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Community participation and empowerment in sustainable rural development in Poland

Marianna Strzelecka ^{1*}, Justyna Gutowska ² and Małgorzata Grodzińska-Jurczak ³

¹ Assistant Professor,

College of Merchandising, Hospitality & Tourism, University of North Texas, 1155 Union Circle #311100, Denton, TX 76203-501USA

² PhD student of International Doctoral Programme – ECOLOG, Institute of Environmental Sciences, Jagiellonian University, Gronostajowa 7, 30-387 Kraków, Poland

³ Associate Professor, Institute of Environmental Sciences, Jagiellonian University, Gronostajowa 7, 30-387 Kraków, Poland

E-Mails: Marianna.Strzelecka@unt.edu; justyna.gutowska@gmail.com, m.grodzinska-jurczak@uj.edu.pl,

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; Tel.: +1-940-5654551;

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Abstract

The proposed article seeks to identify forms and quality of participation in the EU context based on the example of the LEADER development framework and European Ecological Network - the NATURA 2000. The discussion about the character of community participation is framed within the model of stakeholders' participation proposed by Arnstein (1969). This model identifies different stages of citizens' participation linked to their real impact on decision-making.

Introduction

Sustainable rural environments in transitioning societies have been recently one of the key concerns of policy decision makers in Central and Eastern Europe. The opening of Polish public to the EU-15 influences followed by the subsequent reforms caused a socio-economic crisis in majority of rural areas. Accession to the EU structures had further impacts on how rural development is understood and implemented (McDonald et al., 2003; Smith & Hall, 2006). For example, introduction of the LEADER approach to rural development and the growing interest in nature-based tourism in Poland has provided a unique opportunity for rural community stakeholders to diversify income through tourism services (Marciszewska, 2006).

Also, the beginnings of the NATURA 2000 reflected the ever changing approach to the structure and functioning of valuable rural landscapes in the Member States of the EU (Grodzińska-Jurczak et al., 2012). On the other hand, the increasing focus on a need of biodiversity and nature conservation while implementing the new protection tool - NATURA 2000 program have resulted in conflicts and misunderstandings about the distribution of responsibilities and compensation for loss of economic benefits other forms of rural development (Henle et al., 2008; Alphanbéry, 2011).

The accession to the European Union represented an extension of the ongoing socio-economic changes (Sandford, 1999; Smith & Hall, 2006). Since 1990, the EU has become an active agent of political transition through mechanisms such as aid and loan programs, having significant impacts on how local development is implemented (Steves, 2001; McDonald et al., 2003). At the same time, the increased interest in rural tourism has provided an opportunity for rural households to diversify income through tourism services. Even localities lacking aspiration to become future tourist destinations may be forced to adapt to growing demand for rural tourism. Regional and local development programs became central to decisions regarding tourism (Marciszewska, 2006; Mularska, 2008).

The coherence of EU development policies is challenged by different political traditions in various member states. For instance, in rural Poland formal and informal institutions inherited from the communistic era have significant influence on current local and regional governance practices. The low citizen participation appears the significant obstacle to vital local democratic cultures (Howard, 2002; Krzyzowski, 2008, Grodzińska-Jurczak et al., 2012). Also, traditionally poor quality of social interactions and cooperation are the factors constraining the advancement of local participation (Rose, 1999; Paldam & Svendsen, 2000; Reiser et al., 2001).

The authors believe that their work adds to current conceptualization and evaluation of existing and novel forms of participation in the governance in Poland. They seek to identify the current features of participation in decision-making in rural areas as well as the quality of community empowerment in the EU context based on the example of the LEADER development framework and the NATURA 2000 program. The discussion about the character of community participation and community empowerment is framed within the model of stakeholders' participation proposed by Arnstein (1969).

Methods

This work discusses the results from the two separate studies focused on participation in the EU context. Firstly, character of participation in LEADER rural development framework will be evaluated. Secondly, the authors analyse levels of stakeholders' participation in NATURA 2000 program.

