



Agnieszka Sobol

Department of Environmental Protection
University of Economics in Katowice
agnieszka.sobol@ue.katowice.pl

Governance and citizens' engagement in terms of local sustainable development

Abstract

Local sustainable development emphasizes the role of a community. One of the key prerequisite of this process is therefore participation of inhabitants. Nevertheless traditional way of managing cities does not work very well in terms of public engagement. Local sustainable development requires both i.e. governance mechanisms introduced by the local authorities and positive reaction of inhabitants for the invitation for cooperation. The paper is intended to explore some critical issues and dimensions of governance and citizens' engagement in terms of local sustainable development. It shows the general outlook on the most relevant conditions, factors, problems and barriers of this process in Poland. It presents experiences of the city of Rybnik in its work towards public engagement in local development.

Keywords: governance, public participation, sustainable development, local development.

JEL Classification: O13, H7, K10.

Introduction

In the last thirty years great attention has become focused on the potential for local level, to be primary contributor to achieving sustainability. This has given rise to localism policy that asserts the primacy of local communities and governments for affecting sustainability. The watchword for localism is stated by 'think globally, act locally'. This philosophy suggests that ordinary people are most likely to pay attention to public issues where they see and experience them, and that the governance mechanisms in cities are most likely to be responsive to the everyday concerns of their citizens. In the process of grassroots mobiliza-

tion one thing is important to recognize – it is the way people see themselves and their communities in relation to their physical and social environments.

Public activity and bottom-up initiatives are mostly real at the local scale where inhabitants can directly experience the effects of their common work. This mechanism is used in education where visualization and showing direct and local benefits is better understood and finally used in practice. The socializing effects of working together on an orderly and regular basis reinforce identity and promotes mutual affinity. These experiences of relationships with others bring educational consequences.

From a perspective of governance, developing a city means that a local government should respond to what citizens in the city address. In this sense active participation of inhabitants in local development makes the process more effective because local authorities can better reply for their needs and expectations. The idea of sustainable communities is born out of an understanding of the importance of individual human behavior and the local governance context in which that behavior takes place. Governance is seen as a pursuit of collective goals through various forms of support, steering and coordination of initiatives by many social partners from the public and private scene (Levi-Faur, ed. 2012).

Governance towards sustainability discussion touches on a number of levels and fields. It incorporates all the initiatives which governments and the other social actors are undertaking to deal with the interconnections among social, economic and environmental conditions of development. Sustainable development is a global task to be achieved in practice at the local level by the local initiatives. Sustainability is about coexistence between social and economic development and the environment. Public participation is directly related to social dimension, but besides it is also connected to economic and environmental issues.

The idea of local sustainable development attaches much importance to the relationship between the environment and the people and interactions within the social dimension of this development. Sustainable governance does not evolve from itself. It results from an active political action and should be initiated by local decision-makers. It is their responsibility to engage citizens in the participatory process of development. It means that active approach of local decision-makers is of paramount importance.

Governance especially in the context of sustainability place more attention to factors such as human capital, civil society and quality of life. The concept of sustainable development attaches great importance to the process of shaping civil society and the role of the citizens. This process requires an introduction of governance patterns of policymaking and management which means that a host

of quite different actors must be involved. They are unlikely to work together easily and here the role of public authorities is very important.

Adaptation of democratic decision – making procedures is the imperative of sustainable development. Governance mechanisms and processes enable a society to achieve more sustainable and people-centered development. Despite an ideological shift towards liberalization, governments have remained, and are likely to continue to remain, a powerful actor. This should not be understood as an argument against citizens involvement and other stakeholders engagement. Lack of citizens' activity can be perceived as one of the biggest barriers in the process of local development because when people do not have opportunities to participate they do not feel important and responsible for this process. The move from traditional local government to modern local governance is getting more and more popular. Unfortunately it appears more often in theory than in practice of local management.

1. Governance mechanisms for local development

Governance has become central to the development discourse in the past decade or more. The notion of governance fits in with the idea of sustainable development. Pursuit of sustainability is a long-term never-ending process. That is why governance for sustainable development has to be anticipatory and oriented towards the long term, using strategic approach of visions and goals. Move towards local sustainability is a complex set of actions aiming at vitalizing democracy and enhancing public participation in local development.

