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Participatory Budgeting: Action Research Procedures in Community Work

Abstract

Implementation of actions based on consensus and social dialogue builds a proper climate for cooperation among all social forces in order to solve a given problem or achieve a definite goal, also at local community level (Cohen, 1978; Ross, 1967).

One of the manifestations of the practical implementation of the concept of participatory democracy and civil dialogue at the local community level, are actions within assumptions of participatory budgeting which may be defined as a form of "collective" decision-making process, within the framework of which, the inhabitants along with the local authorities co-create the city budget (Ganuza, Baiocchi, 2012; Górski 2007).

A specific method that enables the checking of the level of willingness of members of a community to undertake common project actions is a participating intervention research. Planning extensive and costly environmental projects such as revitalization projects, should be preceded with implementation of a participatory budget according to methodology of participating intervention research.

Introduction

Community work is defined as a process in which the community specifies its needs or goals, establishes its hierarchy, and deploys its inherent resources that would meet these needs and objectives, and by appropriate action sets out to expand and improve attitudes and practices of cooperation and collaboration in that community (Cohen, 1978; Ross,

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1967; Rothman, Tropman, 1987; Haynes, Holmes, 1994; Wódz, Kowalczyk, 2014). Due to the high degree of complexity of these types of projects and the need to mobilize large forces and resources, we may assume that the level of engagement of community members towards activities within a particular project usually determines its effectiveness. Local Community Organization should involve the citizens in joint activities to change the unfavourable state of affairs from the outset of the project planning until its final evaluation. Participation of the citizens in actions undertaken, whether financial or decision-making, whether associated with contribution in labour or of social issues, encourages the activation of citizens, thus building a sense of belonging and responsibility for the implementation and results of the project. It seems to be reasonable to examine the potential engagement of community members before the implementation of it.

The challenges of community work in excluded communities

In most cases, the activities connected with the Organization of a Local Community are taken in the communities that would be called multi-problem, especially if an initiator and main executor of such activities is local authorities or institutions subordinate to them. The development of such activities was observed in recent years in various Operational Programmes defining the rules of expending funds from the European Social Fund at the central or regional level. In most cases, these programmes were dedicated to groups and environments being at risk of social exclusion or excluded. In Weil's typology (2005), we can find a model of Community social and economic development, which refers to a group of people in a particular locality being characterised by a form of social or economic discrimination. The undertaken actions encourage poor and marginalised communities to take social and economic initiatives, which constitute the basis for economic development of these groups of people and at the same time lead to the improvement of economic or social conditions of their inhabitants (Weil, 2005). In such models of community work, particular emphasis is put on understanding of local conditions affecting the social relations, and the relation of the residents to the local authority and its activities (see: Mandrysz, Perlinski, Evertsson, 2017).

As it was mentioned before, the level of effectiveness of such activities depends mainly on the involvement of inhabitants – their belief that the given project may satisfy (at least to some extent) their individual needs and that it is good for the community. The second element is the way that the role of inhabitants was defined at the stage of planning the project actions. Are they

active entities or passive consumers/beneficiaries of taken actions? It may be assumed that it depends on the way of comprehension of Organization of Local Community, but also on actual relationships and social divisions resulting from the position of particular groups and communities making up the social structure of a given city/locality. At the local level, informal relationships and connections between specific groups will be of basic importance, within which cooperation, exercising power or having impact on authorities and decisions, will guarantee the maintenance of a specific system. Therefore, these groups will be more privileged than groups that don't have such options.

Local communities forming enclaves of poverty usually don't have too much impact on political decisions at the level of cities/towns. The inhabitants of these communities usually are not involved in local political life, including participation in local elections. Therefore, they have limited impact on making decisions and they are not a potential electorate for the governments. These environments, from the perspective of local government budgets, belong to a category of costs due to social welfare provided to their inhabitants or unprofitable housing resources. "Investments" in these areas and their inhabitants are often perceived as a "waste of public money".

The inhabitants of these areas very often verbalize directly their dislike for local authorities, blaming them for lack of investment and renovation negligence for these areas, for the creation of a "ghetto", where, due to rent debts, "the worst element" is exiled (the inhabitants who remember better times of their districts usually mention this). There are also people who were "exiled" and who are not able or do not want to integrate with new environment, blaming both authorities and social services for their bad situation. Such tensions and more or less open conflicts constitute the social background and context of political decisions, distribution of goods and the whole government process. It may be assumed that there is domination and hegemony of local authority attention to interest groups, located in "better" districts, wealthier or at least less "costly" ones; with local government supporting and getting support from these groups and formal and informal relationships resulting from it, and positions communities of enclaves of poverty in a specific way and consolidates their economic, political and social exclusion (see: Mandrysz, Perlinski, Evertsson, 2017: 179–181).

