



Public Services, Community, and Its Involvement in Decision-Making for Local Development

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Abstract

Nowadays, the comprehensive approach to the decision-making of local government and the community is increasingly emphasized as an important factor without which there can be no sustainable development. Community participation in decision-making for the allocation of economic resources in the public sector is an important issue that is closely related to the economic efficiency of the use of resources and the consolidation of democracy in a country. Community participation in decision-making, as one of the essential elements of sustainable development, creates appropriate interaction and makes residents self-direct their behavior in accordance with the objectives of sustainable development. The objectives of the study aim to highlight: 1) the important role of the community in public decision-making for the use of economic resources 2) solving problems begins with the participation of residents in local government decision-making, 3) residents' perception of public services provided by the government local, 4) residents' perception of participation in public decision-making for the allocation of economic resources by the local government. The research method in this study is based on the literature study, analysis, and monitoring carried out by independent institutions and organizations on community participation in local government decision-making and on the qualitative technique for collecting primary data through interviewing residents in the study area. The results of the data analysis show that most of the interviewed residents do not know the development plans of their settlement. But the communities themselves have already realized that their participation in the planning process for the development of their settlements is necessary. For this reason, the local government and all other actors must create effective mechanisms to ensure the participation of residents in decision-making for local development, making the process more participatory and inclusive.

Keywords: Public decision-making, evaluation of public services, local development

1. Introduction

The local level is where services are provided and where social and economic development takes place, where direct democracy and citizen representation are exercised. Local governments play a critical role in shaping and developing the social and economic life of their territories, providing solutions to problems faced by residents. Local government institutions have a responsibility to their residents for informing them about alternatives for using resources and involve them in local government decision-making.

This process requires communication that goes beyond legal obligation by determining the quality of dialogue between them about priorities, projects, and responsibilities. Such proactive communication would lead to the improvement of local governance and the increase of the effectiveness and efficiency of the use of public funds in support of sustainable local development. Understanding the views of the public towards local government, whether real or

perceived, are an important part of improving the effectiveness and efficiency of local government, service delivery, and substantially improving the transparency and accountability of local government.

These improvements can help reduce social apathy, build trust between local government and their communities, curb opportunities for corruption, increase the overall efficiency of services, also in terms of accessibility and equity for all, increase revenues at the local level by fostering confidence that taxes are used to respond to community concerns. Such actions create the ground for greater engagement between citizens and local government and help to better understand roles and responsibilities, as well as aspirations and expectations. Inadequate local governance affects all citizens, but mainly the vulnerable, often undermining inclusion and deepening exclusion.

Lack of participation means that vulnerable people often do not have a voice and are not given the chance to address their needs. Inappropriate decisions and inappropriate allocation of resources can lead to disproportionate socio-economic development and priority spending on areas in a more favorable situation. Thus, the achievement of local development objectives seems to depend on the adoption of a participatory model including community engagement, together with other actors and local government that will lead to agreement on development directions and goals (Faulkner, 2003). Dutton and Hall (1989) point out that this has led to a need for decision-making bodies such as governments to actively seek and consider the views of residents. Engagement and involvement of multiple groups are considered very important issues in a sustainable development approach. The community field is similar to other specific social fields and pursues the common interests and needs of all residents together. Indeed, a locality's economy, sociocultural characteristics, and physical resources are essential parts of the community and its inhabitants. However, these characteristics serve only as background to local life and reveal little about the motives and ability of residents to act together. Community emerges when feedback from the experiences of conscious citizens comes together to address common needs.

The emergence of the community field brings into focus shared interests in aspects of local life. Both local residents and their organizations interact to improve the overall well-being of the community, and this is known as community agency (Wilkinson, 1991). The community has its own expertise contributing according to the nature of the problem. Citizens, for example, have important areas of expertise including knowledge about local conditions and the environment, related to lifestyle, and possess information about how similar problems have been solved before where they live.

