
OPTIONS OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT. THE EXAMPLE OF THE MORAVIAN-SILESIA MICROREGION OF OSOBLAŽSKO

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Cohesion policy and the development of rural, peripheral areas

Rural peripheral areas in Central Europe are among the “losers” of transformation and there is some risk that they will also become the “losers” of Europeanisation. Given the growing gap in wealth and dynamic development between the national capitals and the national peripheries, European Cohesion policy is a matter not only at the national, but also at the regional level.

One of the non-material benefits of EU funds is the integration of participatory approaches into guidelines, so that there is a strong incentive for participation within processes of regional development.

In terms of European spatial development, cohesion denotes the attempt to even out the differences in wealth between the member states of the EU. However, the difference in wealth between central and peripheral regions is within most European countries larger than the difference between the largest agglomerations in different states. In the Czech Republic, the capital Prague has a GDP per capita (PPP) well above the average of the EU-25 and more than twice as high as all other Czech regions. What is more, the agglomerations also experienced a faster GDP growth than the predominantly rural regions during the transformation phase¹.

The term “rural” describes a specific socio-economic structure, which is expressed also in physical appearance of landscape and settlement and in the way of life of the population. Rural areas are frequently defined negatively as “non-urban” areas. On the one hand, this denotes a complementary relationship between rural and urban areas, but on the other hand the definition

¹ Programový dokument SROP 2004, Kap. 2, Ekonomická výkonnost; www.stukturalni-fondy.cz

as “non-urban” is symptomatic of the difficulties which lie in summarizing the characteristics of the highly heterogeneous “rural space”. Therefore the term “rural” is here specified by the term “peripheral”, as the Microregion Osoblažsko is situated at the state border at a relatively large distance from cities and agglomerations and has thus diminished opportunities to profit from the development of “poles of growth”.

However, “periphery” is a relative term. At the EU level, “periphery” often refers to the northernmost Scandinavian regions. At the Central European level, the Microregion of Osoblažsko lies within the space between the agglomerations of Wrocław, Kattowice, Ostrava, Brno and Vienna—a space which is well on its way towards becoming a European growth region. However, the concepts of growth regions (similar to the West-European “Blue Banana” discussed in the 1980s and early 1990s) neglect the fact that dynamic development concentrates on selective poles of growth—the spaces between these poles do not necessarily take part in the growth of the agglomerations. Thus peripheries remain within the transnational “areas of growth”.

In rural peripheral areas, market forces do not necessarily create positive development. On the contrary, growth of wealth in the cities may occur simultaneously with a decrease of economic activity in the periphery and even cause this development by the reduction of qualified working force.

Peripheral rural areas in Central Europe therefore share some elementary challenges. One long-term, yet nevertheless urgent problem is the loss of population due to the lack of employment opportunities. The consequences are out-migration of young and qualified persons and a relative increase of a non-productive population in the rural areas (social selective migration). The concentration of remaining socially disadvantaged persons causes further marginalisation (reduction of infrastructure, services, education opportunities). Regional disparities thus influence the risk of social exclusion in the sense of an exclusion of regional population from opportunities. If we follow the development theories of divergence, we can state: Disadvantaged regions develop into disadvantaging regions—this is the main reason why intervention is considered necessary².

² ARL (2005), S.1034

European cohesion and rural development policy are attempts to create similar opportunities for life in different areas by levelling out the imbalances created by market forces. Intervention occurs through national or EU programmes or—mostly—a combination of the two.

Some facts about the Osoblažsko Microregion

The Osoblažsko Microregion comprises nine communities with about 30 settlements. The largest settlement is Osoblaha with ca.1,150 inhabitants; it lost its historic town status in 1960. The population of the Osoblažsko Microregion decreased from over 20,000 in 1840 to ca. 16,000 in 1930 to nowadays ca. 3,770 persons. The end of World War II brought about an almost complete exchange of population (in 1930, over 98% of the population were Germans). This not only meant a break with the traditional social and economic relations and a loss of local knowledge, but also brought about problems with resettlement. Resettlement was connected to political pressure on the settlers, so that fluctuation within the new population remained constantly high. This is one reason for the weak regional identity which is evident today.