As it was stated by Mayo:

community workers need to have knowledge and understanding of the socio-economic and political backgrounds of the areas in which they work, including knowledge and understanding of political structures and relevant organizations and resources in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. And they need to have knowledge and understanding of equal opportunities policies and practice, so they can apply these effectively in every aspect of their work (Mayo, 1994: 74).

Action research – specific participatory research and activating procedure

As it was mentioned before, extensive projects, that is, the activities related to Organization of a Local Community, require the potential of involvement of inhabitants of a given community. The development of a project, preceded with in-depth analysis, taking preparatory actions, etc. are both time-consuming and expensive. Therefore, looking for the ways of optimization of chances of their realization seems to be legitimate. It requires not only the acquisition of good knowledge about capabilities and resources of the relevant institutions, which will be responsible for their realization, but also to determine the willingness of inhabitants to become involved in such actions. Therefore, before realization of complicated, long-term and expensive projects, taking actions that require a lower amount of effort and means seems to be rational, which will enable both instigators of a project-institutions and organizations involved in them-and members of the community, to check the potential of all these partners to cooperate.

A specific method to check the level of willingness of members of community to undertake common project actions is a research procedure, which is connected with making changes. In the subject literature, this type of research is called action research – research through actions, or participatory intervention research. On the one hand, it is a more or less specified research procedure, and on the other hand, is a broad research orientation that consists of many procedures of both quantitative and qualitative character. However, the basic assumption is that action research/intervention research is connected with examination of real and not abstract practices. It assumes learning about real, specified practices concerning specific people in specific places (see: Kemmis, McTaggart, 2014).

The key feature of this process is its cyclical, spiral, recurring character: (planning – action and observation – reflection – change/adaptation – action and observation – reflection – change/adaptation – action). Such procedure assumes that we should act in accordance with a previously defined plan; however, it is constantly monitored and considered whether the effect of the actions was in accordance with the plans, and if they are not, how changes are introduced to the next cycle of actions, which is monitored, etc.

The main assumption of this theoretical approach suggests that in these actions, the researchers and inhabitants should have equal roles of cooperating researchers, who develop a common plan for the research process, then execute it, constantly controlling (evaluating) its course and obtained results, share their experiences and reflections, and analyse and mutually assess their vision of desired changes and propositions of

solutions (see: Wyka, 1985 follow: Wódz, 1998: 156). Of course this kind of assumption seems to be very idealistic especially if we compare the social status, resources, knowledge etc. of these two parties. However, to achieve the best possible results, the researcher, who is in a privileged position in this relation, should try to create circumstances as close to this assumption as it is possible.

Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (2014) distinguished 7 characteristics of intervention research. With reference to Organization of Local Community, they may be presented in the following way:

- It is a social process that helps people to understand, both in the individual and social spheres, how they are shaped in the course of socialization and changed as a result of social influences and how they can improve these factors and relationships.

A team of members of communities, local institutions and organizations taking part in participatory intervention research may define shared values and norms, traditions of the members of community, dominant socialization mechanisms, etc. Action research shows the impact of the above-mentioned elements on mutual relationships of the members of community and their potential to cooperate, which may be used in future projects.

- Full participation of a group of people involved in it is assumed and they, as researchers and subjects analyse their (individual and collective) knowledge – the ways of comprehension of skills and values or interpretative categories. It allows them to understand how their own knowledge forms their sense of identity and subjectivity, as well as limitations resulting from it.

The members of the community examine the environment of their life and themselves. On the one hand, it allows them to better and more quickly identify the ways of comprehension and interpretation of some issues by a given community, on the other hand, it allows the uncovering of unconscious social processes arising from shared convictions, which constitute a barrier or basis for limitations in actions.

- This type of research is practical and based on cooperation. Involving people in the process of verification of social practices and processes of social interactions enables the understanding of communication practices and other social practices experienced by them, which may help to discover how to improve and reconstruct their situations together.

