Practice of inclusion of residents in the operation of Hungarian municipalities

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Abstract

Inclusion of local residents in the decision-making in communities, in urban planning and in delivering municipal services has intensely been debated in the scientific community and among practicing planners. Underperformance of communities and failures of programs have proven that inclusion of locals with their social networks, skills, prowess and expertise have beneficial effects on the long-term performance of a community.
In a research carried out within the Municipal Coordination Office of the Ministry of Interior of Hungary, we delineated and analysed the situation with the underlying and correlating factors and issues with various research methods.

Keywords: Inclusion, Participation, Municipalities

Introduction
Running a community requires information, knowledge, prowess, expertise, know-how of various kinds and ability to make decisions based on the former. It is safe to hypothesise that involving the citizens in the processes related to decision-making will benefit the quality, fundaments and durability of the outcome.

Methods prevalent in most of the last hundred years put the experts with their sophisticated academic education in the focus of managing and planning for the community; it became however gradually accepted that no expert may have the full spectrum of information and aspects encompassing all sectors related to, and affected by, planning and decision (Arnstein, 1969; Jacobs, 1961). Analysing the possible techniques of public participation, however, necessitates the examination of the underlying local power structures and decision-making mechanisms (Mollenkopf, 1992) as well as flow of information.

The involvement of the public is first beneficial for the additional knowledge and aspects, and second, as a means to lessen conflicts and negotiate widely accepted resolutions. To achieve these goals, various methods have been elaborated and put in practice worldwide (Rowe & Frewer, 2000) with mixed results.

Present technology propounds novel methods of gathering, managing and analysing data on municipal level, usually referred to as 'smart city', but effectively doing so demands the careful inspection of the social and institutional processes connected to the operation of the local municipalities.

Between 2016 and 2018, an extensive research was carried out within the Department of Municipal Affairs of the Ministry of Interior of Hungary, to describe, analyse, assess and evaluate the practices of local governments in Hungary in terms of involving local residents in the decision-making processes and delivering municipal services.

The research had produced a huge set of data and studies the thorough elaboration of which requires long further years but even demonstration of the analysis accomplished so far is well beyond the limits of a single paper thus some major results will be set forth.

Hypotheses of the research

Inclusion of the residents in decision-making and delivering services is in general beneficial and several methods are being legally prescribed, though different local governments realise it on varying degree with diverse effectiveness the level of which reflects characteristics of the local society, especially the state of the local community. We also hypothesised that more extensively and intensively a local government involves the local residents, including the worse-off, the more successful the community is. On the other hand, residents value more their neighbourhood in better performing communities thus they are more successful economically and in terms of liveability. Furthermore, better-off and more educated citizens expect that their opinion be taken into consideration.

In the research, we thus scanned the ways of local decision-making, the methods of participation and the mayor actors within, their underlying assumptions and intentions, channels of flow of information from the local governments to the residents and techniques of feedback, state of the local community and trust and methods of community building. We also included in the investigation the usage and effects of the new communication methods, including Web2 techniques and mobile applications.

Methodology

Extensiveness and complex nature of the research goals required the usage of compound approaches, including qualitative and quantitative methods. Description of the general situation necessitated the usage quantitative methods but analysing the underlying factors and delineating the structure of causation required the intensive involvement of qualitative techniques of social research.

Altogether 58 extensive case studies of municipalities were accomplished based on 301 in-depth interviews with local decision-makers, opinion-leaders and citizens. The sites of the case studies were selected to represent the mayor types of towns and villages and to have some specific characteristic rendering them somewhat unique. Though the number of the sample, that is less than 2 per cent of all municipalities of the country, does not allow stating generalisable conclusions; it allowed, however, formulating statements on the relation and causation among different factors. The case studies were supplemented with three focus group interviews with representatives of the related ministries, municipalities and local residents, respectively.

To enable formulating generalisable statements, various quantitative methods were used. Besides using the data made available by the Central Statistical Office of Hungary (KSH), original data gatherings were also brought about. A survey was online sent to all Hungarian municipalities the 79.3 per cent of whom replied. This level allows generalisation only with serious limits, but it serves as a good indicator for attitudes and practice.

Moreover, a survey of a representative sample of 1,800 interviewees was carried out that allows detailed description and analysis of the attitudes, experiences and opinion of

the general population of Hungary. Comparing the three above mentioned quantitative methods offered an even finer means of investigation.

In the following some major findings and conclusions will be outlined.

Importance of community
The case studies showed that the state and characteristics of the local community and the strength of the local identity play an elementary part in the operation and success of the village or town. The survey of the population of the country allowed deeper study.

A variable was constructed to measure the strength of social connections from variables in the survey. Table 1 shows that those with more people to rely on have a better assessment of their community.