Governance arises as a public concern whenever the members of a social group find themselves engaged in interdependent decision-making in the sense that the actions of each impinge on the welfare of the others. The higher the level of interdependence among the members of the group, the more complex collective actions are. It means that greater demand for governance becomes.

Governance in practice means a *mélange* of governmental and non-governmental, corporate, social and individual actors that cooperate together to reach common goals. Governance builds a civil society with its properties such as: autonomous, emancipatory, integrative, and consensus-oriented. It is a democratic voice against all evidence of power-related political constraints.

Governance is a uniting notion, which enables different actors to help each other in finding new ways of dealing with urban issues. This has to do with the way in which welfare organizations, businesses, citizens and local governments deal with each other to shape life in the city. Every urban actor experiences its

own social reality. The challenge is to unite these different social realities and turn them into synergy and action. Governance is about reaching this goal. It is therefore something completely different from government, a concept which places the local government at the centre of the decision-making process. In government patterns of policy making all the visions, plans and programmes are concentrated at the city/town hall. When it comes to governance, these three elements are the part of work of many local actors representing different social groups.

Nevertheless management towards sustainability should be initiated by decision-makers, especially in the nations with new, fragile or not fully formed democratic structures. Responsibility of local authorities to engage citizens in the participatory process of development seems to be crucial in this case. Implementation of sustainability policies happens when citizens recognize political institutions as their own and acting in their interest. When people feel subject to local government they tend to react or obstruct its decisions or, at least they remain inactive. The process of civil society formation frees after some time the bottom initiatives without any external stimuli. Governance actions are to encourage local actors in different fields of urban development. That is why the bottom-up initiatives should be supported by local authorities.

In the debate on sustainable development and governance references are frequently made to the role of the citizens and their attitude towards common and private interest. Governance is the approach that helps to reconcile individual and public interest. It helps to break 'methodological individualistic' orientation as neoclassical economists call it. Governance requires mediation of many different partners to reach broad consensus on what is in the best interest of the whole community and how this can be achieved. Good governance means that processes and institutions produce results that meet the needs of the present as well future societies while making the best use of resources at their disposal. Along with decentralization and delegation of responsibilities there is an increase of multi-stakeholder partnership. Shift towards sustainability requires more direct democratic control in decision-making, more transparency and clearer accountability, openness and communication with the citizens. The transition from 'traditional government' to 'modern governance' means a review of the role of political systems and institutions in the context of the participatory interests and options open to the citizens. Participatory processes are necessary for a city to produce durable conditions for local sustainability. As Portney shows: "the seriousness of a city's commitment to sustainability is ultimately determined by the nature of the local governance regime" (Portney 2003, p. 4).

Particular modes of local policy describe different role of the citizens and the politicians. In elitists democratic theory citizens should reduce their in-

involvement in politics to voting during public elections. These are the politicians who are the key actors, they have the mission to represent the rest of the society and act on the basis on their judgements. A direct democracy approach indicates the need of more direct civil involvement. In this model politicians are more of the delegates, entrusted by the voters to realize their needs and expectations. Whereas the deliberative democratic approach demands the continuous citizens engagement. In this case the role of the politicians relates to the permanent dialogue with all local stakeholders.

Regarding the above descriptions of the citizens and politicians approach the general questions can be stated:

To what extent should the politicians be the decision-makers and to what the representatives of the society?

To what extent should the citizens be involved in public affairs to contribute to local sustainable development?

How can citizens be educated and socialized in democratic participation?

The answers are important in the context of directing to sustainable development, as governance is one of the main prerequisites of this process. The traditional way of managing cities does not work very well in terms of sustainable development. Developing a city from a governance perspective means that local government should respond to what citizens, professionals and organizations in the city address. All these actors should be allowed to speak and involve in local development.

