between the application for the participation in the project, and the commencement of the workshops local government elections took place in the country, the outcomes of which sometimes negatively influenced the dedication of a local government, where the new mayor opposed or at least did not support the project. This can be the explanation for the remaining 30% of the communities that did not seem to benefit from the offered opportunities. These are the same ones where the quality of the documents did not meet the expected standards either.

c) Publicity

Spreading new communication techniques and efficient ways to inform the public was an important aim of the project. 22% of the participating governments opened new
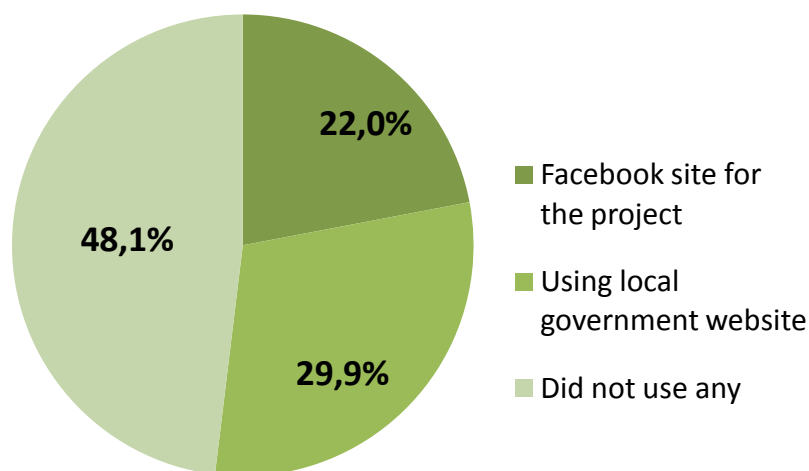

Figure 3 — Using the Internet for sharing information

Facebook sites for the purposes of the project, while almost 30% of them used their existing websites to share up-to-date information about the project (invitation to workshops, photos, online needs assessments, project documents, presentations, comments). However, almost half of the communities did not rely on the Internet at all, which restricts their means to traditional ways of communication: personal discussions, mailshots or posters placed in public places.

d) Multiplier effect on the neighbouring communities and overall outcomes

Our project findings coincide with earlier experiences indicating that the sense of partnership in most local players is too weak; they do not believe in partnerships that can result in mutual benefits. The competitive approach is more frequent, which is the reason for the refusal of neighbourhood cooperation, not realising their common interest in the higher potential to have access to resources. In the series of three workshops held in each community, the final one was meant to present the project results to both local people and to invited guests from neighbouring villages. It is difficult to say if the 40% interest was due to deliberate negligence on behalf of the invited people or simply the lack of invitation. However, 26 villages and small cities have already expressed their interest in joining the project, which is quite a promising prospect for the future.
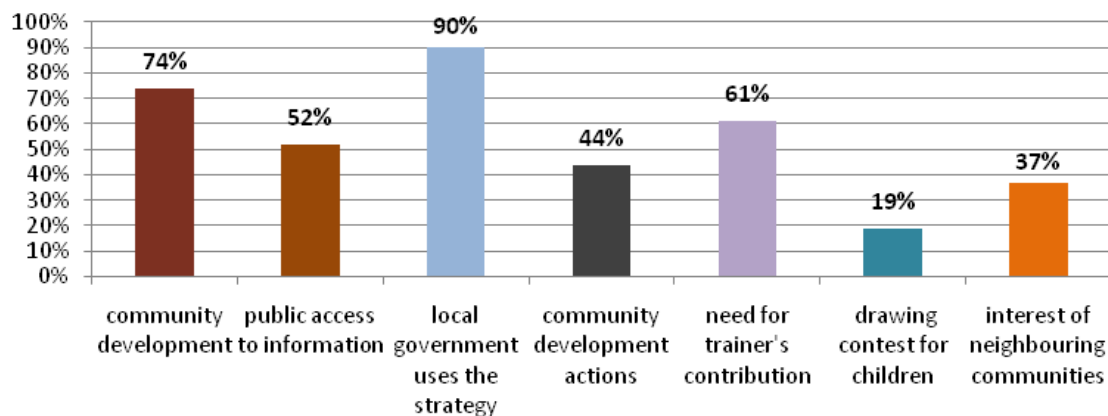

Figure 4 ─ Benefits of the project

Figure 4 above shows the most important benefits the responding communities associate with the impact of the project. Data indicate that the utilization of the strategic document, which was the primary tangible objective of the project, was attained in the majority of the communities. Considerable development was made in community building, too. The relatively high need for the trainers' further help proves the popularity and the acceptance of the interactive training methodology and group work as the means and a suitable way of sharing opinions and coming to common conclusions. Based on the findings it is evident that the public access to information and the application of the social media and Internet-based solutions have to be improved a lot. Backwardness is often due to low level infrastructure in small communities, but digital illiteracy of the older generation is also an important shortcoming hampering information flow.

Conclusion

Facilitating long-term strategic decision-making and dedication to partnership building, benefiting from best practices, engaging local citizens, grass-root organizations, and local stakeholders in long-lasting cooperation are even beyond the extent prescribed by law. Engagement has to occur in a phase of decision-making when stakeholders' opinions can be still heard and listened to, and there is an opportunity for intervention and reaching a consensus.

Svara and Denhardt argue that besides the normative value of citizen engagement, i.e. to develop the sense of belonging to the community and prepare people to become responsible citizens who can exercise their democratic rights, it is also a "smart thing" to benefit from it as the complexity of local issues needs the invaluable input of the people directly or indirectly affected by these decisions. They warn that the lack of community cooperation in decision-making can easily result in the lack of community support and the ultimate failure of the planned solutions. (Svara and Denhardt, 2000) Therefore, it is not sufficient to ask for opinion at the planning stage; it is also important to inform the public, and create the opportunity for the delegates of the local community to make comments, and partly or fully supervise the implementation processes.

Nowadays dedication to the principle of citizen engagement is almost essential for the efficient operation of local governments and public institutions. On the one hand adequate time has to be devoted to make these processes work, on the other hand the trustworthy attitude of the leaders and their community support are the preconditions of participatory democracy. If people interested in and affected by local problems are given better insight into the matters and gain better understanding of the complex issues, they will become more supportive and more dedicated to seek solutions to the problems.

As a result of the programme, the policy recommendation of the European Union on the community-led local decision-making and development has been met, and the relevant experiences can be disseminated. Nevertheless the project was merely the first step on the way of provide small communities with a feasible model for collaborative decision-making, and it is the shared responsibility of all the partners involved to be dedicated to seeking innovative ways to improve, develop and extend the scope and the overall outcomes.

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