Table 1: Social embeddedness and assessment of neighbourhood

N=1810		Strength of Social Connections					
		Very Low	Low	Moderate	Expanded	Very strong	Total
Recommendation of the Neighbourhood to Others	Yes	68,90%	82,10%	78,30%	86,80%	90,90%	80,10%
	No	22,40%	14,30%	17,50%	7,60%	4,80%	14,70%
	No opinion	7,30%	2,20%	4,20%	5,00%	4,30%	4,60%
	No answer	1,40%	1,40%		0,60%		0,70%
	Total	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%

A somewhat different picture can be observed when evaluating the development of the residence (Table 2). Those with exceptionally strong social connections have better view over the success of town but residents are on the whole a bit more critical in general.

Table 2: Social embeddedness and valuation of town/village

N=1810		Strength of Connections					
		Very Low	Low	Moderate	Expanded	Very strong	Total
Valuation of the development of the town/village	Very low	2,70%	0,80%	2,00%	0,90%	2,20%	1,70%
	Low	9,70%	8,80%	5,50%	4,70%	3,80%	6,70%
	Moderate	38,90%	34,20%	32,80%	31,00%	32,30%	33,90%
	Good	33,50%	41,00%	39,30%	43,90%	37,60%	39,20%
	Very good	12,70%	14,30%	19,10%	17,50%	21,00%	16,70%
	No opinion	2,20%	0,80%	1,30%	2,00%	1,60%	1,50%
	No answer	0,30%				1,60%	0,20%
	Total	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%

Nonetheless, the patterns show that strength of the social connections and valuation are connected. The tables show not only that more connected people have more positive attitudes towards their residence but also that in neighbourhoods with better community the locals feel more development and attachment.

Table 3: Social embeddedness and trust in mayor

N=1812		Strength of social connections					
		Very Low	Low	Moderate	Expanded	Very strong	Total
Trust in Mayor	Very low	3,2%	1,9%	2,9%	2,3%	3,2%	2,7%
	Low	7,0%	5,2%	4,0%	2,3%	4,3%	4,6%
	Moderate	29,4%	28,4%	20,4%	20,2%	13,9%	23,1%
	High	38,3%	38,6%	37,9%	39,5%	31,0%	37,7%
	Very high	17,5%	22,9%	30,4%	33,0%	44,4%	28,2%
	No opinion	3,8%	2,2%	3,3%	2,6%	1,6%	2,9%
	No answer	0,8%	0,8%	1,1%		1,6%	0,8%
Total		371	363	549	342	187	1812

Similar pattern may be observed when analysing the acceptance of the mayor (Table 3). The picture is clearer compared to the one given in Table 2. Mayors operating in more integrated communities are more trusted and thus better accepted.

Table 4:Citizens' involvement and success of town/village

N=52		Subjective level of involvement					
		Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high	Total
Level of subjective successfulness	Very low	3	4	0	0	0	7
	Low	1	4	2	0	0	7
	Moderate	1	6	9	3	0	19
	Successful	1	0	3	7	2	13
	Very successful	0	0	2	2	2	6
Total		6	14	16	12	4	52

The state of the local community determines the settings the local decision-makers work in. In a well-knit social fabric, the channels of information flow to and from the local government, forums of socialisation and communication among locals enable better founded processes and goal settings. On the other hand, better communities can select

more appropriate leaders; whereas in larger communities, intermediary key actors, such as opinion leaders, are more able to gather and transmit information.

Table 5:Typology based on local identity

Level of Local Identity	Major Category, Settlements…	Subcategory
Low	With atomised society	Dominantly low status
		Dominantly high status
	With mixed society	Polarised
		Non-polarised
	Dominated by dominant employer(s)	Single employer
		Few employers
Moderate	Socialist industrial towns	Transformed successfully
		Stalling
	Peripheric with significant low status residents	
	With serf or peasant traditions	
	With traditions of lower nobility or craftsmen	
High	Dominated by small-town élite	
	Oppidum with strong identify or minority-dominated	
	With strong burghers' traditions	

The surveys and other statistical resources allow only a general evaluation of citizens' role in the management of the community. The case studies, based on in-depth interviews on the other hand, permitted to scrutinise the link between citizens' involvement and success of the town, labelled 'subjective' due to the nature of data gathering (Table 4). The correlation is twofold: there is no community with high or very high level of citizens' involvement that are not at least moderately successful, but the correlation does not stand the other way: there are successful communities with lower level of public participation. That is to say, there are other key factors behind the success of a community. In smaller communities, formal methods of public inclusion are less necessary and thus not properly operated, but in the background, elaborated means of feedback and information flow may be run.

Other method of success include channelling the flow of financial resources, either from within, that is, local enterprises and major companies, or from without, from state redistribution. Success may also be based on power structures relying on the support of a smaller select groups. They can be either part of the local élite but in some cases a peculiar

alliance between low status, often minority, groups and a fraction of the local élite may turn a town successful.