The concept of sustainable development attaches great importance to the process of shaping civil society and the role of the citizens. The key component of this process is social capital, which enables the local policy to be based on trust and public interest. It should be noted that endorsement of democracy is not necessarily accompanied by the interpersonal trust in the societies. Is democracy real in case of the general interpersonal mistrust? Because of the controversies around this subject, governance advocates indicate that true democracy should go beyond the right to vote (Welzel, Inglehart 2008). In terms of local sustainable development, modern democracy should not be based on voting as the only legitimate form of society participation.

As it is stated in EU Communication: "An empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system and is an asset in itself. It represents and fosters pluralism and can contribute to more effective policies, equitable and sustainable development and inclusive growth" (Communication 2012, p. 3)

2. Civil society and public participation

Nowadays we can observe a strong accent in the paradigm of sustainable development towards a more humanistic approach. Some scholars recognize that currently in sustainability issues, the focus is on democracy and identity topics (Svedin, Aniansson, 2002). Human or in general social capital is perceived as a key category of this process. In terms of local sustainability it attaches great importance to a role of the citizens and shaping civil society.

One of the most famous explanation of the impact on civil virtues on development has been presented by R. Putnam. Since the publication of his *Making Democracy Work* in 1993, social capital has become one of the key terms both in the scientific as well as political discourses. Putnam's concept refers to the crucial role of an active community in which inhabitants are involved in a network. They cultivate the habits of cooperation in mutual trust towards an improvement of all aspects of social life. Putnam argues that the presence of civil institutions facilitates capacity to solve conflicts and increases trust among actors. It means that various policies aimed at strengthening civil society institutions – such as support for grassroots, various local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other associations should in long-run support prosperous local development. Similar path of explanatory arguments has been developed by several other famous authors including F. Fukuyama (Sobol 2006).

Governance and civil society are strictly tighten. Vibrant and organized civil society is fundamental to long-term and strong development. Formal and informal civil society organisations help in fostering governance mostly by improving access to public information.

Social capital as we see from the works of Putnam or Fukuyama is perceived to be essential in the promotion of governance and economic development. Putnam's conclusions indicate that there are strong links between social and economic dimensions of development. According to his considerations, strengthening the meaning of social capital, promotion of civil society and governance leads to economic development and improvement of the economic factors of quality of life.

However, wrong understanding of the meaning of economy for local development can lead to unsustainable development. Rising in income is not a simple key to a better quality of life. In general it is important to make a clear distinction between economic development and economic growth. Economic development leads to a sustainable increase in all fields of local development. It can be defined as a broadly based and sustainable increase in the overall standard of living factors for individuals and the whole community (Greenwood, Holt 2010).

While in economic-oriented growth, outputs and incomes can be even destroying to social and environmental spheres. In this sense economic growth does not need to lead to the only positive impacts and improvements in quality of life. Studies show poor correlation between increase in income and improvement in the general quality of life (Slottje 1991).

Quality of life is one of the main categories in the concept of sustainable development. In this context arise a question about the responsibilities for formulating criteria of this complex category. Who can define the quality of a neighborhood and the city? The type of an answer shows the policy formula and finally has major implications for the local development. In the case of government patterns it is primarily local government task. Instead in governance, where it is the people who live and work the area should be the crucial party.

Government or governance approach changes also the issues that are taken into consideration in local policy. In many local units the strategies still focus on the factors of economic growth. Governance mechanisms change the set of local concerns. When public is invited to set the objectives of local development the array of issues is much more broader. The multidimensional character of the process of sustainable development shows that there is a need to support all three dimensions: social, economic and environmental simultaneously. Nevertheless, the social dimension and social factors have fundamental meaning for the whole process.

In local development public participation is most often interpreted in its 'weak' form, that is stakeholders and citizens are being informed about political decisions taken or are invited to attend meetings. Many politicians express concern about participatory methods that aim for empowering citizens, claiming that this is in conflict with the idea of representative democracy. In general, politicians' trust in expert knowledge in policy making is high and it is difficult to involve citizens in that process. Also, because work with sustainable development issues in general, and thematic issues (spatial, transport, indicators, etc.) in particular, is largely seen as projects rather than processes, the time-limit orientation prevails in local policy making – maybe not in rhetoric, but certainly in practice. While experiences and good practices of many cities around the world show that collective actions of different local groups are possible and effective in local development.

