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PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND GOOD GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FOUNDING

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between participatory research, the principles of governance and the scientific founding of local development. Following a short analysis of heuristic and practical qualities of participatory research, the study summarises some of the fundamental issues presented in the White Paper on European Governance. This document is of high importance for all levels of governance, starting with local to national and European governance. In order to further explore this issue, the study will focus upon a series of previous researches in which we used the restoring of results, as a basic participatory research instrument in the research previously carried out.

Key-Words: Participatory research, Principles of governance, Restoring of inquiry results, Local development founding.

Introduction

The starting point for understanding good governance is European Governance. A White Paper (2001). According to the White Paper, there are some proposals for member states to get more involved in shaping the EU policies. This document promotes greater openness, accountability and responsibility for all those involved, emphasizing the fact that acting together is what generates force and effectiveness. (White Paper on European Governance, 2001).

However, governance issues at different levels – a constant and recent concern for both practitioners and scientists – involve participatory research. This is especially due to the complexity of such problems in which economic, social, and profound human aspects interfere.

Based on the assumption that research is the production of knowledge, Oquist links the concept of research to those of action, policy and practice. Oquist has written that action is the deliberate change of a certain reality. This action involves consequences that change a specific reality, regardless of whether the action is successful or not in order to modify the reality under discussion towards a given direction. Policy is made up of needs and interests, values and norms, results and objectives, plans and programmes, operations, evaluations and resources concerning a given or a potential action. Practice is a policy and action in the context of determined processes and structures, both being acted upon and conditioning the results of actions. He has linked the four concepts and in this way identified the following types of research: descriptive research, political research and action research. Descriptive research delineates the phenomena of incidents and events typology. Political research is the production of knowledge that guides practice, while changing a given reality, but takes place independently and generally subsequent to the process of research. (Oquist, 1978, pp. 144-145). Action research “is the production of knowledge which guides practice, with changes of a given reality, which takes place as part of the research process”. (Oquist, 1978, p. 145).

In a study about the models and action-oriented research, Stephan A. Small described four situations: action research, participatory research, empowerment research and feminist research. Small considered that action research is perhaps the most widely used out of the four models,. From a historical point of view, Small notes that participatory research was associated to the economic field and to organizational development, but more recently this approach has been used by specialists from other fields such as education, agricultural innovation and human development. (Small, 1995, pp. 941-942). Based on such considerations, this study aims to link, at a conceptual level, the participatory research and the governance principles. We intend to put forward the possibility to support better implementation of the principles of good governance through participatory research as the basic form of action research.

We rely on the fact that, essentially, participatory research, which is at the same time intervention too, can have practical results including in the field of good governance. Among the principles of good governance, this study focuses upon the principle of participation, considered a transversal principle that is essential for all others: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, coherence. (European Governance. A White Paper, 2001, p. 10).

Participatory Research and the Principles of Good Governance

Participatory Research

As previously stated, participatory research represents a fundamental component of action research, even if at times it is treated as one of its particular forms. Action research is frequently linked to social change. According to Senn, the most frequently used terms to define research which aims to change the societal situations, are those of action research, participatory research and activist research. (Senn, 2005, p. 357).

Argyris and Schön consider participatory action research as a form of action research which involves practitioners both as subjects and co-researchers. (Argyris, Schön, 1989, p. 613). According to Dentith and his colleagues, participatory research is based on collective investigations, native knowledge, community policies and collective action. (Dentith, Measor, O'Malley, 2009, p. 158).

Fox makes a reference to collaborative action research and its benefits. According to him, action research is seen as ethic and political engagement in practice. The practitioners' engagement generated what Fox calls collaborative action research, which can: 1) bring together people with diverse abilities and knowledge; 2) demystify the research process, allowing the practitioners to identify the process of data collection; 3) build a research capacity in a community which can act independently; 4) increase the chance for practitioners to use the results and 5) improve the quality of research through facilitating access to key entities which hold knowledge in a community. (Fox, 2003, pp. 83-84). It is utterly important to point out the principles underlying participatory action research as signalled by McIntyre: 1) collective engagement to investigate the problem; 2) engagement desire in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity on the issue under scrutiny; 3) a common engagement decision into collective and individual actions which will lead to useful solutions, beneficial to those involved; 4) development of alliances between researcher and participants in planning, implementation and dissemination of the research project. (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1).