In case of LEADER, the main research activities employed semi-structured interviews with representatives of local social fields in the selected Local Action Group areas. The examined LAG's were selected from the list of Local Action Groups operating in Pomerania provided by the Pomeranian Marshal Office (http://www.pomorskie.eu/pl/dprow/dzialnia_umwp/lider/lsr). The two LAGs selected for the study appeared different in size and character of LEADER implementation.

Next step included interviews with selected office managers who responded to emails. Also other LAG participants were contacted on the basis of available membership information. After initial connections, this research employed a snowball-sampling procedure. A set of beforehand-prepared questions guided the interviews to include themes about stakeholders' participation in LEADER. However, the interviewees were encouraged to tell their individual stories and talk about their links with tourism while discussing (the following) research problems.

From total of 18 conducted interviews with stakeholders from Local Action Group I and II, eleven participants were members of LAG I and five participants of LAG II. Interviewed LAG I stakeholders included: seven owners of an agro-tourism or rural tourism business, a local artist, a tour guide, an owner of a restaurant and a representative of a local association. Four interviewees from LAG II represented interest of the private sector, two of them were also active members of local associations (Local Tourism Organization, Agro-tourism association). One stakeholder actively participated in LAG II Board of Directors and the other represented a local cycling club. The sampling strategy appeared a relevant to illustrate the character of LEADER participation in Pomeranian rural tourism destinations.

In case of NATURA 2000 Program, the researchers performed a content analysis of the official opinions on borders of protected sites proposed by environmental experts (years 2005-06), that were requested by the Ministry of Environment from municipal, district, provincial authorities (Kronenberg & Berger 2010; Makomaska & Tworek 2003).

Next, the study employed methods such as passive field observations during public consultation meetings in Małopolska region (in total 20) (<http://www.muw.pl/PressArticlePage.aspx?id=5033>) and in-depth interviews (22 interviews) with the participating state officials and local authorities'. The analysis covered perceptions of the consultation program in Małopolska province and its' effects. The interviews were conducted in 3 sub-regions that varied in the number and size of proposed NATURA 2000 sites as well as the character of other protected areas, in order to collect possibly broad range of opinions.

Finally, the researchers carried out the analysis of the meetings' protocols (available from websites of Regional Directorate for Environmental Protection, RDEP, in Kraków, Małopolska province, and in Rzeszów, Podkarpackie province) and the online forum about the current phase of NATURA 2000 implementation on the Information-Communication Platform (ICP, <http://pzo.gdos.gov.pl/>). Current meetings organised by environmental administration aim at engaging the main stakeholders in development of management plans for each NATURA 2000 site, whereas the ICP platform is designed to serve as a tool for general public consultations on these plans.

Results

The model proposed by Arnstein (1969) identifies different levels of citizens' participation linked to their real impact on decision-making. At the bottom of the ladder are *manipulation* and *therapy*, which describe levels of "non-participation" which to external actors may appear as genuine participation. The real objective of these 'non-participatory' forms of decision-making would be to enable power-holders to "educate" participants. Higher levels of involvement (*informing, consultation, and placation*) are defined as "tokenism" as they allow participants to be informed and to have a voice.

According to this simple model there is a critical difference between empty rituals of participation and redistributing power to affect the outcome of the decision-making (Arnstein, 1969). Many participatory methodologies allow the power holders to claim that all views were represented but practice makes it only possible for some of them to benefit, and therefore it maintains the status quo. The following sections will focus on the two leading programs, LEADER development framework and NATURA 2000 program. With the model being guideline of how to view and evaluate the character of participation, the following sections focus directly on the results of our studies.