Governance means an involvement of many stakeholders in a decision-making process and implementation. Participation processes based on collaborative action should result in greater democracy and community building. From this point of view, the sector of non-governmental organizations seems to be of special meaning. Communitarian orientation in local development and collective actions of various local members need comprehension of categories of shared values and

common goods. A concern of communitarians' views of individualism was described by G. Hardin in his famous *Tragedy of the commons* (1968). The linkages between issues of sustainability and conceptions of community describe also H. Daly and J. Cobb (1994). They provide a comprehensive arguments on unsustainable patterns of neoclassical economics reliance on individualism and self-interest. For Daly and Cobb a role of an individual is a role of the 'person in community' as the fundamental building block of sustainability. They show the importance of personal relationships and arguments that the well-being of a community as a whole is constitutive of each person's welfare. That is why support of the patterns of human interactions and personal relationships directed to collective work with view on common goods is significant for local sustainable development. This orientation requires changes in organizations and in people – in their attitudes and competences.

The central focus of local governance relates to participatory tools and procedures. Participatory processes can take many different forms and public participation is manifested in many different ways. This refers to efforts aimed at promoting greater interpersonal interaction, increased citizen engagement and, in general, fostering civil society. Public debate, workshops and brainstorming are part of a shift from government to governance. However, initiatives directed at citizen participation seem to prefer polling and surveys for obtaining input from residents into the process. Polling and surveys can provide much accurate information. Nevertheless, they are not connected with human relations and, consequently, do not lead to community-building. In this context, the participation of stakeholders should be based on a broad public forum in the sense of actors representing different social groups (Sobol 2008a).

As it was argued, participatory tools and procedures bring advantages for a community and local development at large. Nevertheless, they bring also direct advantages for local authorities. Citizens who feel that local decision-makers take them seriously and respect their needs and expectations are more likely to assess them and the process of local development positively. They are also more likely to take an invitation for cooperation in public affairs. This positive effect in terms of will for cooperation is also widespread to the other people in the community. Through governance mechanisms, honesty and fairness local authorities can build a generalized trust which facilitates public engagement in local development (Sobol 2008a; Stolle 2004).

3. Public participation in practice – the general situation in Poland

Decentralization and dissemination of theory and good practices on sustainable communities brings a permanent alteration in the way people see themselves in relation to their local environments. The question on the citizens' role in local policy, on perception of the grassroots on the process of local development and many more has started to be stated more and more often. It is a subject of many surveys and public debates. What is the general outlook on the situation in Poland in terms of public engagement and participation?

Poles are always passive, public alienation is typical for them and they always represent claim attitude towards what is going on. They always claim about politics and local authorities but simultaneously they do not undertake any action to change the situation. They even don't articulate and communicate to the local decedents their visions, needs and opinions. Unfortunately numerous examples of Polish local units show that local authorities are also unwilling to engage other actors of the local scene. Even if some decision-makers are conscious of the importance of people activity for local development, they rarely use any tools of social mobilization. At the same time both groups – local authorities and the grassroots find citizen's involvement and partnership important for local development. However, their real declarations for actions seem to be very low. Therefore appears a contradiction between recognition of the partnership importance and a real willingness for action.

The inactivity of citizens is indicated as one of the key problems in the context of local sustainable development in Poland. It can be perceived as a real barrier, because when people are not engaged in a process, they do not feel important and responsible for it. What is more this barrier, due to the changes in mentality, is difficult to break and rather long-term.