In promoting participatory research, we have implemented and perfected along time an important instrument, i.e. the restoring of results. The research methodology was based on inquiry (questionnaire-based) and the restoring of results obtained from it. Bergier defined restoring of results as: "That action or dynamics through which the researcher shares with his field interlocutors, for ethical and/or heuristic purposes the provisional and /or final results of data collection in order to analyse them." (Bergier, 2000, p. 8). The ethical and heuristic objectives of our study derive from Bergier's theory. We could even go further and speak, according to these objectives, about a restoring as gift or ethical restoring, and a restoring as knowledge, or heuristic restoring. The restoring of results, in its turn, was organised as individual restoring (through a interview guide) and collective restoring (through the focus group technique). Practically, in both cases, the data obtained through inquiry was presented (restored) and submitted to analysis to local stakeholders. As the study will show later on, there may be a strong instrumental connection between participatory research (through restoring of results) and good governance, especially due to the principle of participation, a central principle of good governance. In terms of collective restoring, we have based our study primarily on two experiments, along with the research determining the way management principles apply to a local level in Romania. The first experiment was part of EUGENIA (Buciuman & Pascaru, 2003; Pascaru, 2006) - a European project of local development in the micro-region Livezile-Rimetea. This region was subject to a new research some years later and some of the results will be presented below In this case the research data were presented at a public reunion with the

inhabitants of the region, local authorities, representatives of the county authorities, internal experts and the EUGENIA projects managers. A series of results for the inquiry were subjected to discussion while targeting the following dimensions: 1) personal and family issues; 2) specific problems of the entire micro- region; 3) ecological issues (related to the water supply, sewage and residual waste disposal); 4) the main fields of activity that could develop in the micro-region; 5) inter-communal collaboration. (Pascaru & Butiu, 2007). The discussion focused mainly on environmental and taxation issues. It was the first time that the local authorities became acquainted, from a scientific perspective, with the inhabitants' opinions regarding the main issues and the first time they could publicly discuss possible solutions. The interventions of the County Council have stated the legal context for solving these issues and also the limitations of the County's contribution. The European representatives involved in the coordination of the EUGENIA project shared the sociologists' view concerning the persistence of a mind-set where the state holds all responsibility and, as a result, it has all the solutions. There is a certain amount of hostility towards a development strategy based on projects as opposed to one imposed by the government, which was a specific trait of the communist regime. The few entrepreneurial initiatives were appreciated by the audience, but in turn the entrepreneurs were complaining about excessive taxation. The solution of inter-communal collaboration was yet another innovation to be received with a certain amount of hostility. Moreover, in a seminar for the restoring of results organized in Valisoara on August 25, 2002, the solution based on inter-communal collaboration was better defined, even though it was faced with certain tensions from the commune Livezile. The most hostile villages towards the centre-village were Izvoarele and Valisoara, the two villages our research was based upon, which wanted a closer collaboration with the neighbouring commune.

In the second experiment, the data was presented at the beginning of a meeting organised by the Local Council, in a commune that was subject to a series of sociological investigations, which also included the topic of inhabitants' participation to public meetings. 71,4% had stated that they would take part in meetings where major decisions regarding the community are to be discussed. It was shown that the town councilmen and the mayor of Albac did not reject the idea, but they pointed out a number of possible barriers at an organizational and socio-psychological level. As such, the mayor of the commune noted: "It is a good idea to consult the population when there are decisions to be made at a local level; a great idea even! However, I do not believe the final decision should belong to the population... So many minds, so many ideas... So many minds, so many interests!" (Mayor, Albac). A councilman noted that taking decisions at a town meeting is useful, but people would not come: "I would be good; because we have come across situations where no decision seemed to be the right one. People would not understand the way the law works and what the interests of the commune as a whole are. They can only understand the immediate benefits and the group interests [either political or business groups]. As such, if the place for meetings will be the centre then it would be a good idea to consult the entire population, in order to avoid the impression that councilmen take the decisions according to

their own interests. But if 70% have to attend... It is hard to gather the councilmen..." (Local councilman I, Albac).