Table 6: Community size and trust in mayor

N=1812		Size of the Community						Total
		<1000	1000-4999	5000-19999	20000-49999	50000-	Budapest	
Trust in Mayor	Very low	5,0%	1,2%	4,5%	4,0%	1,4%	2,8%	2,8%
	Low	7,1%	1,2%	7,0%	6,0%	5,2%	3,7%	4,6%
	Moderate	21,3%	16,6%	25,9%	26,4%	24,0%	25,7%	23,0%
	High	28,4%	38,2%	33,4%	37,8%	46,4%	36,1%	37,7%
	Very high	34,0%	38,2%	26,7%	21,4%	20,7%	26,9%	28,2%
	No opinion	4,3%	2,4%	2,5%	2,5%	1,7%	4,9%	2,9%
	No answer		2,1%		2,0%	0,6%		0,8%
Total		141	421	359	201	362	327	1811

It is important to affirm that power structures relying not on the local community are very sensitive to changes and thus far less stable in the long run.

Case studies have proven that local identity stands behind the strength of community. Their analysis allowed a proposition of typology of communities along the identity (Table 5). Identity usually stems from socio-historical background and a stability of the community. Rapidly changing communities, especially ones doomed by the influx of less integrated strata and high level of commuting, regardless of their social status, have a tendency to dismantle social connections and turn into atomised local populace. Whereas strongly knit local societies are based on historical values and distinct set of values and attitudes.

The mayors are effectively the sole representatives of the communities, the faces of the towns and villages. Their role was proven essential according to the research.

The sole key player
From the smaller villages to larger cities, the mayor is the one whose statements are sought for, whose opinion matters and whose promises are taken seriously. Other actors on behalf of the municipality are regarded less important by the population thus the activity and performance of the mayor is of key importance. The mayors are generally well accepted by the residents (Table 6).

Mayors are even more important in smaller communities where they are personally connected to the individual residents. Other results of the research prove that communities hinging on the knowledge and skills of the mayor and town council are more successful

than ones dependent on external expertise, especially in communities with strong social ties.

Acceptance of the mayors differs among diverse social strata, measured with the best proxy as level of education. Higher status people have in general more trust in the mayor but not without critique as they are best accepted among the least educated (Table 7).

Table 7:Status and trust in mayor

N=1812		Level of education			Total
		Maximum of 8 years of school	Maximum of 12 years of school	University degree	
Trust in Mayor	Very low	3,3%	2,6%	1,9%	2,6%
	Low	5,0%	4,7%	3,7%	4,6%
	Moderate	23,2%	24,0%	19,9%	23,1%
	High	29,3%	40,2%	43,6%	37,7%
	Very high	34,3%	24,9%	28,7%	28,3%
	No opinion	4,6%	2,2%	2,2%	2,9%
	No answer	0,4%	1,3%		0,8%
Total		522	969	321	1812

The personality and modus operandi of the mayor therefore set the circumstances within which inclusion of the locals are realised. Mayors relying on the community have to actively communicate towards the residents – or its select groups – and gather their feedbacks. Personal methods are prevalent but new methods are gaining ground.

Online methods and communication gap
Web-based methods and other means of electronic communication are integral part of the everyday practice of local governments and although generally considered convenient the ways of their usage still and all reflect a high variance and numerous considerations.

Debates on online sites tend necessarily to harsher tones, especially when anonymous participation is allowed (Santana, 2013) that discourages a great deal of municipal actors from allowing comments or feedback on the websites. Discussions quickly turning into bashing or harassment in a limited size exclusionary group with strongly opposing opinions is an everyday experience in online discussions that is regarded avoidable by many actors. The phenomenon of trolls is among the most mentioned in interviews in this regard. Moderating the debates could be a way out but that would require financial and personal resources many municipalities could not allow.

Financial aspects come into view from another direction. Setting up and constantly running a municipal website and often another social website in parallel is often beyond the capacities of especially smaller municipalities. In the villages, personal contacts dominate and other means of gathering information and feedback play a secondary role thus such local governments do not see the online activity important. Most of the mayors even in larger community reported on the paramount importance of face-to-face interaction with residents. Some bigger and richer municipalities, on the other hand, run

elaborate online tools, including online discussions and public hearing, smart phone applications and others.

One would assume more educated people use the new technology more. The analysis showed a different picture. The upper strata prefer communicating directly with representatives of the local government where they most likely have straight connections to and more importantly they do not observe social, thus communication, gap between themselves and the key figures of the local power structure. Poorer, less educated residents, however, face an almost insurmountable gap, especially when having to enter the unknown and estranging territory of an official building, particularly of a larger town or city, thus they tend to use impersonal means of gathering information for what online tools seem adequate.

Conclusion

Community with strong identity is the key factor behind the long-term and stable success of a neighbourhood, village, town or city. Level of mutual trust among residents and easy flow of communication, regardless of being personal, impersonal or online, are key factors. Community building with various means, including social, economic and architectural methods are thus appropriate ways leading to more successful settlements.

Communication is the other key factor. Forming appropriate, easily legible and comprehensible messages towards the community is the difficult but elementary task of local government as well as constructing and maintaining the channels of information, including feedbacks with the least possible clogs, involving the traditional and newest methods as well.

Acknowledgments

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