2. Community Participation in Governance

Today, more and more, when we talk about development, we refer to sustainable development and the requirements that society, in the local, national, and international aspects, must respect in order to move on the path of sustainable development. According to Gursoy, D., Jurowski, C., & Uysal, M. (2002), definitions of sustainable community development are parallel to definitions of sustainable development.

The main difference involves the apparent reduction in geographic scope: sustainable community development is local. The Bristol Agreement, which is based on the WCED vision of sustainable development, is the most prominent definition of community-based sustainable development in the academic and policy literature and defines them as places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life.

Community-based development is also positive in the fact that it avoids conflicts between different actors, involved or different interest groups, implements the policy of coordination and this helps to create synergy sharing knowledge, thoughts, and skills among all members of the community (Kibicho, 2008). Community participation in local government decision-making is related to increased sensitivity to social responsibilities as well as the sustainability of development. It has gained popularity as part of strategies for development and environmental protection.

From a social, economic, and environmental perspective, if local people are not involved in the entire development process, there is a high chance that the resources on which development is based will be destroyed and the investment lost (Brandon, 1996). From a moral perspective, it is argued that management by local people coupled with decentralized decision-making is preferable and may be more accountable, and more sustainable in the long term.

3. Participation – Not Implementing the Plan that Someone Else Has Made

Although decisions, policies, and programs must conform in some respects to community norms and desires, they are often formulated outside the community without considering the full local social, economic, or environmental

consequences. This study is based on the sociological tradition of social exchange and is guided by the premise that individual feelings can be important elements that influence people's social response and the community's supportive or non-supportive attitude towards development. Among the many theories that have been proposed to understand people's attitudes, the social exchange theory has been given theoretical priority because it facilitates a logical explanation of the positive and negative aspects of development and enables the examination of the relationships between exchange factors and their consequences.

The interdisciplinary field of cognitive science has made important contributions, and one of these, perhaps the most neglected, is the repeated demonstration that humans are remarkably adept at processing information. In this respect, people should be seen as active, curious, and problem-solving beings. Based on these cognitive and emotional themes, Kaplan lays out the necessity of reconceptualizing human nature by asking that in logical reasoning, take from human nature what is natural to confront the issues that require solutions. He reasons that people resist change if they perceive change as reducing the quality of their lives and that they are also concerned about the future of the country in which they live.

By recognizing human tendencies and the circumstances that support motivation, as a first step, three aspects of information processing have been identified that are thought to have a strong influence on human motivation and behavior: 1) people are motivated to know, to understand what happens and do not want to be confused and disoriented, 2) are motivated to learn, examine and discover, they prefer receiving information and tend to have their questions answered, and want to participate, play a role in what is happening around them, they hate being incompetent or powerless. This principle is particularly important in the context of this study, arguing that solving problems begins with the participation of residents in local government decision-making. But "Participation" means that many people are engaged in an activity.

The phrase "problem-solving" is a reminder that the purpose of the participatory process is not to implement a plan that someone else has already made or designed, but to engage in finding new solutions to problems that meet the needs of the participants. To make this feasible, people must be given the opportunity to: 1) Be in front of a focused task that needs problem-solving. "Target groups are responsible for achieving these objectives by encouraging innovation and participation across the board" (Adams, W. M. (2006). 2) To face the challenge of finding a solution that is satisfactory for them and to feel its responsibility; 3) Their participation should be effective in solving the problem. On the one hand, it may seem unfair to put decision-making in the hands of many people, but to understand the issue of inclusion it is useful to consider the difference between: 1) telling people what to do, 2) asking people what they want to do and, 3) helping people understand the issue by inviting them to consider possible solutions.

The first is the most useful, the second involves participation in a limited sense, and the third describes the proposed approach as not participating in the sense of a published survey, rather, it includes understanding, consideration, and problem-solving as essential components of participation. In this context, different types of expertise will need to be available for effective participation according to the nature of the problem. Generating desirable solutions reduces the feeling of helplessness, and the fear that nothing can be done is replaced by the discovery that, in fact, a great deal has been done.