A general observation was also noted: "I do not believe that the Romanian population is prepared for something like this... It's not ready! Admittedly, there is not much to be expected after 10-20 years of democracy" (Local councilman II, Albac).

There are two main points that need to be made at the end of this paragraph. The first one refers to the fact that even though we wanted to determine some changes in the attitude of the people involved in the presentation of results, public authorities and/or citizens, there has never been an evaluation of the amplitude of the changes. In a research-participative action this is compulsory. The second point refers to research deontology. As mentioned previously, instead of tightening the cohesion of the community, our research, and the public presentation of its results in particular, have deepened the previous problems of the bonds, and increased the risk of stimulating a local conflict. Nevertheless, the necessity of a more comprehensive series of research upon a good government and its principles was obvious from the very beginning of this investigation.

Principles of Good Governance

The White Paper on European Governance explains the principles which underpin good governance in order to obtain the changes aimed for: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. Each principle is important for establishing democratic governance. The principles apply to all levels of government: global, European, national, regional and local. (European Governance. A White Paper, 2001, p. 10).

The main idea of openness is that institutions should work in a more open manner, should actively disseminate their activity and the decisions they take; they should use accessible language to reach the general public. All these actions help to improve the confidence in complex institutions. The participation principle represents the insurance of wide participation in the policy chain (from conception to implementation), assuring high quality and effectiveness of policies. Wide participation ensures more confidence in the end result and the institutions. It is of extreme importance to have clear roles in the legislative and executive processes. Each institution must explain and take responsibility for its actions. This is the accountability principle. Effectiveness involves timely policies, clear objectives, objective evaluation of future impact and past experiences. Effectiveness also depends on taking decisions at the most appropriate level.

According to the coherence principle policies and action must be both coherent and easily understood. Coherence requires political leadership and a strong responsibility on the part of the institutions to ensure a consistent approach within a complex system. These principles must be seen as part of a whole, each having its own importance. They cannot be achieved through separate actions, only by common participation. Policies can no longer be effective unless they

are prepared; thus, according to the White Paper, before launching an initiative in this area, there are three essential aspects to be taken into account: 1. Is public action really necessary?; 2. Is the territorial level the most appropriate one?; 3. Are the chosen measures proportionate to those objectives? (European Governance. A White Paper, 2001, pp. 10-11).

Participatory Research and Governance in Local Development

A first aspect regarding the connexions between participatory research and the principles of good governance is the development through participatory research.

But what would be the relationship with the principles of good governance?

The model of good governance is magnificent in its theoretical construction, but its application is often problematic. The implementation of the principles of governance represents a major social problem in itself, which generates other social problems which may result from the inefficiency of governance. For the purposes of this research, we have studied this aspect in connexion with the implementation of the principle of participation at the local level of governance. (Pascaru & Butiu, 2007; Pascaru & Butiu, 2010). Our research used the participatory research method and the restoring of results technique. Through participatory research, we identified a series of specific issues which function as barriers for the implementation of the principle of participation: "1) the citizens' indifference to the actions of local government; 2) the local government's lack of interest in stimulating participation; 3) the lack of courage to express opinions and make requests; 4) the fact that debates at the level of the local administration do not have any practical outcome; 5) the fact that group decisions made under conditions of extreme diversity of opinion and attitude cannot be trusted; 6) the communities' political divisions and 7) the lack of democratic practice as a result of a long period of communism." (Pascaru & Butiu, 2010, p. 504).

Despite all difficulties, the need for participation, associated with the need of respect for the other governance principles, is a major need for the local development in Romania, and not only, if we want development to be sustainable. According to Kumar, "Governments, financing agencies, donors, civil society actors including NGOs and multifunctional agents such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund came to the conclusion that development cannot be sustainable and long-lasting unless the people's participation is part of the development process." (Kumar, 2007, p. 23).