A particular value of this approach for Organization of Local Community is that activities undertaken are of a practical character, therefore, research may be conducted with reference to analogous methodologies as in the projects, which will be carried out in

these communities. It allows the research to verify the potential of community to cooperate for common good and cooperation in future projects with different partners based on proven actions. Such actions enable not only the examination of the level of social capital in a given community, but also allow to build such capital (see: Putnam, 2001).

- Participatory intervention research is of an emancipatory character, that is, it can help people to free themselves from irrational, unproductive, unfair and unsatisfactory social structures. Removing social limitations makes them more conscious and responsible for their actions.

The projects connected with Organization of Local Community require active participation of local leaders, who are aware of the meaning of the project and dominant role of community in the course of its execution. A community that is aware of its resources, free from disempowering complexes and ready to struggle for realization of their needs, increases its chances to achieve assumptions of a project.

- Participatory intervention research is critical towards examining existing conditions in the sphere of language, social and political relations. This assumption allows the participants of the research to look more critically at the role of social and political discourse, economic and professional status, and structure of authorities on the determination of their social practices.

Participatory intervention research, can increase aspirations for independence and a sense of responsibility for inhabitants' own life, creating new circumstances concerning "location of authority and control" in local social and political structures. In addition, it demands an increase in the level of openness of remaining players to maintain partnership relations.

- It is a reflective research procedure, based on recognizing reality in order to change it, with particular emphasis on the process and conditions of making this change. This process is based on a spiral of critical and self-critical activities oriented towards making changes and reflection on the way such conditions are made. It means that the goal is not only to make changes, but also to develop in-depth understanding of the way they are created, the meaning of all the relevant circumstances, and the role of all people involved in the process of making changes, including the research group.

This feature of participatory intervention research is of basic importance for proper comprehension by the inhabitants, representatives of institutions and organizations of how practical realization of actions within the scope of Organization of Local

Community may look like in their environment. Based on conducted participatory intervention research and observation during action research, participants will develop skills and knowledge to know what to pay attention to, what to avoid and how to optimize projects in the future.

- Participatory intervention research aims at transformation of both theory and practice. However, the dominant role is not ascribed either to theory nor practice. It is more focused on perceiving and presenting these areas.

Organization of Local Community is based on a rich theoretical basis, indicating various typologies and models concerning this approach, each with their specific methodology. Action Research is a research procedure that encourages and mobilizes verification of theories. It forces people directly involved in such procedures to critically refer to theoretical models, looking for the most appropriate ones to the environmental conditions (Kemmis, McTaggart, 2014: 785–787).

The main and final goal of activities undertaken within participatory intervention research is to improve the functioning of the local community. On the one hand, such improvement may be achieved as a result of properly conducted research, which will provide knowledge about communities, processes that occur within them, and effectiveness of actions undertaken. On the other hand, such improvement will result from internalization and propagation of the experiences of cooperation, self-awareness and ability to reflectively comprehend the process of making changes, which were gained by the members of community with representatives of institutions and organizations cooperating within research team while carrying out the procedures of intervention research (Niesporek, 2013: 82).

In Polish conditions, initiators and implementers of local community organizing projects are usually local government institutions, along with the associated social assistance services. This is mainly due to the necessity of mobilization of considerable financial resources in areas under jurisdiction of local authorities. In this context this organisation can be understood as a Social Development (Payne, 2005: 217–223).

I am personally convinced about the necessity of deeper engagement of members of the community with actions which are called Organizing of Local Community. But this engagement will not be possible without greater openness of all “partners”/participants of these kinds of actions. This partnership relation may be built only if representatives of funding institutions, local authorities etc. will eschew their privileged, leading position to create the space for sharing experiences and knowledge taken through joint actions. It may create the circumstances in which community members will be more convinced to take partnership positions.

Participatory budgetting – an opportunity for implementation of action research procedure

In recent years, we have been witnessing in Poland the dynamic career of one of the forms of deliberative democracy, which is known as civic/participatory budgetting. The practical application of participatory budgetting procedures was first used in Brazilian Porto Alegre in 1989, from where it spread quite quickly not only in Brazil and South America but also in other regions of the world, including Western and Southern Europe.