True participation creates this feeling in a person. With his alternative to the Reasonable Person Model, Kaplan (2000) seeks to find a stable source of motivation, the reduction of the corrosive sense of powerlessness, and the possibility to generate new solutions that are not perceived as a threat to the person's quality of life. This approach is based on a coherent conception of human nature that considers the relationships between how people approach new information, how information is related to motivation, and how information and motivation are related to behavior change.

4. Research Methodology

The research method in this study is based on the literature study, analysis, and monitoring carried out by independent institutions and organizations on community participation in local government decision-making (Desk research) and observation through interviewing residents in the study area to collect primary data. In this study, the individual qualitative technique of interviewing individuals will be used.

This technique consists of interviewing randomly selected residents to obtain their thoughts and opinions regarding the measurement and evaluation of the indicators obtained in the study. The questionnaire constructed for this purpose consists of a first section where information on demographic data regarding age, gender, education, and employment is requested. In the second section, information is requested to measure the assessment of residents on public services, on the recognition of development plans in their place of residence, if the local government receives their opinion on the

development plans, and if they wish to give their opinion on these plans.

The study area includes the Sukth, Katund i Ri, and Rrashbull administrative units in the Durrës Municipality. The selection is based on the concept of random selection. A total of 310 residents were interviewed and 310 questionnaires were completed, of which 300 are valid. The analysis of the primary data obtained through the semi-structured individual interview with the residents was done with the method of descriptive statistics. Information handling consists of organizing and classifying data, preparing the structure of the analysis, and presenting the results.

5. Results and Discussion

The first section of the analyzed data summarized in Table 1 describes the profile of the interviewees. The results show that 20% of respondents are 18-35 years old, 38% are 36-55 years old, 30% are 56-65 years old and 12% are over 65 years old. The interviewees are from all categories of age, gender, level of education, and employment status.

Table 1: Profile of respondents

| Characteristic | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----|--------|----|-------------------|----|-------------------|----|
| Age | % | Gender | % | Education | % | Employment Status | % |
| 18-35 years old | 20 | M | 57 | Elementary school | 50 | Employed | 22 |
| 36-55 years old | 38 | F | 63 | High school | 41 | Self-employed | 17 |
| 56-65 years old | 30 | | | High education | 9 | Unemployed | 61 |
| Over 65 years old | 12 | | | | | | |

Source: Questionnaires completed in the study area

Table 2 shows the residents' assessment of the public services provided by the local government after the organizational changes compared to their level before the changes when they were local government units in their own right.

Table 2: Residents' responses regarding the improvement of public services after the merger with the Durrës Municipality

| | Are the services provided by the local government improved after the merger with the Durrës Municipality? | Yes | No | The same |
|---|---|-----|----|----------|
| | | % | % | % |
| 1 | Water supply | 26 | 42 | 33 |
| 2 | The lighting of public environments | 20 | 46 | 34 |
| 3 | Conditions in kindergartens and schools | 14 | 42 | 44 |
| 4 | Primary health service | 21 | 34 | 44 |
| 5 | Road infrastructure | 10 | 44 | 46 |
| 6 | Urban public transport | 29 | 36 | 35 |
| 7 | Urban waste management | 36 | 31 | 33 |
| 8 | Administrative services | 14 | 62 | 24 |

Source: Questionnaires completed in the study area

Table 3: On the recognition of local government plans by residents

| | Do you know: | Yes | No |
|---|---|-----|----|
| | | % | % |
| 1 | the plans for the development of your city/village? | 3 | 97 |
| 2 | how many local government resources are available? | 2 | 98 |
| 3 | how these resources are used by the local government? | 1 | 99 |