LEADER

In Poland, major rural developments have occurred through funding within the Rural Development Program 2007-2013 with total budget estimated for 17.2 billion Euros (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009). LEADER has been implemented within the RDP 2007-2013 to establish local partnerships that would integrate rural societies (Local

Action Groups) and thereby LEADER would improve the quality of stakeholder's participation in local development (The LEADER approach: A basic guide: European Commission, 2006). Representatives of local interests established Local Action Groups (local partnerships) that further provided opportunities for local stakeholders' interactions and at the same time were responsible for distributing LEADER funding.

Since then, funding within the LEADER framework has been limited to a formally established Local Action Group. It concentrated only on the implementation of the successful strategies. The implementation process is being continued but no generally accepted indicators measure of how successful it has been so far.

Along with changing economic and political environments the character of stakeholders' participation in local associations has evolved. The area of LAG I is unique because of its tradition of entrepreneurship (Restaurant Owner, 20.09.2010). This local entrepreneurship bloomed in the early economic transition and led to creation of an organization (Farmer I, 27.07.2010; Accommodation Owner, 31.08.2012). The base for LAG I activity were partnerships among several tourism stakeholders who had good relations with local public officials (Restaurant Owner, 20.09.2010; Accommodation Owner, 31.08.2010; Skeptic, 28.08.2010; Local Artist, 01.09.2010). LAG I actions were effective because they sought to engage local representatives who would communicate general stakeholders' concerns (Restaurant Owner, 20.09.2010)

"I think that cooperation goes well ...this is the community that acts together ... groups that hold together can achieve something."
(Restaurant Owner, 20.09.2010)

Mobilization of tourism stakeholders in LAG I aimed at maximum utilization of local resources (Accommodation Owner, 31.08.2010; Tour Guide, 31.09.2010). Participants were not afraid to express their mind and they expected to gain control over local processes:

"We can discuss and express different views [and] ... at the end we reach the point where all participants are able to work on a strategy or LAG I goals" (Restaurant Owner, 20.09.2010)

On the other hand LAG II has grown and its current size reduces the quality of participation (Farmer II, 08.05.2010; Director of the LAG II office, 11.08.2010). LAG II is developing a stakeholders' database that supports local workshops and training that would lead to increased number of applications for LEADER funding (President of LAG II Decision Board, 04.09.2010).

Two interviewees highlighted the difference between the current and the past character of stakeholders' participation in LAG I tourism actions (Father, 13.09.2010; Accommodation Owner, 31.08.2010). Promotion of events and local attractions used to be an important marketing tool and stakeholders participated in a variety of events in Poland and outside the country (Accommodation Owner, 31.08.2010). Nowadays, however, tourism promotion happens mainly through the Internet and 'word of mouth'. Participants aren't as mobilized and active as they used to be during early transition stage. Many past participants are not interested in influencing decisions made in the current LAG I (Father, 13.09.2010) as they don't understand the benefits from membership in local organizations (Accommodation Owner, 31.08.2010; Tour Guide, 31.09.2010).

Availability of funding is probably currently the main incentive to participate in LAG I. Once the distribution of funds is completed, it is expected that those stakeholders will lose interest in LEADER (Accommodation Owner, 31.08.2010; Farmer I, 27.07.2010). There is a possibility that others who no longer need financial capital from LEADER stay active in their villages.

“Possibly they will be active in the small fields they created with money from LAG – but not necessarily more than that” (Accommodation Owner, 31.08.2010)

Many stakeholders aren't interested in participation in LAG because their goals are different. They don't understand how they can achieve their goals through participation in LEADER. Interviewees recognized that current 'social apathy' is a significant barrier to social development through participation in rural areas (Small Agritourism Owner, 02.09.2010; Farmer II, 05.08.2010; Social Representative, 2.09.2010; Authorities Representative, 19.09.2010). Others, joined LAG I but they are more active in their villages. Some stakeholders regard themselves as local leaders and they want to promote development of tourism attractions (Small Agritourism Owner, 02.09.2010) joined LAG I to. In addition, Farmer II (08.05.2010) stressed that being elected by other stakeholders makes the representatives of local needs.