This is also evident from the research carried out in the micro-region Livezile-Rimetea. Situated in the northern part of the county of Alba, with villages spread across a distinct geographic unit (Trascau Depression; The Apuseni Mountains, west of Transylvania), the micro-region comprises two communalities: Livezile (with the villages Livezile, Izvoarele, Poiana Aiudului and Valisoara) and Rimetea (with the villages Rimetea and Coltesti). Between the two

communities there are some major differences for the local development. Livezile consists of a larger number of

villages, but with a lower average number of inhabitants and households per village (1526 total inhabitants in 584 households from 4 villages comparing Rimetea which has 1213 total inhabitants in 496 households from 2 villages). Rimetea has an ethnic majority of Hungarians (87.3%) while in Livezile 98.7% of the inhabitants are Romanian. Both in Livezile and in Rimetea there was a low employed population (80 people in Livezile and 110 in Rimetea) and the inhabitants' main source of income was livestock and the cultivation of wheat, rye, maize, vegetables and fruits. In Rimetea (agri)tourism and related activities (arts and crafts, trade, tour guiding) brought substantial income, while in Livezile, a region with an equally important tourist potential, this source of income was less exploited. The Hungarian population from Rimetea were more active in developing their own business and attracting funds from private sources (foundations from Hungary, in particular), while the Romanian population from Livezile accessed more public funds from the Romanian Government and the European Union.

Despite these differences, many local problems were common to both communalities. Thus, at the time of research, 47.5% of the inhabitants considered that the major problem in the village was the bad roads; for 19.7%, it was water supply and sewage; 4.9%, complained about the lack of employment opportunities and 2.7%, emphasized the bad waste management. "Another problem" was the answer for 20.8% of the respondents. In 87.4% of the cases it was appreciated that the problem mentioned affected directly the respondent's household. These results were presented, with the purpose of developing participatory research in a series of restoring interviews. The interviews were made alongside local representatives from administrative, economic or religious sector. The restoring interviews are based on a set of questions comprising the following: How do you see the evolution of solving the problems of your village? How could be improved citizens' participation in the problem solving process?

The issue of governance was invoked in the answers, from the very outset, with direct relation to the infringement of the principle of efficiency in local governance: "[The problems] will be solved if the modus operandi at the Village Hall changes... People are disappointed that nothing is resolved. That is why people lack interest; because their problems are not solved." (Local councilman I); "I said it before and I repeat it that we should get more involved. Not just go there and chat for two hours and decide nothing... just drink a glass of beer, and some refreshment, get our meeting indemnity and leave the hall. In my opinion, as I said before, you are not a mayor for eight hours; you are a mayor for twenty-four hours a day. This is what I say myself: I am not a local councilman for an hour a month or two hours per meeting, I am a councilman for the entire month." (Local councilman II).

The low citizen participation could be improved, according to local leaders, by stimulating communication in all possible ways: “There should be posters on display, flyers could be distributed to people’s homes, and they could be encouraged to participate in the next meeting where issues pertaining to the public interest will be discussed. People do not help due to the lack of communication. They [people from the Town Hall] do whatever they do for themselves and afterwards, time allowing, might do something for the citizen.” (Local councilman, Livezile); “I said it before that we should make some questionnaires about problems, that I should administer from door to door, and just ask people: hey, what do you think we should do?” (Local councilman, Rimetea).

Moreover, participation seemed to entail, in the interviewers’ opinion, profound changes at the level of the population, even changes in the age structure of the population: “You can’t change the people in this village because they won’t see.. They can’t see anything around them. They were raised like this; one can’t change them at this age. The youth billow much easier, like a cane...” (Entrepreneur).

However, one of the religious representatives of the community believed that local governance should abide by the principle of transparency, hence his more optimistic outlook: “Little by little everything will settle down. The local administration is more open. They listen to citizen’s problems. Little by little they will do everything. It is just that one cannot work as quickly as people want...” (Priest). Transparency would be a first step towards stimulating participation, if communication were better, if the elect were more active in ensuring a connection between citizens and the institutions of local governance. Save that, according to the religious leader, the councilmen were only nominal (by name only) and not real leaders in their communities. An old mentality, inherited from the communist governance, in which the principle of local accountability was basically non-existent, was still salient. It concerns the dependence on state resources and expectations concerning this dependence: “...People don’t get involved... they expect everything from the state. That is how we were accustomed...” (Local councilman).