There is a lack of a clear and generally accepted definition of participatory budgetting. It is defined mainly upon the socio-cultural conditions and legal and political circumstances of a given society. Therefore, similar actions in different societies can be defined differently. However, participatory budgetting can be defined as a form of “collective” decision-making process, allowing inhabitants along with the local authorities to create the town budget (usually in relation to its constituent parts – the districts, neighbourhoods, street quarters, objectives or tasks), and at the same time, making decisions on the distribution of a specified pool of public funds. Basically, participatory budgetting allows citizens (and sometimes the users of a particular space – e.g. commuters), despite the fact that they were not elected to local decision-making bodies, to participate in creation of concepts and/or the allocation of public funds (Sintomer et al., 2012; Ganuza, Baiocchi, 2012; Górski, 2007). It has a specific dimension in the case of the enclaves of poverty where the level of bonding social capital (see: Putnam, 1995, 2001) is low, and which results in a low level of shared trust. It usually brings a limited degree of commitment of inhabitants to work together to achieve common goals or resolve societal problems.

The basic element of participatory budgetting is a public discussion of inhabitants who meet at the meetings or forums. Active and real dialogue between inhabitants is a basis for their inclusion in the whole project and cooperation with other players. The central point of this public discussion is – how to use precisely defined and limited financial resources?

Participatory budgetting is not limited to the level of district, neighbourhood or institution, even though when it comes to the dimension of specific projects, the micro level seems to be more rational and practical to implement – at least one of the stages of participatory budgetting should also concern the whole city. The projects conducted at the local level, removed from the perspective of a whole city, can be easily dominated by interests of individual social groups or political options. They are seldom successful in establishing and satisfying common needs of inhabitants and formulating reasonable proposals, instead of focusing on general demands or protests.

The outcomes developed in participatory budgets are binding, which leads to actual implementation of the proposals selected by the inhabitants. The residents receive feedback both on projects selected during the discussion, and those that were rejected. Implementation of specific actions arising from a participatory budget is monitored, and information resulting from the monitoring is made available to the inhabitants.

Participatory budgeting should be implemented as a long-term, long-standing process repeated every year, since it is not one-off action. This assumption allows for a kind of institutionalisation of participatory budgeting as a kind of procedure or algorithm for operationalisation – through its repetition, it is smoother and becomes more efficient; the inhabitants, seeing positive effects and being given feedback, get involved in it more eagerly, and being treated as equals, have greater confidence, and engage more actively in implementation of particular projects (see: Sintomer et al., 2012; Kłębowski, 2013).

An issue that arouses debate and worth analyzing is the extent to which implemented actions in Polish municipalities are convergent with the idea, values and theoretical assumptions of the participatory budget. Critics of this type of activities draw attention to a number of restrictions and sometimes distortions of implemented civic budgets.

It is argued that they are attended by a limited (unrepresentative) number of people/residents, or that they have a “club” character, because they are limited to “activating” those already activated, forming a team of “friends” which cooperates better without including additional people. It is also suggested that in Polish conditions these activities are mainly building political capital of local authorities, which are not so much interested in stimulating civic participation, but in building a political public relations based on the slogans of the civic budget.

Despite the criticism, there are many examples of interesting implementation of the civic budget, such as in Dąbrowa Górnicza, Wrocław, Sopot and many other cities. From the point of view of this contribution, the pioneering project 2-poles – different ends of the city, different citizens implemented by the Centre for Development of Social Initiatives from Rybnik in 2009–2010 seems to be particularly interesting. In this project, participatory budgeting procedures were implemented based on funds obtained for this purpose from the Fund for Non-Governmental Organizations, that was not related to the budget of the city of Rybnik. The experience of this first participatory budget in Poland is also interesting because it was undertaken in two fundamentally different districts of Rybnik, selected on the basis of contrast – the Orzepowice district usually seen as a “good” one, and Boguszowice, usually seen as a “bad district” in the opinion of the majority of the city residents. The first is perceived as a “decent” neighbourhood of single-family houses and the second as an area of blocks of flats, and

a community affected by many social problems. Without going into the details of the project itself, it is worth referring to its effects and conclusions described in the final report (see: CRIS, 2017) or to the opinions of people involved in the implementation of this budget. One of the most frequently mentioned issues is a “surprisingly” high level of involvement in budget procedures of the inhabitants of the district, which is stereotypically considered as “worse”, in comparison with the low involvement of residents from the district considered as “better”. In the district of Boguszowice there was also a greater level of cooperation between residents, as well as a relatively high involvement of young people, after which, based on the previously indicated stereotypical claiming, such involvement was not expected. In the district of Boguszowice was a greater level of cooperation between residents, as well as a relatively high involvement of young people which was also not expected, based on the previously indicated stereotypical way of perceiving this age group.