The area of ca. 150km² touches the Polish border in the north, east and south. From 1945 to 1990 the border regime was very strict and the closest regular border-crossing was more than 80 km away. Thus, the border had a highly dividing effect in terms of infrastructure and social and economic life.

The landscape is hilly with a high percentage of fertile land under intensive agricultural use. About 24% of the employed population works in agriculture—before 1990, it was over 70%. There are a few smaller private firms now employing up to 30 persons. In some villages, the unemployment rate exceeds 50%. In most of the villages a high percentage of houses is used only for weekend recreation (100% of all houses in the villages Piskořov, Pelhřimov and Studnice). The landscape has been identified as one of the most important potentials of the Microregion. However, apart from very attractive scenery, there are also huge stretches of fertile, but rather monotonous agrarian landscape. Due to decades of intensive, quasi-industrial agriculture, soil and water are heavily polluted.

This situation was the incentive for a development initiative which brings together locals, scientists and officials. The stimulation of a regional discourse

aims at developing a perspective for future development, and setting free and interconnecting the potential existing within the region.

Informal planning approaches

Efforts in rural development have been made by national states for many decades and under different regimes. However, the effect has been rather little and problems persist or have even increased. State intervention proved to be schematic and hence ineffective. One decisive point is that state intervention in many cases struggles against the market forces—and these all too often prove to be stronger. Increasingly complex questions of rural development due to the competition between regions and the differentiation of challenges faced by rural areas go beyond the capacities of hierarchical formal planning.

In many EU countries, complementary “Informal planning” approaches have come into use. These are applied additionally to the formal planning approaches established by planning law. Among these informal planning approaches are “Bottom-up” initiatives, which aim at the creation of development opportunities from within the region by focussing on internal regional potentials. Informal planning contains autonomy from the sphere of state activity during the decision process; nevertheless it is closely related to the opportunities offered by the state (expertise, financial means). EU and national programmes make provisions for bottom-up approaches, and the initiative LEADER+ even demands a central role of local actors in the co-decision-process.

Participatory approaches

Participation in spatial planning denotes the co-decision possibility of the affected citizens (“stakeholders”) and institutions of the civil society in different stages of the decision-making process. In some cases, when the interests of citizens are directly affected, the right of participation is guaranteed by law. In many more cases, it is optional. Nevertheless, there are good reasons why optional forms of participation are being applied.

Who is to participate?

The question of who should be involved in participatory action depends strongly on the spatial level and on the topic in question. At the EU level, the EU Commission defines “Civil society” very broadly as including the social partners (trade unions, employers organisations), organisations representing social and economic players (e.g. industrial organisations), NGOs, human rights organisations, charities, professional associations, grass roots organisations and organisations that involve citizens in local and municipal life with a particular contribution from churches and religious communities³.

Logically, at the local and regional level a higher number of individual citizens is involved, and correspondingly a lower number of organizations. The aim of participation is the establishment of a broad discussion leading in the ideal case to a broad consensus. The precondition therefore is to reach a broad representation of population; that is, all relevant social groups should be included.

This raises the question of how to identify relevant groups of stakeholders. Social divisions may occur along ethnic, socio-economic and/or educational lines. However, if concrete plans are concerned, the formation of groups of common interests is likely. People who thus far did not have contact with each other establish coalitions when they discover common interests. The duration of these “coalitions of interests” is usually limited to the duration of the concrete case. Pragmatically, networks that already exist (informal and formal institutions) are encouraged to participate. However, problems linked to the motivation of potential participants, the stimulation of a broad societal discourse and the establishment of medium- and long-term networks are quite common.

Groups of local actors

In the Several groups of local actors have been identified in the Osoblažsko microregion. They bring in various potentials, which are to be interconnected:

- Representatives of the communities (mayors): they usually enjoy a high degree of local authority, which can be used for the motivation of participants and organizational tasks on the spot; moreover they dispose over elementary information on economic and social conditions in the community.