The rule of public meetings seemed to be a solution for stimulating citizens’ participation: We need to hold a community meeting with people at least quarterly... The mayor, the vice-mayor and all councilmen need to be present and everyone who attends should share his problems! Unfortunately, this way, when you meet somebody in the street, there is nothing you can do.” (Local councilman, Rimetea).

An unexpected and extremely forceful solution came from a councilman in Rimetea and it concerns the division of the communality apparently because of the infringement of the principles of transparency and coherence in this communality: “The former mayor transferred the funds for Rimetea towards Coltesti. He lived there... Now even if the current mayor tries to do the same thing it we won’t allow it... What was meant for Rimetea should stay in Rimetea, what was meant Coltesti should stay in Coltesti. Until the year 1962-1965 we belonged to Cluj county

... In order to avoid these problems, ... people were wondering what could be done for Rimetea to be re-included in the county of Cluj and for the village Coltesti to remain in Alba county ... This is the wish of Rimetea's inhabitants... In terms of inhabitants, Coltesti outnumbers Rimetea. Any elections, even in ten years' time, will be won over by them. Rimetea will lag behind 50 years comparing to the village Coltesti... Rimetea was a mining town, Coltesti was just a farmers' village and now they try to get all funds and that is why the inhabitants of Rimetea want to separate from Coltesti." (Local councilman).

In terms of citizens' participation, another difficult solution has been put forward: "They need to be summoned by the police to attend this or that meeting... Whether you want to or not, you have to be present, even if under protest. Afterwards they take it in their stride." (Entrepreneur).

Conclusions and openings

As this research showed, many of the principles of good governance were not respected from the very level of the territory in question. The method leading to this result holds a value, in itself: this study used the restoring interviews, as instruments of participatory research. Moreover, through our very research we stimulated participation, raising the awareness of local leaders involved in different types of governance as to the problems signalled by inhabitants. These problems are unlikely to have reached the leaders' ears, particularly because of the defective way in which local governance functions. This is what we once called "a secondary, sociologically driven participation" (Pascaru & Butiu, 2010, p. 505).

Other results, brought by restoring, particularly to the religious officials' attention, were those concerning the role of religion in determining participation at local level. However, these results were treated in a different study (Pascaru & Butiu, 2009), briefly referred to here. The discussions involved both citizens who participated in the inquiry and representatives of local and county governance. The principle of participation was implemented, however, without sustainability. The meeting organised for the restoring of results ended up in a series of dangerous discussions concerning the separation of a few villages from Livezile, and the affiliation to the neighbour village of Rimetea, a more developed one. On the other hand, shown from the restoring of results from more recent research, territorial separation has been brought forward, this time referring to Rimetea. It ensues that the introduction of participation in governance, and implicitly, the implementation of the principles of good governance with the help of participatory research instruments, entail a series of risks that need to be addressed from a deontological perspective as well. However, the existence of such risks should not impede but reinforce the idea that good governance to the benefit of local development finds in participatory research a possible keystone, both seminal and thorough.

Out of the most important prospects of the analysis perspective set forth and exemplified in this study, we have to emphasize the close connection to what is known today as territorial intelligence. Territorial intelligence, in Jean-Jacques Girardot's definition, is founded upon six

ethical and methodological principles, the first of which is the partnership principle. The ethical principles of territorial intelligence can be identified, in Girardot's opinion with the principles of sustainable development: 1) participation of all players involved in the development - first and foremost, that of the citizens; 2) a global approach towards the issues, characterized through an appropriate balance of the economic, social and environmental aspects; and 3) a partnership between the players. There are three methodological principles associated with the above mentioned ones to guarantee their application in practice: 1) approaching the territory as an action space; 2) generalising the development through projects and evaluation; 3) developing accessibility policies for the information society technologies. Alone the definition of these principles can make us see the multiple connections with the principles of good governance and the perspectives of e-government as a better chance of applying them. The bigger challenge is, of course, that of developing a more comprehensive series of research in this case. Before all else, this is a challenge for contemporary sociology and her constructivist and functionalist paradigms.

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