“In LEADER I am as the representative of local society, because from the beginning I was chosen by local society instead of being invited by the President of LAG I” (Farmer II, 05.08.2010)

Participation in LEADER may also be viewed as an access to solutions developed for the entire group as well as workshops and training (President of local tourism organization, 14. 09.2010).

Establishing Local Action Groups required a series of meetings at local and regional levels that included stakeholders from different areas (Father, 13. 09.2010). In the case of LAG I the meetings were designed to motivate farmers to use LEADER funding opportunities and exchange of experiences (Farmer I, 07.27.2010; Father, 13. 09.2010). Another set of meetings focused on the strategy development took the form of public debate (Father, 13. 09.2010) and aimed at the development of action plans (Restaurants Owner, 20. 09.2010). Many stakeholders, however, disengaged after the strategy and action plans were completed (Son, 17. 09.2010; Farmer I, 27. 07.2010).

Typically, activities within the LEADER framework are expected to utilize the participatory approach to strategy implementation. In LAG II participants usually felt capable of deciding what projects they wanted to pursue and what would be the most important tasks mainly during the first phase of strategy building (Farmer II, 05.08.2010). However some of the interviewees noted that at the current stage, implementation techniques are not necessarily inclusive of all stakeholders (Father, 09.13.2010; Son, 09.17.2010). Moreover, private stakeholders from LAG II feel that they commit their time and individual resources to implement strategic plan, while officials engage only in LAG II during their working hours for municipalities.

“Whereas private stakeholders contribute to LAG II because they believe in its advantage over other local organizations, officials only do what their job requires” (Farmer II, 05. 08.2010).

Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats analysis performed by stakeholders followed the brainstorming stage of strategy building. However, stakeholders' positive attitudes faded away due to the disappointment with LEADER procedures or other participants (Director of LAG II office, 11. 08.2010). Also, residents expected to be able to talk about their tourism-related concerns during meetings within municipalities but often those meetings were limited to discussion of emerging issues (Farmer II, 05. 08.2010).

Probably the most discouraging fact is that stakeholders who were involved from the beginning of the strategy building process are more welcomed in LAG II (the President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.14.2010). Also some stakeholders may feel that criteria for participation in LEADER discriminates against the new enthusiasts of LEADER because of

the invalid assumption that they have insufficient information about the program (Small Local Agriculture Owner, 06. 09.2010).

It is believed that LAG II must remain independent from the public sector in order to facilitate bottom-up initiatives of the private and social sectors (Director of LAG II office, 08.11.2010). The President of the LAG II Decision Board expressed concerns about LAG II dependence upon local authorities. Already, some municipalities sought to influence decision regarding their memberships (President of LAG II Decision Board, 14. 09.2010). The cooperation between sectors is also limited because officials view tourism 'as a cure' for all rural problems and they misunderstand the role of LAG II due to insufficient communication (President of the LAG II Decision Board, 14. 09.2010)

Perceptions of LEADER decision-making usually vary among residents. Some of them hold a negative view of current development efforts while others feel comfortable cooperating within LAG structures. It cannot be easily concluded whether participation in LEADER is truly empowering the residents of rural areas in Poland. More discussions about the rationale for programs similar to LEADER and adopted participatory methodologies are needed. The following section highlights the character of participatory methods adopted during designation and management of the NATURA 2000 sites.

Natura 2000

Another recent example of participatory efforts in Poland is the program NATURA 2000. In 2004, the European Ecological Network - Natura 2000 began to play a significant role in shaping the rural political landscape. This process proved to be a huge challenge for both the local communities and the various country level administration. This work highlights the four phases of the simultaneous consultations: official written opinions (OWO), consultation meetings (CM), Local Cooperation Groups (LCG) and Information-Communication Platform (ICP).