³ Commission of European Communities (2001), p.14

- Farmers, who in the case of the owners of large estates are also important employers; with regard to plans and measures dependent on land resources they play a decisive role as landowners.
- Owners of small and medium-size firms as employers and potential for economic development; they may provide specific professional knowledge and carry out work related to development projects (building, processing of raw materials etc.); moreover, they act as private investors.
- Representatives from the sphere of culture and education (teachers, priests, journalists); they act as initiators and organizers of cultural actions and as multipliers in terms of passing information and the formation of public opinion.
- Local citizens and local citizens' initiatives (NGOs) deliver an in-pu of ideas and different kinds of local knowledge, organize actions in the cultural and social sphere, and have some degree financial capacities at their disposal.
- Owners of recreation houses; they dispose of incomes higher than those of most of the local residents and potentially form a "bridge" to the towns and cities of the region (social and political resources).

Additionally, external experts are involved who offer specific technical or process-related knowledge and eventually may act as impartial negotiators in conflict situations:

- Scientists from universities and scientific institutions dealing with relevant topics (ecology, economy, tourism, infrastructure, regional development)
- Officials from relevant authorities (agencies, offices of regional administration); they contribute expertise, knowledge on legal alternatives and contacts to relevant formal institutions.

In areas with an enduring high out-migration, the remaining population often tends to behave passively. The larger the social differences, the harder it is to create full-fledged participation across the divergences of education, local hierarchy, social status and political orientation. Intraregional co-operation can be imagined as a "market place" of potentials. Each of the groups or individuals integrated in the process of participation brings in some kind of potential—formal political power, informal power of opinion-building (charisma/prestige),

knowledge, ideas, financial means, ownership of land, contacts or just personal commitment. The position of the individual within the decision-making process is largely determined by the degree to which the specific potential is valued according to objective and subjective criteria.

Participatory approaches are applied in order to open up new paths of development and to translate ideas and concepts into action. At the beginning, however, the competing behaviour of the actors prevails. One interim goal of participatory approaches is therefore to stress common interests and to support compromises which are not pressed through by local elites, but are at least acceptable to all.

Why do we need participation?

Experience shows that the sustainability of projects can only be guaranteed if the needs and capacities of the local population are taken into consideration. The people affected by measures of development have a right to influence decision-making, which is legitimised by elementary democratic principles⁴. Thus, participation fulfils functions in the following fields:

- Legitimizing of decision-making by fulfilling democratic principles
- Ensuring stability of development ("sustainability") by guaranteeing support within the region and continuity after the end of project funding
- Strengthening of regional identity
- Activating and creating local knowledge and capacity building

The need for participation depends also on the topic to be decided on. The more long-term the commitment needed from within the region, the more intensive participation makes sense. For the utilization of internal development factors (potentials) comprehensive participation is very effective. In projects focussing on external factors, which can be influenced only to a minimum degree from within the region, participation often has merely a legitimating function.

The starting point in the microregion of Osoblažsko was that the communities represented by their mayors and a number of citizens recognized that the region was all the more lagging behind during the transformation process. It is a widely held opinion that EU-membership is not likely to bring

⁴ Danielzyk (1998), p.91

about fundamental changes, but rather more difficulties for agriculture in this respect. Thus, in the beginning there was just one common, very simple idea: We have to do something about that.

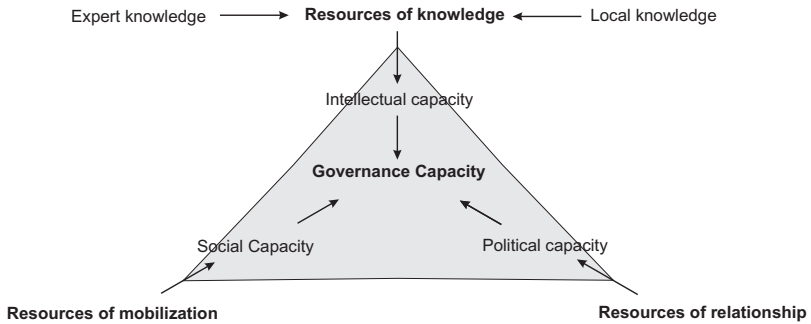
The next step was the discursive identification of potentials which could be used to enhance positive development from within the region. Internal potentials of the microregion of Osoblažsko have been identified as the high ecological and aesthetic value of the landscape, the fertility of the soil, the cultural heritage, a surplus of buildings which could be used for the establishment of non-emission industries, successfully evolving activities in the field of tourism, and the commitment of local citizens. This last statement is of special importance, as it was obvious that the complex challenges could not be managed by the badly-equipped communal offices. As the priorities of development lie within the socio-economic and ecological sphere, it was clear that local firms, farmers and representatives from the cultural sphere should play a vital role as partners for development.