Source: Questionnaires completed in the study area

Table 4: The participation in the planning process by residents

| | Item of the questionnaire (Affirmation) | I do not agree | I agree | I am unsure |
|---|--|----------------|---------|-------------|
| | | % | % | % |
| 1 | The development of our city/village needs the participation of residents in the planning process of public services. | 0 | 98 | 2 |
| 2 | The local government takes the opinion of the residents about the development plans in my town/village. | 88 | 5 | 7 |
| 3 | I would like to give my opinion on the development of my town/village, but I am not given the opportunity to do so. | 6 | 88 | 6 |

Source: Questionnaires completed in the study area

The results of the data analysis according to Table 1 shows that 26% of the residents estimate that the water supply has improved, 42% think that it has not improved and 33% think that this service is at the same level. Regarding administrative services, 62% of the interviewed residents estimate that they have not improved, 14% estimate that they have improved and 24% estimate them at the same level. In general, also for the other services presented in Table 1, 10-36% of residents think that there is an improvement, 31-62% think that there is no improvement and 24-46% think that the level of their provision is the same as before the administrative reform. Also, the interviewees state that the way administrative services are performed creates concern for them. Most of the respondents (97%) state that they do not know the development plans, resources, and their use by the local government and that the local government does not take residents' opinions on development plans; 99% of them do not know how economic resources are used by the local government. 98% of residents think that their participation in the planning process is necessary, but 88% of them say that they are not allowed to be part of the process.

The guiding principle of this study is that community involvement in economic planning and development is a key element in decision-making for local development. The knowledge and experiences of community members, which derive from long-term observation and interaction with their residents, make their involvement and participation in sustainable economic and social planning and development irreplaceable.

The results of the data analysis show that most of the interviewed residents do not know the development plans of their settlement and how economic resources are used by the local government. But the communities themselves have already understood that their participation in the planning process for the development of their settlements is necessary. But the local government institutions must understand that the purpose of the participation process is to find new solutions from the residents themselves. for problems that concern them and the plans drawn up with their participation, manage to meet the needs of the community.

So, it should be noted that the purpose of the participation process is not to implement the plan that the local government draws up without making the community an active part of the entire development plan preparation process. The monitoring of legal obligations and legislation standards on the participation of residents in local government has pointed out the fragility of community participation in local government and the dominant role that political parties and political agendas have in local government activities.

The monitoring of the official websites of the municipalities does not allow for the creation of the correct idea of how the municipalities respond to the requests of the citizens, in the function of the legal obligation for the right to information and for local self-government. There are no measurable products that prove the level of transparency and accountability (the level of receiving opinions from interest groups and their reflection, the level of citizen perception towards the most important local issues).

Passive participation, by which participants only become familiar with the development of governance processes, but the knowledge is not accompanied by action. For this reason, local government and all other actors must create effective mechanisms to ensure the participation of residents in decision-making for the use of public funds and sustainable development, making the process more participatory and inclusive.

6. Conclusions

This paper highlights the fact that various issues of local governance have not been successful. Warren (1972) argues that historical developments such as increased contact and reliance on extra-local institutions as well as sources of income and employment have eroded local autonomy. As this trend solidifies, "...the locus of decision-making...often

shifts to places outside the community".

The long-term collective action needed to achieve active community participation in sustainable development is unlikely to occur due to narrow economic interests dominating local politics, and to avoid such pitfalls, sustainability principles must be coupled with efforts to build and consolidated the community field. Even the data in this study evidence the fragility of the approach of community involvement in local government as well as the need for a permanent and constructive communication system that makes possible the active participation of the community in solving problems and better management of the public activity. It is important to understand well what it means to participate in problem-solving and participation in the planning process by insisting on the active role of the community in the entire political process of public decision-making.

Efforts for sustainable development, referring also to the data of this study, should be accompanied by efforts to build and consolidate the community field. Based on the results of this study, some recommendations are necessary: The local government should re-evaluate the situation from the perspective of the reality of decision-making and the concrete opportunities that should be created for the realization of community participation in this process. Civil society should orient its activity and various projects, especially from donors, in the direction of creating the social capacities of the community, necessary to become part of the process of the improvement of local governance.

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