As it was already mentioned, in local development the formal organizations with NGOs among them are of special meaning. The appearance of grass-roots voluntary organisations is perceived to be the forerunner for social trust in society at large (Szreter 2002). Role of formal and more spontaneous neighborhood activities is significantly important in countries like Poland where index of social movements is at a low level. The lack of activity of Polish society and inertia in public affairs is directly manifested in low turnouts in general elections, even at the local level. The average turnout is around 40%. The passive attitude and public alienation of Poles can also be seen in the lack of civil movements and underdevelopment of non-governmental organizations within it. Nevertheless, in the last few years the NGO sphere in Poland has experienced significant quantitative and qualitative changes. These changes are mostly a result of the Act on

Public Benefit Activity and Volunteer Work which was enacted in 2003. This law made cooperation with NGOs a mandatory task for local authorities. Declared membership in NGOs in Poland is estimated at about 15% of the whole population. The report Social diagnosis shows that informal public activity in local development of a municipality, neighborhood, etc. is also rare. Only 15% of the survey respondents declared such activity (Czapiński, Panek, red. 2011).

The young are an important group of the local actors. Unfortunately it is still rare in Poland that young people and kids are perceived as significant partners for cooperation. In terms of local policy and development such strategy is a huge mistake. Neglecting the young causes them to migrate to more 'favorable' local units. Conversely, taking into account in local policy their needs and expectations can build bond and identity with the city. Hence, local authorities that are long-term thinking should undertake actions to engage young people in local development and working with them on the progress of 'common good' – the city. 'The young are the future' is not an empty slogan. It is a fact. What is more, governance mechanisms directed at the young are part of civil education and engaging them into public participation. A sense of the above statements give the following arguments: "It is unrealistic to expect them (kids) suddenly to become responsible, participating adult citizens at the age of 16, 18, or 21 without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved. An understanding of democratic participation and the confidence and competence to participate can only be acquired gradually through practice; it cannot be taught as an abstraction" (Hart 1992, p. 5).

Sustainable development, governance and decentralization are becoming high on the local development agenda in Polish communities. However, both their definition and practice remain 'work in early progress'. The results of different experiences and the examples of good practices are evidence of a will for cooperation between local authorities and the society.

4. Public participation in practice – case study of the city of Rybnik

The development of the democratic structures is essential in the process of local community empowering. Systematic decentralization and changes in self-government units in Poland since the nineties have initiated the process of local empowering in Rybnik. Along with learning of self-government, the new initiatives, both by local government and these of inhabitants has occurred. In 2008 Rybnik has started to celebrate The Rybnik Days. The aim is to build local identity and activate the inhabitants. Local government together with the residents

undertake different redevelopment actions in the selected part of the city. Rybnik City Hall also supports local volunteers and the NGOs.

In 2002 The Center for Development of Social Initiatives (CRIS) has been formed. Among the local NGOs it plays a role of the leader in terms of actions towards community empowering. The mission of CRIS organization is to build social capital and to inspire and support local initiatives. Among many activities CRIS organizes different trainings aiming at civil participation. The selected subjects of these trainings are as follows: The modern forms of activity in local society – how to organize events for and with local community, Planning of the social and civil events, trainings for the projects in Act Locally Program. In the years 2009-2010 CRIS realized a project Two poles – different outskirts of the city, different inhabitants. The aim of this project was to test, a pioneer at that time in Poland, mechanism of social consultation in participatory budgeting.

Along with the development of Centre for Higher Education in Rybnik (the Rybnik Campus) important role plays development of education and engagement of academic community. In 2012 under the patronage of the President of the city students of the Campus conducted the survey on perception of Rybnik's development (Koło Inicjatyw Studenckich 2012). According to 60,4% of the respondents of that survey life in Rybnik is getting better.

Cooperation with young people is significantly important for the Rybnik City Hall. The Young City Council (MRM) has been formed in 2001. The MRM acts on the basis of art. 5b of Self-Government Act. The Young Council undertakes their own local initiatives. One of them is a yearly charity action "A Hat of the Santa Clause" which aim is to collect money and food for the poor people in Rybnik community. Another charity action is The Humor Evening aimed at collecting money for curing kids with tumor. Young people of the MRM engage also in culture events for example by organizing a photographic contest and in environmental protection by organizing the days of sustainable transport.

Another manifestation of engaging the young by the Rybnik City Hall is realization of a project Modern pupil in modern school. The Program of civil and education activity of the Rybnik's high-school students. Part of this project was The Self-Government Game which was organized in the years 2010 and 2011. The Game was co-financed by the European Union funds with budgets of 26,000 and 8,000 Polish Zloty, respectively. In the second edition of the Game students took part in the lectures on the subject Sustainable development of the city of Rybnik. The aim of the series of meetings conducted by the author of the article was to encourage the students to prepare the programs of local development. For the Rybnik City Hall the programs are a good source of information on the needs of the young people in the city.