Participation and Governance

In this context should be considered new modes of governance and capacity building. The establishment of “good governance” is a means of improving the use of existing capacities. Governance denotes “new modes of regulation including participation of actors of civil society”⁵. The “Governance Capacity Model” (Figure 1) shows which different kinds of knowledge should be used to enhance capacity building within a region. At the same time, the model makes clear which groups of actors are usually involved in the regional capacity building process.

⁵ FICHTER-WOLF, 2004, S.3

Figure 1: *Governance Capacity Model (after FICHTER-WOLF, 2004, S.4; slightly changed by the author)*



The term “local knowledge” denotes knowledge which exists in a certain place as a resource (“tacit knowledge”). Knowledge may exist in the form of expertise (e.g. local professionals in agriculture, building, social affairs, education etc.), but also as knowledge about local interrelations, social relations, conflicts etc.⁶. This knowledge should be activated, as it is essential for the understanding of the local conditions. Information and knowledge are vital elements of good governance. Local knowledge is advantageous for the establishment of networks, but it is also activated, interlinked and created by networks. Participation is thus not only a means of democratic decision-making, but through the establishment of communication-networks it is also a means of reproduction of regional potentials.

Forms of participation

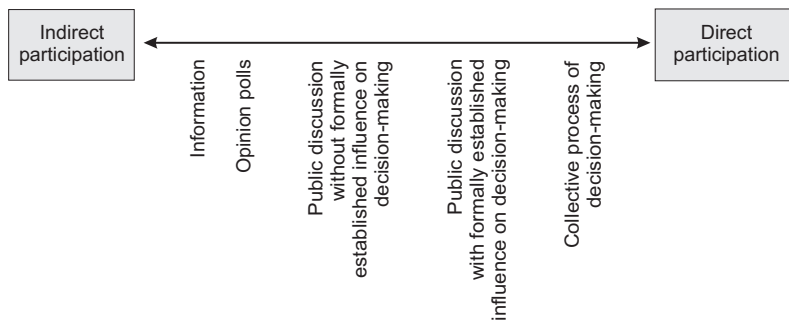
In practise, a distinction is made between direct and indirect approaches of participation, according to the degree to which competences of decision-making are ceded from formal planning institutions to civil society. Indirect participation means that the public is merely being informed about plans and measures, but cannot exercise any influence over decisions. Direct participation comprises the possibility for the civil society to influence decisions and take over responsibilities.

Depending on the various goals of public participation, various ways of including the population in the decision-making process can be applied.

⁶ KNORR-SIEDOW, 2004, S.8

Examples of measures and their position on the scale between indirect and direct participation are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *Examples of measures of participation; their positions on a scale between indirect and direct participation show, to which extent the public takes part in decision-making.*



In general it can be stated that the higher the degree of participation is, the higher are the chances for materialization and sustainability of projects, however much effort is spent in reaching decisions. Thus the level of participation decided on is usually a compromise between what is necessary and what is attainable under a specific situation.

In a relatively small region like the microregion of Osoblažsko it is possible and reasonable to introduce direct forms of participation. In practise, this approach combines meetings, discussions, brainstorming and involvement of external experts from universities and state institutions. Additional publicity is obtained through the launching of articles in the regional press and broadcasting on regional TV and radio stations. Neither should local festivities be underestimated; in particular, the groups of the population with more passive behaviour can be addressed by the combination of events and information which is presented in an entertaining way (expositions, quizzes, rallies). Moreover, festivities support development regional identity and communicate a positive internal and external image of the region.

