

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICES AND ITS ROLE IN DECISION-MAKING FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Parashqevi Draci^{1*}, Majlinda Velcani²,

¹ University "Aleksander Moisiu" Durres, Public Administration Department, Durres, Albania,

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-3333-3524

² University "Aleksander Moisiu" Durres, Public Administration Department, Durres, Albania,

* Corresponding author email address: pdraci19@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to highlight the perception of residents about public services provided by the local government and 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 study of literature, 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 area of study for the collection of primary data. The results of this study show the fragility of the approach of community involvement in local government for local planning and development in the study area. The improvement of public services and the active participation of residents in local planning and development is one of the most important objectives of local government reform. Efforts for sustainable development, referring also to the data of this study, should be accompanied by efforts to build and consolidate the community field.

Keywords: *Public decision-making, community participation, public services, local development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Local government creates the possibility of direct exercise of democracy and participation of residents in development processes. Local institutions have the legal responsibility to inform residents how local economic resources are used and to ensure their participation in local government decision-making for economic, social, and cultural development. The active participation of residents in local planning and development leads to a better definition of priorities and responsibilities, for a greater engagement of citizens and local government, and helps to better understand their roles, aspirations, and expectations. Increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of public funds in support of sustainable local development in meeting the expectations of residents will contribute to the improvement of the quality of local governance. Nowadays, the comprehensive approach to local government decision-making 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 the right interaction and makes the residents themselves guide 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) the solution of problems begins with the participation of residents in the decision-making of the local government, 3) the perception of residents about public services provided by local

government, 4) residents' perception of participation in public decision-making for the allocation of economic resources by the local government.

Research methodology: The research method in this study is based on the study of literature, 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 area of study for the collection of primary data. The results of the data analysis show that most of the residents interviewed do not know the development plans of their residences. 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, 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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of citizen involvement in policy-making is treated as one of the most important aspects for improving the quality of local governance (Oliveira & Campolargo, 2015; Sadoway & University, 2018; Trencher, 2019) which is reflected in meeting the real needs and expectations of the community. For this reason, policymakers are committed to promoting to encourage the engagement of the population by turning this into a practice of local governance (Correia, Marques, & Teixeira, 2022; Correia, Teixeira, and Marques, 2020). The achievement of local development objectives seems to depend on the adoption of a participatory model including meaningful community engagement,

together with other actors and local government that will lead to agreement on development directions and goals (Faulkner, 2003). Participation was defined as the organized efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations (Stiefel and Wolfe: 1994:5). Participation is defined as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them (World Bank, 1995). Among other aspects, it is important that these practices remind citizens of their role (Carreira, Machado, & Vasconcelos, 2016). Cort ´es-Cediel, Cantador, and Bolívar (2021) reviewed the literature and the initiatives of the EUROC-ITIES network and noted an increasing interest in smart city projects involving citizen participation, mostly on the governance side. But, according to Wolf, Borges, Marques, & Castro, 2019, very little research has been done on the methods used to promote participatory methods' democratic role and the respective barriers that exist to citizens' participation. According to this perspective, the focus is on the direct participation of key stakeholders, instead of indirect participation through elected representatives. 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 community views. Engagement and involvement of multiple groups are considered very important issues in a sustainable development approach and the action by citizens is aimed at influencing decisions taken mainly by public representatives and officials.

The community field is similar to other specific social fields, except that it pursues the common interests and needs of the entire community. Indeed, a locality's economy, sociocultural characteristics, and physical resources are essential parts of the life and experience 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 (Bridger et al. 2010). 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 their way of life, and possess information about how similar problems have been solved before where they live. The importance of citizen involvement in policy-making is treated as one of the most important aspects for improving the quality of local governance (Oliveira & Campolargo, 2015; Sadoway & Univeristy, 2018; Trencher, 2019) which is reflected in meeting the real needs and expectations of the community. For this reason, policymakers are committed to promoting to encourage the engagement of the population by turning this into a practice of local governance (Correia, Marques, & Teixeira, 2022; Correia, Teixeira, and Marques, 2020).

