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Possible Role of Universities in Shortening the Timescale of Change of Social Embeddedness through Participatory Actions

Abstract: Resources addressed in this work are human and social ones. They are integral parts of the institutional arrangements domain from the rural web concept. Institutional arrangements are drawn parallel with New Institutional Economics (NIE) in this study. Inside NIE the paper focuses on Social embeddedness. Social embeddedness as the first level of the institutions is understood as Mental Models in this paper. The literature underlines that Social embeddedness is the level of the institutions where longest timescale is needed for change. The study tries to examine if participatory actions initiated by Universities, helping generating dialogues and discussions, can shorten the timescale of social embeddedness so as to improve the results of rural development policies. The methods used along the paper are case studies, where the authors of the paper carry out participatory actions in a region of the North Great Plain Region of Hungary. In our paper we discuss that different participatory actions (rural action learning, participatory action research, participatory video etc.) could shorten the period of change on level one and also examine and underline the role of Universities in this process.

Keywords: participatory actions, rural development, social embeddedness, universities

Considerations on the theory of rural development and empirical studies led to the definition of six dimensions of the rural web (Figure 1). Though these dimensions might be readily distinguished from each other, they cannot be separated, as the web exerts its strengths simultaneously across all dimensions. These six domains are defined as important elements of rural development, in our understanding the local economy.

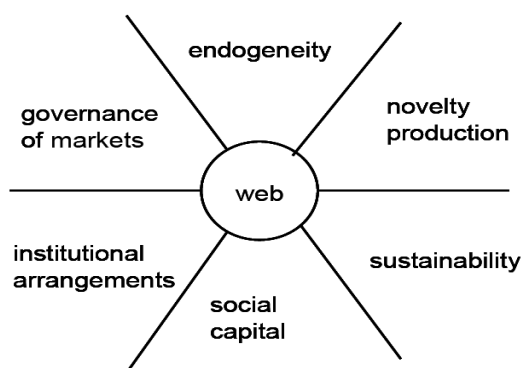


Figure 1. The theoretical dimensions of the web

Source: van der Ploeg et al. 2007, p.8

From the six domains, this paper focuses on institutional arrangements and social capital.

Institutional arrangements – NIE, social embeddedness

Authors of this paper understand Institutional arrangement of the web as the frame of *New Institutional Economics (NIE)*, where four levels of institutions are defined – social embeddedness, institutional environment, governance and resource allocation (Williamson, 2000) – with different timescale for change on given level.

Inside NIE the paper focuses on Social embeddedness. Social embeddedness as the first level of the institutions can be understood as Mental Models (2006) from Senge. He writes (2006), that new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting. Mental Models (Social embeddedness) are active – they shape how we act. If we believe people are untrustworthy, we act differently from the way we would believed they were trustworthy. Social embeddedness is the level of the institutions where longest timescale (50 to 100 years) is needed for change (Table 1). On the other hand today's environment needs much quicker change. Marquardt (2011) in his book on how to build learning organisations, writes that among crucial issues today's

corporations facing we can find: doubling of knowledge every two years and spiralling need for organizations to adapt change. Adapting change needs trust from the society, if there is trust in society adaptation is quicker.

Table 1. Period of change on different levels of institutions

Four levels of institutions	Period of change years
<i>Social embeddedness</i>	<i>50 to 100</i>
Institutional environment	10 to 50
Institutions of governance	1 to 10
Incentives and motives	Continuous

Source: Williamson (2000)

One way of shortening the period of change in the case of social embeddedness could be teaching and organising dialogue and discussion. In dialogue, deep listening to one another and suspending of one’s own views. By contrast, in discussion different views are presented and defended and there is a search for the best view to support decisions that must be made at this time (Senge, 2006). Participatory actions could give place for learning dialogue and discussion.

Researchers at the University of Debrecen Faculty of Applied Economics and Rural Development try to translate theory to practice with initiating local actions, motivating regional movements and participatory attitude. Universities are considered to be knowledge centres and theory focused institutions; it is evident that scientific research results are pooled mainly at these centres but there are often neglected by local actors. With distributing the research results and experiences collected, social changes can be influenced and accelerated.

Case study region

Our former results (Katona et al, 2011) on the modes of governance in four Local Action Groups (LAGs) operating in the North-east of the Great Hungarian Plain showed, that the examined LAGs (including the LAG where the participatory actions demonstrated in this paper were carried out) mainly positioned themselves with the level 3.7 (on an evolutionary path going from the first to the eighth). On this level the LAG has to more frequently play an active role as project promoter.

