

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND URBAN SUSTAINABILITY – A CASE STUDY FROM SZEGED, HUNGARY

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Abstract:

The topic of the paper

Sustainability is originally primarily a future oriented concept which refers to negative environmental consequences of today's socioeconomic processes endangering future human well-being over time, i. e. intergenerational equity (see e.g. Brundtland 1987, Hanley 2000). However, it seems similarly important to emphasize that “in our anxiety to protect the future generations, we must not overlook the pressing claims of the less privileged today. A universalist approach cannot ignore the deprived people today in trying to prevent deprivation in the future” (Anand – Sen 2000, p.2030). Consequently, concentrating exclusively on future well-being is clearly an elitist approach in the sense that wide social groups have extremely pressing well-being claims already in our times (see e.g. UNDP 2010).

To make a move towards sustainability in general, successful urban programs aimed at sustainability goals on the local level are needed (Blassingame 1998). In our study we show how participatory action research (PAR) (Kindon et al. 2007) aimed at the understanding and enforcing of local human rights of marginalized people can be a potential bottom-up tool for improving urban sustainability.

The case study in brief

Our results are based on a case study that has been carried out in Szeged, Hungary. In this research, a local civil society organization (CSO) called Védegyelet in Hungary, with the support of an academic research group (ESSRG), is conducting a participatory action research process with one of the most disadvantaged minority groups, the Roma in the city of Szeged, South-Hungary. The aims of the project are: to identify the most urging challenges and problems with regard to the local human rights of the Roma in Szeged; to draw up an action plan targeting problems actively engaging the members of the Roma community; and to monitor the functioning of the CSO as a civil agent in the research project.

This still ongoing research consists of several phases. In the first phase 22 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with relevant actors, mainly including opinion leaders within the Roma community and experts, professionals in the field. Then, two discussion round tables were organised for the interviewees and other interested parties to receive feedback on the main findings and to initiate together a common action-planning process.

After this first, “elitist” phase of the research we started to conduct our second phase of fieldwork with the most marginalized citizens themselves – i.e. the Roma people who live in the segregates of the city of Szeged. Right now we are in this second action planning phase of our research.

The outline of our conference paper

Besides a general introduction of and reflection on our work in our paper we discuss the following specific topics based on the aforementioned case study:

1. Why does participatory research carried out with marginalized groups in the topic of local human rights seem to be a theoretically useful tool for encouraging bottom up urban sustainability programmes? How can it theoretically contribute to urban sustainability?
2. How this theoretical usefulness emerge in real world situations? Which pillars of sustainability is participatory research able to contribute to and under what circumstances?
3. How can we “measure” the contribution of participatory research to urban sustainability? What dilemmas we face when we are to estimate such effects? What are PAR’s limits regarding urban sustainability? Does it have an added value compared to conventional research on the topic?

By raising and answering the aforementioned questions we hope to have a better understanding of the relationship between conventional research, PAR and urban sustainability.

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