Among other aspects, it is important that these practices remind citizens of their role (Carreira, Machado, & Vasconcelos, 2016). Cort ´es-Cediel, Cantador, and Bolívar (2021) reviewed the literature and the initiatives of the EUROC-ITIES network and noted an increasing interest in smart city projects involving citizen participation, mostly on the governance side. But, according to Wolf, Borges, Marques, & Castro, 2019, very little research has been done on the methods used to promote participatory methods' democratic role and the respective barriers that exist to citizens' participation (Wolf, Borges, Marques, & Castro, 2019). 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 Jeffrey C. Bridger and A.E. Luloff, 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. (ODPM, 2005, p. 6-7). Community-based development is also positive because it avoids conflicts between different actors involved or different interest groups, implements the policy of coordination and helps to create synergy by sharing knowledge, opinions, and skills among all community members. (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 sustainable in the long term. Local government has the opportunity and advantage to better address the preferences and needs of residents, but often local decisions, policies, and programs do not consider the full social, economic, or environmental consequences they cause in local communities. 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 investigate 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 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 worried about the future of the country where 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 participation process is not to implement a plan that someone else has already made or designed, but to find 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" (Atkisson, 1995); 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 participation in the sense of a published survey, rather, it involves understanding, consideration, and problem-solving as a component essential 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 helplessness, 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. In this way, the inclusion and active participation of residents in the development process in their residences can be realized. They will be motivated to contribute to increasing the responsibility of the local government for the good use of economic resources to increase the well-being of the residents. Also, it is important that the planning approach is captured by the dominant values that exist in the community and to the extent that these values are incorporated into the vision for the future (Simpson, 2001).

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 for the collection of primary data. The study method consists of interviewing randomly selected residents to get their thoughts and opinions regarding the measurement and evaluation of the indicators taken 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 encompasses the Sukth, Katund i Ri, and Rrashbull administrative units in the Durra Municipality. Residents of this area are populating target that owns the information we desired to respond objectives of this study. The method of choice is based on the concept of random selection. It is considered the best technique to select a representative sample. It is a probability choice, so each element of the population has an equal probability of being part of the solution. 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 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.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

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

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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	8-year education	50	Employed	22
36-55 years old	38	F	63	Medium education	41	Self-employed	17
56-65 years old	30			High education	9	Unemployed	61
Over 65 years old	12						
Total	100		100		100		100

Source: Questionnaires completed in the study area

The data presented in Table 2 show residents' assessment of the most important public services provided by the local government that affect their level of well-being.

Table 2. Residents' responses regarding the improvement of public services after the merger with the Durres Municipality

	Are the services provided by the local government improved after the merger with the Durres 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

The data presented in Table 3 show residents' assessment of recognition of local government plans and the use of economic resources for the development of their 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

The data presented in Table 4 show residents' assessment of participation in the planning process for local development.

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 show that of the interviewed residents, it is estimated that public services have not improved, 62% estimate that they have not improved and 24% estimate them at the same level and only 14% think that they have improved. 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 the opinion of the residents on the development plans; 99% of them do not know how economic resources are used by the local government.

Most of the respondents of residents (98%) think that their participation in the planning process is necessary, and only 5% of them say that the local government takes the opinion of the residents about the development plans, and 88% of them say that they are not given the opportunity to be part of the process.

DISCUSSION

The guiding principle of this study is that community involvement in economic planning and development is a key element in local development decision-making. 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 realized that their participation in the planning process for the development of their settlements is necessary. However, local government institutions must understand that the purpose of the participation process is to find new solutions by the residents themselves for problems that concern them and that 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.

CONCLUSIONS

The strengthening of local government is one of the priorities of the administrative-territorial reform in the country in order to increase the quality of the provision of local public services, but the results of the study in this paper show the shortcomings and problems of local government related to the participation of residents in the planning process and improvement of public services. Decision-making for local governance is often dominated by the narrow interests of different groups, avoiding the active participation of residents in the process of local planning and development. Sustainable development requires that the process of local planning and development be as comprehensive as possible, and this dictates more and more the need to build and consolidate 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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