The first phase occurred simultaneously to selection of the sites. The Ministry of the Environment asked local authorities (municipal, district, provincial) for official written opinions (OWO) on the borders of proposed sites in their area (Kronenberg & Berger, 2010; Makomaska & Tworek, 2003). The second phase, practically implemented only in a few sites, theoretically and legislatively included about 16 Regional Directorates for Environmental Protection (RDEPs) which were to organise consultation meetings (CM). A example of a good practice of CM was The pilot social consultation project "Natura 2000 – meetings in the regions" („*Natura 2000 – spotkania w regionach*") initiated by the governor of Małopolska province (also see: Grodzińska-Jurczak & Cent ,2011; Makomaska-Juchiewicz, 2007)). The meetings aimed to provide information on NATURA 2000 network, as well as to consult borders of the proposed protected areas. Currently, General and Regional Directorates for Environmental Protection (GDPE and RDEPs) are implementing the project 'Development of management plans for Natura 2000 sites in Poland' under EU Operational Programme Infrastructure and Environment (POIS.05.03.00-00-186/09 *Opracowanie planów zadań ochronnych dla obszarów Natura 2000 na obszarze Polski*) that includes creation and application of two public participation tools: 1) collaboration on management plans with Local Cooperation Groups (LCGs) and 2) general public consultations on the Information - Communication Platform (ICP, <http://pzo.gdos.gov.pl/>).

It has to be stated that changes in the approach of nature administration bodies to decision-making have been materializing in Poland. We can even presume that obligation to implement NATURA 2000 created an occasion for Polish environmental administration system to transform itself, along with its standards in this matter. The most tangible sign of

happening transition is the fact of establishing the new administration bodies, directorates for environmental protection (GDEP and RDEPs) in 2008. Moreover, we can observe quite big effort towards environmental empowerment of the society in Poland, including implementation of the 'Law on access to information on environment and its protection, public participation in environmental protection and environmental impact assessment'. However, in general, these changes seem to be simply the results of the EU directives: Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC), Birds Directives (Directive 79/409/EEC, Directive 2009/147/EC), and Directive 2003/35/EC, which follows the so-called Aarhus Convention (Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters). Below we present the material illustrating what further goings-on and changes in social reality arose in Poland from the above mentioned facts.

In local government representatives' opinion, written in OWO phase, NATURA 2000 is rather an obstacle, no an engine of attractiveness' increase of the areas it covers. Such perception has complex historical-socio-economic grounds (Grodzińska-Jurczak & Cent, 2011; Kloskowski, 2010; Kluvankova-Oravska et al., 2009; Pietrzyk et al., 2009). However, it should be noted that respondents expressed themselves under time-pressure of 30-days period for giving opinion on NATURA 2000 program they had hardly known. Therefore, analysis found conflicts perceived in that time, but not necessarily objectively existing ones.

CM phase gave possibility to express opinions to a broader spectrum of actors, particularly while pilot public consultation project "Natura 2000 – meetings in the regions" in Małopolska. The meetings had open character and in practice every interested member of the community could participate. RDEP employed both independent experts and, what needs to be emphasised, professional moderators to help RDEP officials to lead the meetings. Organisers invited local authorities and various levels officials, as well as local residents for the meetings. However, invitations sent to municipal offices sometimes did not reach all the groups, e.g. private land owners – RDEP didn't specifically ask to inform residents on the meeting.

CM participants generally perceived the meetings as very important, providing useful information and needed for assuring NATURA 2000 would not prevent economic development. Some of them actively engaged in following work on NATURA 2000 sites' borders. Despite this facts, including participants into decision-making was only partially realised. In many cases, the CM were organised too late in relation to sites' selection. Lack of experience on both the experts' and local communities' sides, is also possible cause of this state.

Work on management plans together with Local Cooperation Groups (LCGs) created for each NATURA 2000 site gives, in its assumptions, a possibility to communicate with local stakeholders and 'ordinary' citizens. According to the project each LCG has 3-4 meetings for discussions and/or workshops during writing the project of management plan. Modern and interpersonal approach to work on management plans for NATURA 2000 sites was expected to strengthen local communities' view that this conservation is legitimate, and improve cooperation of different stakeholders in NATURA 2000 management (Kiszkurno, 2010). This way of realising nature conservation is still very new in Poland. Similarly, the idea of consulting the projects of management plans with the society on a digital platform (ICP) is actually quite novel in our country.