In order to establish sustainable local action, a “leading board” is needed in order to coordinate activities, pass information and organize meetings. Mayors

act in this context as local coordinators and brokers of information, and play an important role in organising meetings and applying for support from public funds. It is advantageous for external institutions to be involved as well; their representatives provide expertise, and may act as impartial mediators in the event of internal conflicts.

Due to the geographical location of the area on the Czech-Polish border, co-operation with Polish communities is an important goal and fostered by the Euroregion Praděd/Pradziad. Many problems can be tackled in a pragmatic way through cross-border co-operation. For example, a cross-border emergency call has been introduced, as Polish hospitals can be reached faster than Czech hospitals. While the institutions of the Euroregion overtake important tasks in establishing contacts, actual success often depends on the interplay of the individual local actors.

An atmosphere for co-operation

In order to create an atmosphere encouraging innovative approaches, it is important to offer a regular forum for participants to discuss, develop ideas, exchange knowledge and reach decisions in an effective, satisfactory way. Important steps are:

- Identification of the specific motives and interests of local actors
- Identification of common interests and accordingly the formation of coalitions of interest (creation of win-win-situations)
- Creation of action groups dealing with specific topics
- Agreement upon overall goals and priorities of future development, correspondingly agreement upon partial priorities within the action groups
- Identification of strategic projects, their goals and required steps
- Involvement of actors in the materialisation of projects (public-private partnership, support for regional economy)

The involvement of actors from various backgrounds, with different interests and accordingly different conceptions for future development implies that conflicts might arise at each step of the decision-making and implementation process. Reasons for conflict are on the one hand differing interests and ideas, and on the other hand personal conflicts, which often have a long history and are not linked to the project as such.

It is normal that in the beginning a competitive situation prevails. Every actor tries to push through his/her ideas, not only for the sake of the matter as such, but also as a question of hierarchy. It is all the more important to reduce conflicts to their factual content and to point out alternatives, which might be at least acceptable or—in the better case—advantageous to all concerned parties.

More conflicts are likely to arise as financial questions are put forward. At this point, competences have to be made clear: Who acts as an applicant for funds? Who bears the costs of working force and capital investment? When projects enter the phase of materialization, broad participation is pragmatically reduced in order to guarantee a certain freedom of action for the responsible institution or group of actors. Thus, the elementary conflicting interests must be settled before the goals of the projects are attained. Participation is also a question of the right timing.

Bohušov—a community with its own dynamic

In the Osoblažsko Microregion the implementation process is still in the making. So far, the main targets of development have been identified and several related scientific studies from various disciplines have been completed. The realisation of development measures will still be subject to many rounds of discussion. Success depends on a complex combination of factors.

The example of the dynamic community of Bohušov illustrates how the process can work on the local level. The village (ca. 280 inhab.) focuses on using its picturesque landscape with fishponds, a river, a mix of fields, pastures and forests, an old castle and other elements of the architectural cultural heritage for the development of recreation activities. The community owns cabins and a hotel with about 60 beds, took part in the national programme for the revitalization of fishponds (fishing licenses are being sold to tourists) and has initiated thematic recreation programs (guided tours, cultural programme). The demand for summer recreation is mainly generated in the industrial agglomeration of Ostrava, which is about 100km away, and the locals know quite well which kinds of recreational activities are attractive. A local citizens' initiative successfully runs a steam-locomotive on the local narrow-gauge railway (one of the last in Central Europe), and a local businessman has bought the old castle with the surrounding forests in order to establish a ecological-

historical theme park, which will also be accessible to handicapped persons (possibly co-operation with the neighbouring community of Dívčí Hrad, which focuses on social projects). These initiatives have inspired several local farmers, who were struggling to earn a living from their farms, to offer apartments for recreation. The largest local farmer, who works on 1600 ha, is committed to hunting tourism with a high share of clients from Germany and Austria. A new citizen's initiative is now starting to produce and commercialise alcoholic drinks out of local fruits, and thereby tries to revitalize the tradition of fruit-growing in orchards.