The project did not refer to the action research methodology, but because of its pilot and research nature, one of its goals was to deepen participants’ knowledge. The knowledge gained by the Association regarding this environment allowed for the preparation of subsequent projects in this district in a way that gave greater possibilities to include residents. It is also possible to assume, although there is no empirical data, that the members of the community who joined the activities related to the participatory budgeting carried out in their district have learned something about themselves and about the effectiveness of jointly undertaken actions, which can indirectly indicate the level of their involvement in the process.

In the context of potential involvement of inhabitants, an advantage of participatory budgeting over other forms of Organization of Local Community can be observed. It results mainly from the fact that inhabitants may take activities, the effects of which are easily countable – it is a specific amount that they can directly refer to. In case of other projects (e.g. Local Activity Programmes, revitalization projects, etc.), an expected effect of a project is less clear, harder to imagine and measure. Therefore, it may be assumed that inhabitants will be more motivated to act. On the other hand, it is easier to be involved in them, because the duration of realization of all actions related to participatory budgeting is short. Therefore, initial enthusiasm, usually associated with new challenges, is not decreasing quickly, which lowers the risk of fatigue and resignation from active participation.

The above argumentation leads to the conclusion that while planning extensive and costly environmental projects such as revitalization projects, they should be preceded with implementation of participatory budgeting according to the methodology of participatory intervention research. Such initiatives are usually costly; however, due to the losses that may result from failure of high-budget projects, such “investment” should be considered. The

following potential profits may be generated as a result of implementation of action research based on participatory budgeting:

- the members of community, and indirectly also representatives of local institutions, through cooperation on budgeting may help define norms, rules and values shared within a given community, that is, elements that may motivate local people to take part in common projects carried out in a given environment;
- people involved in the work on a budget in a form of action research may gain deepened knowledge of how members of local community perceive themselves with reference to the broader social context, and how they define their problems and needs;
- working together on specific projects, they build a network of mutual relations, which favours consolidation of confidence and willingness to cooperate, that is, the attitudes of social capital are formed or consolidated;
- cooperation among inhabitants builds a sense of causative power and belief that involvement may lead to changes in their (individual and common) life. It can help make people more independent and they can become more active in satisfying their own needs;
- practical realization of a common project allows the identification of the most effective form and paths of communication in the internal community, and with reference to internal relationships, building a positive atmosphere around the project and identifying and removing communication, social or political barriers;
- practical experience of cooperation gained in the course of work on a participatory budget, based on knowledge resulting from applied research procedures concerning efficiency and limitations on these actions, shapes specific skills, which can result in future projects having better cooperation from inhabitants and more efficient coordination of actions with various institutional and social players.

Conclusion

Enabling representatives of local civil society and, in some cases residents, to participate in the decision-making process in matters related to their place of residence, allows them to learn about procedures and formal circumstances of managing their living space and gives them a greater chance of influencing the activities carried out in this space. Indirectly, such inclusion in the decision-making process may persuade the inhabitants to accept a partial “responsibility” for the effective implementation and effects of the project conducted in communities in which they live. It should be

stressed that this consultative, deliberative way of making decisions requires acceptance by both parties of this process – the authorities and residents – and its principles. These principles include: actions based on good and clear intentions; acting in the name of the “spirit of law” and not just formal agreements; respect for the general public good; and representativeness and reliability (Długosz, Wygnański, 2005: 27). This responsibility is particularly important on the part of public administration, which very often treats the consultation process as a burdensome obligation implemented only formally. The same procedure and its principles should be taken in to account during establishing and implementing projects which in great degree will influence the community and lives of its residents.

The practice of social participation realized within the projects of Organization of Local Community, which results in the mixing of interests and revising old or creating new conflicts between various groups, institutions or communities, assumes that through dialogue, even if it is difficult, compromise and agreement may be reached, and as a result, cooperation during execution of a given project is possible. However, the representatives of local authorities and institutions subordinated to them and members of local communities must understand the nature of participatory processes. Whereas, the most effective form of understanding for them will be practical application of the approaches based on critical examination. Such an effect may be achieved through realization of specific environmental projects based on the methodology of participatory intervention research.

Planning the actions within the scope of organization of local communities on the basis of the rule of broad social participation with the use of consensual solutions, conducted from the stage of diagnosis of community issues to development of an action plan, implementation of this plan and evaluation, results in the creation and institutionalization of specific social and institutional mechanisms within the scope of preventing and solving social problems. Such mechanisms may activate spontaneously in the future, where there maybe the emergence of specific conditions which can help make the community more independent.

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