Lukesch (2007) calls attention, that a Local Action Groups (the examined region also part of a LAG) mirrors the socio-cultural environment in which is embedded, as such it also reflects the prevailing styles of governance. Lukesch (2007) suggests to reduce the complexity of the real world by using a two dimensional model when looking at local action groups (LAG) from outside. The two dimensions are the mode of governance and the modes of operation. Lukesch (2007) in adaptation of a model from social psychology distinguishes

eight styles of governance. The eight styles represent levels of complexity, which means that the evolutionary path goes from the first to the eighth. There is a connection between the modes of operation and the modes of governance. In less diversified, hence less evolved socio-economic contexts, as in our case study area, the need for animation actions will be more significant. (Lukesch, 2007) Lukesch (2007:20) defines animation actions as follows: *“They move people and bring them together in new ways. They allow changing the look on local aspects, turning barriers to potentials. Aim to create meeting space and fora, to prise open incrustated structures and beliefs. They strip up innovative ideas and encourage people to live their dreams. Animation actions aim at discovery.”* Keeping this definition in mind it will be visible, that participatory actions demonstrated in the paper could be part of these animation actions. Through promoting participatory competences and regional identity, participatory actions could also play important role in building trust between involved actors, so as reducing the timescale to change social embeddedness.

In Hungary, in the last decade migration from rural areas intensified, most of the people left presumably in the hope of employment and a better living. If current tendencies remain, we have to reckon with an unfavourable change in the age structure of the population in all regions, the continuous decrease of the active-age population, and the concomitant rise in the number of inactive citizens. (Hungarian Gov, 2007) The examined local administration unit (LAU 1) is situated in the most disadvantaged labour market regions of Hungary, also affected by lack of commuting possibilities (Oláh-Pakurár, 2011).

What kind of vision can we have for the future of rural regions in Hungary? The vision, this paper tries to address is linked to local economy, where the control of the process in rural regions, following neo-endogenous rural development, is an interplay between local and external forces. The success of rural development policy and its instruments (such as LEADER programme) is largely defined by available local resources among which human and social capital are important elements. The idea is that governance of a rural region is influenced by the institutions and participatory actions could play important role in forming them. Different case studies as examples for actions coordinated by the University of Debrecen Faculty of Applied Economics and Rural Development are presented and conclusions are drawn from the results.

Three forms of Participatory Actions

Central features of participatory actions carried out along the research are in line with Rural Action Learning (Schockemöhle et al., 2010). Similarly to RAL the concept is aimed at promoting the regional identity and participatory competences of people in rural regions.

Three different types of participatory actions were carried out in the Balma-zújvárosi LAU 1 region. This region belongs to one of the above mentioned

LAGs with less evolved socio-economic contexts. In the last 20 years (from 1998 to 2008) its population decreased with 6%, 30,502 people lived in the LAU1 in 2008. The first action addressed all LAU2s of the region (the region has 4 LAU2s), while the second and the third only one. Table 1. gives information about the main features of the participatory actions carried out in the region.

Table 2. Information about the three participatory actions in the examined LAU1

Participatory actions	Action 1	Action 2	Action 3
Number of addressed LAU2s	4	1	1
Focusing on	regional identity - regional thinking	participatory competence - creativity	participatory competence – dialogue
Population addressed	primary school students of all LAU2s	primary school students of one selected LAU2	inhabitants of one selected LAU2
Duration of the action	6 months	3 months	1 month
Contractor	assistant professor and student from the University	assistant professor and student from the University	assistant professor and student from the University
Financial source needed	250 euro	200 euro	20 euro
Source of funding	Bolyai research fellowship	CEE Citizens Network	Bolyai research fellowship
Number of inhabitants involved	about 20	over 50 (1% of total population in the selected LAU2)	about 10 (0.5% of total population in the selected LAU2)

Source: own data

First participatory action – regional identity

Along earlier works of the authors they have met the problem that inhabitants in rural regions, when thinking about the future, forget to keep in mind that near to their Local Administration Unit 2 (LAU2 = settlement) there are other LAU2s with similar attributes, resources (in our case being part of the Hortobágy National Park). They think about the other LAU2s as competitors and not as partners with whom they can reach their goals easier. The question behind this action was how attention to this problem could be called and how the eyes of people could be opened.

The idea how to foster this new type of thinking came from the work of a Hungarian new media lab, called Kitchen Budapest, who published a book the “Subjective atlas of Hungary” after the concept of Annelys de Ver. As Lajos Parti Nagy puts in his introduction “Whoever encounters this strange and self-evident book, can learn strange and self-evident things about Hungary”.... “The country is a million scents, flavours, fragrances, sweetness, bitterness, inflamed sincerity and sour unmentionables, a cobweb in time and space, intellectual and emotional matting, of which without a pretence at or even spasm

of completeness and being representative, the stock comes into being which we define as “Hungary”, here and now, within the front and back covers, naturally subjectively, and again, right from the very beginning.” (de Vet – Bujdosó, 2011:17)

As work of Schockemöhle et al. (2010) had the result that younger participants tend to show stronger parameter change than adult participants, the calls inviting for the creation of the subjective atlas of the selected LAU1 region, were placed in all primary schools (all together 7) in the region. Children had to create groups and got 4 weeks to prepare a map of their region. Different prizes were offered for the winners. Finally 5 groups with 8 maps (one of the maps, Picture 1.) took part in the competition.