The case of Bohušov might seem to be just a small step, but taking into account the desolate state of the community some years ago, it has a very important effect on the motivation and creation of self-esteem not only within the community, but also as an example for neighbouring communities.

Problems and open questions connected to participation

It should not be concealed that certain problems continue to remain unsolved. Symptoms of lack of participation and support from population manifest themselves in different ways, and by far not always in the form of outspoken criticism. Vandalism, passivity and absence (exclusion?) of a specific group from meetings are non-verbal expressions of opposition. Seemingly undisputed projects might reveal deeper problems. To provide but one example, vandalism. The preparation of a hiking route around a castle is anything but a difficult topic of discussion, mainly if it is initiated by the landowners concerned. However, within a very short time after the information desks along the route had been put up, most of them were destroyed by unknown persons. The reason might be envy at citizens able to buy land after 1990, or just an expression of the existing social exclusion of some groups. Whatever the reason is, this example shows the limitations of participatory approaches, but it possibly also points out the need for comprehensive approaches which directly tackle social problems. It seems not to be enough to await the spread of the effects of regional economic development.

Participation is mostly selective and tends to reflect established patterns of social in- and exclusion. Taking into account long-existing social exclusion in

the local context, it must be stated that the involvement of excluded groups into direct participation demands special and very concentrated efforts.

Another threat of exclusion tends to appear during workshops with (socially included) local actors and external experts. Due to the generally lower level of education in rural areas, which reflects the economic structure, there is a threat that locals and experts do not speak the “same language”. What is meant to be a perfect, informative presentation of facts provided by an expert may leave other participants at a loss or even provoke distrust. There is a high sensibility towards measures imposed “from above”, which is probably the consequence of negative historical experience.

Challenges and open questions

An important role in the set-off and realization of local initiatives falls to EU-funded programmes and initiatives. At the moment, EU cohesion and structural funds represent one of the most important and high-rated external factors to rural development in the New Member states. However, practise reveals some deficiencies, which should be challenged on the political level.

One point is a certain frustration about EU-accession, which is caused by the high hopes related to EU-accession. After accession, the difficulties of receiving money from European funds became apparent very quickly. It is mainly the small communities in structurally disadvantaged areas which lack the personal and financial capacities necessary for successful applications. The amalgamation of communities is linked to great efforts in terms of organisation, time and decision-making. Moreover, the fluctuation in the decisive political and administrative positions seriously endangers continuity.

The rather close definition of measures apt for financial funding introduced by the relevant national programmes sometimes seems to be opposed to the aim of exploring individual solutions. In the “identification” phase of project management, the central task is to adapt the aims of regional development to the requirements of the programme documents. Eagerness to gain financial support often leads to an overestimation of the prescribed criteria at the expense of reflection on the real needs in the locally given situation. This can be interpreted as an obstacle to the development of the innovative potential of a region, as the power of imagination is suppressed by highly standardized criteria. On the

regional and local level, there is some lack of consciousness that funds are meant to pave the way to self-sustaining development, and are not the central aim of development projects.

Another point is a certain inconsistency between the central EU-target of cohesion and the demand for competition between regions. Of course, competition is an important incentive for change and improvement. However, cohesion even within a meso-scale region is not easy to uphold, when it comes to the competition for financial means from funds. How does the competition between regions affect the competing concepts of regional, national and European identities? Here there arises what could be called a “regional exclusion”: Regional identity-building on the meso-level tends to lead to an exclusion of neighbouring (competing) areas. Can the combination of different programmes (e.g. LEADER and INTERREG) offer a real solution?

The last challenge I would like to mention is the question of democracy on the different levels of the European political system. On the one hand, EU-funded programmes and initiatives like LEADER enhance or even demand basic and democratic elements like direct participation at the regional level. However, criticism of a lack of democracy within the central EU institutions is frequent and cannot easily be rejected. The demand for direct participation on the regional level threatens to lose credibility, as the impression of a lack of democratic co-decision at the highest levels gains ground. Nevertheless, participation at the regional level makes sense—change is rather needed in terms of democratic approaches within the EU institutions and their policies and the communication of achievements to the public.

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