The above initiatives are among the best experiences for Rybnik in terms of civil society development. Despite of good initiatives by the City Hall and undertaken by the local NGOs Rybnik does not distinguishes from the other Polish local units. The survey shows that public participation and political engagement in Rybnik is more or less the same as the Polish average. Turnouts in general elections is even under the national average and only 12% of the respondents declare activity in social organizations mostly in labor unions. The general conclusion from the survey is that Rybnik community is characterized by typical Polish passive attitude and conservatism manifested in unwillingness for civil initiatives (Zygmunt 2007). However, from the City Hall perspective the public engagement is getting better and the empowering tools are more efficient from year to year.

Conclusions

There is a broad acceptance that governance and public participation are prerequisite for local sustainable development. If progress toward local sustainability is to materialize, it must be animated by the activities of the local authorities, NGOs and the grassroots. The concept of sustainable development attaches great importance to the role of the citizens, civil society and partnership. This requires introduction of governance patterns of policymaking and management. It means that to make local sustainable development real governance patterns implementation is a must. Communitarian orientation and work towards civil society mean facilitating and supporting engagement of people in organizational and decision processes. There is a need to undertake approaches that emphasize two-way interaction between decision makers and the public as well as deliberation among the following local actors.

Governance at the local level focuses on participatory process. This approach emphasizes the role that society (and within ordinary citizens) can play in influencing local policy in representative democracy (Rothsein 2013, p. 8).

The reorganization of power functions and the transition from government to sustainable governance is a systematic process that requires a change in the way of thinking of both groups i.e. the decision-makers and the inhabitants. Indeed, the relationships between the local government, the private sector and the grassroots can greatly enhance or obstruct sustainable development initiatives. Efforts to improve the quality of local governance should be based on a thorough understanding of these relationships, including issues of leadership, conflicts and tensions between all parties.

Sustainability requires thinking and acting locally. It requires also a more comprehensive approach to development. Inhabitants can significantly influence development of their communities. The localism and governance philosophy suggests that ordinary people are most likely to pay attention to public issues where they see and experience them, and that the empowerment mechanisms in cities are most likely to be responsive to the everyday concerns of their citizens. What is more when the public is invited to local policy the array of issues is much more broader than in traditional government-oriented way of development.

Public participation in Poland is at the cross-road of several problems on today's local development agenda covering a wide range of issues such as decentralization, civil society, cooperation and many more. Unfortunately we can still observe underdevelopment of civil society in Poland and that is why we should start to build it as soon as possible.

Sustainable development is a long term process in which governance is a relevant determinant. It is important to remember about Robert Putnam's pessimist observations that there are no 'short-cuts' and development of civil society takes long time. As Portney states: "Without changing the way people relate to each other, and the values that underline these interactions, pursuing sustainability would simply not be possible" (2003, p. 126). The turn from government to real governance is a long term process. A concept of local sustainable development is fundamentally communitarian. It requires social change: changes in people, in organisations, in their way of thinking in their attitudes, their expectations, competences. It requires a willingness for cooperation between all local actors.

If progress towards local sustainability want to be achieved, there needs to be a great deal of attention to fostering community-building process. Social capital is perceived to be an essential ingredient of promotion of governance and economic growth. It enables local policy to be based on trust and public interest indicating a significance not only of the individuals but also of the common goods.

Unfortunately in many Polish cities these issues are rarely addressed. Even in cities, as Rybnik example, that include public participation in local policy, the efforts are too limited and too recent to make substantial progress in terms of sustainable development. The analyzed case-study and presented experiences cannot of course provide a blueprint for all local units in they work towards sustainability. Unless they show that public participation is important in different fields of local development. They also indicate that implementation of governance mechanisms brings direct results. What is more it shows that there is a great potential in local community and young people among them to build basis for local sustainability.

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