Results showed that from the seven schools addressed, only two took part in the competitions. It is an interesting result, that children alone, just to win the prizes (for example Aquaticum tickets) did not organise groups and did not take part in the competition. Only those children prepared their map, where there were committed teachers behind. An explanation for the success of the next participatory action could also be the teachers of the local school with whom, along this first action, a good relation was built.



Picture 1. Subjective Atlas of the examined, Balmazújváros LAU1

Source: work of the children from primary school of Balmazújváros, LAU2

Second participatory action – creativity

A student from the University and helping with the organisation of the Subjective Atlas competition decided to write her Thesis in connection with the development of the thermal bath of their settlement in the examined region. This action had close link with the subjective map competition as children of the primary school were invited to take part in a common thinking about the future development of the Thermal Bath in their settlement. This second ac-

tion was advertised along the closing ceremony of the primary school before the summer holiday, where the prices of the Subjective Atlas were handed over. The local government, the tourist office and the thermal bath was ready to give place for the competition, but they asked to plan it after the summer programme of the settlement. Finally the date chose for the competition following the suggestion of the primary school and the local government was at the end of September. It turned out that the selected week was the Voluntary Participatory Week for Citizens, and there was an open call for such programs. So there was an idea to apply for funding from the Citizens Network. The student from the University applied it and won about 150 euro for the primary school.



Picture 2. Participatory action – Development of the Thermal Bath

Source: own photo along the action

In the program children had different tasks, focusing on the future of the thermal bath and different information about the settlement. The aim was to improve participatory competences, to call attention of students that they can play role in planning the future of the place where they live. Along the games children had the vision of a modern bath with new hotel with different services. They also had idea to build on tradition and use again the recipe of old people in the city, who prepared cake from the plant of the river Tisza. Finally children had the requirement to start water polo training for them using the pools of the bath.

Third participatory action – dialogue

As in the second case this action is also linked to a student's thesis at the University, where farmers and there link to markets were examined. Following the work of Kelemen et al. (2010) results were tested in the way of a Forum, a common thinking with inhabitants (it was a feedback and its testing). The aim was to start a dialogue on the basis of the results and learn from each other, try to think about the necessary steps for the future.

The event was a bottom up organisation carried out by the student. It was advertised through posters and snow ball effect. Finally we had 7 participants, but they were very active. One of the participants after the event wrote in his letter, that he felt disappointed. He thought that they should turn from criticising to be active.



Picture 3. Local Forum

Source: own photo along the action

Along the dialogue, after the presentation of the results, pairs were formed and they got the task to collect products of the region. The diverse products were grouped. The need for dialogue was expressed the program lasted for 3 hours. The outcome was that inhabitants need a common vision and a better communication between different participants. The leader of the local government, who helped in the organisation, accepted to publish the outcome of the Forum in the local newspaper. It is very important as well, because those who did not participate but read the “story” of the event may be ready to be there on the next one.

Discussion

As it was presented in the paper quick changes are needed today, but the society, especially in rural regions are not ready for this change. Social embeddedness or mental models build a strong barrier. In our opinion, participatory actions, as a kind of animation action, could speed up the transition, could help increase social capital and could shorten the period of change in the case of social embeddedness.

Following the results from earlier study of the author (Katona et al., 2011) and results demonstrated through the case studies, Universities could play an important role in participatory actions, and could increase the development of rural regions. With the involvement of students they could create bridges between Universities and rural regions. Especially when students forming

a bridge arrive to University from the region, where these actions are running, and they are motivated enough, the work can be very successful. They can even create link between different actors. Participatory action has the best effect if the University tries to keep in touch with the selected rural region. In our case studies, we had the experience that a very good cooperation has started with the primary school who took part in the first two actions. Continuity, regular participations, communication and results achieved could build trust, which is an important element in shortening timescale of change.

Over trust building supporting talent increases self-knowledge which is also an important element of community development.

The implementation of the learning activity at the regional location requires duration from three or four hours up to several days, plus time for preparation and follow-up processing. An interesting question arising on the basis of the results and their importance: why curriculums of the present education systems do not involve such kind of actions.

We are in a big dip as invest in relation need time and effort (Godin, 2007) and further time is needed when these relations bring economic results, which is the most important indicator at present time to start up processes.

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