Coordinator of management plan chooses 'main stakeholders' and sends them invitations to LCG. These usually consist of regional (provincial), district and local (municipal/gmina's) officials, mayors, state forests' and NGOs' representatives, and sometimes crucial entrepreneurs or rectors of local parishes. 'Ordinary' citizens, including land owners, very seldom come to the meetings. The question if the local authorities represent them is still open. E.g. informing residents about the meetings in advance would allow them

to present their views to the mayors before the meeting. Unfortunately, there are no grounds to expect that anybody informs them on the LCG meetings, (also no announcements on the RDEPs' websites providing the term of the meetings).

However, the most striking question is what is really discussed during these meetings and what was decided before. During consultations on sites' selection (CM) people who asked '*what limitations will emerge in this area?*' were informed the management plan would regulate it in the future and they would have the opportunity to engage in work on it. Instead, it occurs, establishing NATURA 2000 site in particular area simply results in planning specific activities or constraints and the only question discussed is what is the easiest (the cheapest?) way to realise directives' goals. Discussions carried on by RDEP in Podkarpacie do not really touch local communities' needs or aspirations linked to the land subjected to protection. In comparison, RDEP in Kraków, Małopolska, had learned much from the experience of CM, so it organised even pre-project meetings in several locations. However, unfortunately, it reported only the meetings up to 2009 on its website.

In spite of the fact that LCGs' coordinators assure ICP will be the main tool for communication besides the LCGs' meetings, the tool has not provided much communication to this days. Although many LCGs have started their work (LCGs for some sites have already finished their series of meetings), only one project of management plan is available at the ICP till now (October 2012), and this is for the site covering solely communally owned land. Actually, there is no discussion on this plan on ICP forum.

Moreover, we can observe several barriers of participation in ICP consultation. First of all, one have to register and give his/her name, and only than he/she can see the uploaded documents and comments on forum. One cannot write any comment anonymously. Representatives of one environmental NGO have already raised two issues restricting their participation in consultations on ICP. One is the time suggested by GDEP for consultation of management plan is only 7 days. It is definitely too short time for reflecting on so long and complicated document, even for the people so devoted to nature as environmental NGO representatives, not even mentioning 'ordinary' citizens. Second thing is that, at the same time, comments sent on the forum are verified by the forum's administrators, what causes inconvenient delays.

Discussion

In the post-communist setting, stakeholders may also restrain from participation in development processes if they believe that the public sector remains the leader and the role of the private sector is rather unclear. In LEADER, the main interactions across sectors are still due to meetings within the framework. LEADER projects connect tourism stakeholders and encourage the use of local resources embedded in relationships between them. However the question whether participation in LEADER and similar programs leads to stakeholders empowerment by giving them better control over the decision making remains unanswered. Therefore we would like to encourage the participants in this conference to share their experience and studies about LEADER or similar initiatives in other countries.

On the other side of the spectrum, the new environmental administration appears to work toward greater empowerment while implementing NATURA 2000 program. However, it seems either these efforts are a 'successful masquerade' or the agency is simply inefficient. Up to now, "what power holders (GDEP and RDEPs) achieve is the evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving <those people>" (Arnstein 1969), what indicates participation in NATURA 2000 implementation in Poland is on the level of Consultation on the Arnsteins "ladder of participation". Possible causes of agencies' inefficiency are misinterpretation of the 'participation' as a model, restricting/inconsistent law or even lack of interest in participation. Low participation and disengagement, observed also

for instance in monitoring of biodiversity may be a signal pointing out how immature Polish society is and its continues disempowerment in the current EU context.

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