HOW TO INVOLVE INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS INTO THE PROCESS OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Jak zahrnout neformální instituce do procesu místního rozvoje venkovských obcí

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Annotation

The topic of this paper is informal institutions (InIn) in community development, with a focus on rural communities. The trouble with InIn, however broadly their importance for the qualitative aspect of development is acknowledged, is that they are difficult to grasp. We therefore attempt to design and test a model that a) contributes to a more holistic consideration of these dimensions of community development and b) is realistically practicable in local development with local actors. We refer to this model as "integrated community development" ("ICD"). In designing the model, we are aware of the dynamic nature of InIn and the fundamental role of local actors. Therefore, the starting point is to identify together with them an expression for InIn that is understandable and engaging for them (as non-experts). The methodological framework is participatory action research. The main methods are in-depth interviews with locals and case studies of three municipalities following the process of validating interventions taking InIn into account. The main results are detailed findings on the operation of two of these elements: community platform and community coordinator, both in terms of site-specific solutions (situations) and in terms of contribution to generally applicable theories and practices.

Keywords

informal institutions, local development, strategic planning, community coordinator, community platform

Anotace

Tématem příspěvku jsou neformální instituce (NI) v rozvoji obcí, se zaměřením na venkovské obce, které obvykle nemají kapacity holisticky rozvoj obce řídit. Ačkoli se obecně hovoří o tom, že jsou pro kvalitu rozvoje důležité, zůstávají stále mimo metodiky strategického plánování, neboť jsou v praxi obtížně uchopitelné. Pokoušíme se proto navrhnout a ověřovat model, který a) přispěje ke komplexnějšímu uvažování o těchto dimenzích rozvoje obce a b) bude reálně praktikovatelný v místním rozvoji s místními aktéry. Tento model označujeme jako „integrovaný rozvoj obce" (IRO). Při jeho vytváření jsme si vědomi dynamického charakteru neformálních institucí a bazální role místních aktérů. Proto je naším východiskem společně s nimi hledat vyjádření pro NI, které pro ně (pro laiky) bude srozumitelné a oslovující. Metodickým rámcem je participační akční výzkum. Hlavními metodami jsou hloubkové rozhovory s aktéry a případové studie tří obcí sledující proces ověřování intervenčních prvků zohledňujících NI. Hlavními výsledky jsou podrobná zjištění k působení dvou z těchto prvků: komunitní platformy

a komunitního koordinátora, a to jak na úrovni řešení specifických místních problémů v daných obcích, tak na úrovni příspěvku pro obecně využitelné teorie a praktiky.

Klíčová slova
neformální instituce, místní rozvoj, strategické plánování, komunitní koordinátor, komunitní platforma

JEL Classification: *R58*

1. Introduction

Experts from both academic and practical circles have long agreed that the current model of strategic planning for municipal development has considerable reserves and that it is more than desirable to seek its modernisation in order to make more use of the potential of planning for real local and regional development. A key shortcoming of the current approach is the neglect of the role of informal institutions.

Institutions are increasingly seen as key factors in the success or failure of endogenous development processes in a globalized world (Vázquez-Barquero and Rodríguez-Cohard, 2016). Rodríguez-Pose (2013) points out that informal institutions are more important than traditional (economic and structural) factors for community development, but also adds that their characteristics prevent us from working with them sufficiently and integrating them into the strategic planning process. The main reasons are their difficulty to operationalise and structure, their immeasurability, their variability over time and their inertia compared to formal institutions. However, this does not justify ignoring them; on the contrary, it is necessary to look for ways to innovate traditional strategic planning with elements of informal institutions.

The aim of the article is to show that although any methodological support is lacking (for a number of objective reasons), it is possible and necessary to seek a deeper understanding of the municipality as a community of citizens and of the relationships and phenomena that may be even apparently hidden and that can be collectively described as informal institutions. We therefore attempt to propose a model that will remedy this deficiency, or at least contribute to a more comprehensive consideration of the various dimensions of community development. We refer to this model as "integrated community development" (ICD).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The role of informal institutions in local development

Strategic planning is a social process through which a large number of people in different institutional relationships interact to design a joint process and determine the content and strategies for achieving spatial change (Healey, 1997). The fragility of such interactions and processes is obvious. Nurturing basic social trust is as important as developing material assets. Trust, along with values, unwritten norms of behaviour, conventions and culture, is one of the most frequently cited informal institutions and one of the few over which there is a broader consensus (when deciding between classification as formal or informal) (Sýkora, Raška and Koutský, 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). The tendency to incorporate them, to establish them by adopting them as the basis for a regulatory and legal environment is observed (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003).

Regional development theory is traditionally an economics-led discipline (Blažek and Uhlíř, 2020). In the 1980s, the theory of endogenous growth began to emerge, opening up consideration of the internal factors of development and actually bringing the importance of informal institutions into play. Institutional economist D. C. North (1992) distinguishes between formal institutions enforced by courts and informal institutions enforced by individuals who bear the costs of non-compliance. Informal institutions refer to networks of relationships based on the communicative contacts of individuals and are created by repeated interactions within a community. Institutions are not a purely economic category; they are a subject of interest to sociology, psychology, political science, philosophy and other disciplines, and this capacity for interdisciplinarity should be strongly evident. It is therefore desirable to focus more closely on how local people relate to the community and its development – in their thinking, feeling, and acting, thereby shaping the present and future of the community. Thus, a concern for a thorough understanding of the specific local context (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose and Toma-ney, 2010) and a focus on local change agents (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020) is key: from feasibility assessments (Barca et al., 2012) to implementation measures to improve local and regional institutional capacities that shape the creation, adoption and absorption of high-quality human capital and innovation. The critical factor in development processes is not so much the number of institutions, but rather the strategic collaboration and coordination of agents and institutions (Vázquez-Barquero and Rodríguez-Cohard, 2016). In this way, some of the limitations of formal institutions can

be overcome and actors and resources can be mobilized for local development (Escandon-Barbosa et al., 2019). Mobilizing informal networks can also activate formal institutional resources (government, formal community organizations and private enterprises). However, it should be noted that research on informal institutions in local development is still rather at an abstract level.

2.2 Historical context in post-socialist countries and shortcomings of current strategic planning practice

In terms of the functional relations between formal and informal institutions, the region of post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe has its own historical specificities that still have a strong influence on the current state of institutions and planning culture. The era of socialism had a detrimental impact on the quality of informal institutions: business practices were interrupted, the loss of private property broke down existing customs, public relations were suppressed etc. Thus, entering the post-transition period meant a significant absence of institutional arrangements. These countries tried to recreate institutions either from the pre-socialist era or by drawing inspiration from Western countries (Sucháček, 2013). It was also reflected in the form of strategic planning for local and regional development. After the period of centrally planned economy, the rejection of planning initially was prevalent. However, this changed with the accession of the transition countries to the European Union, when strategic planning became strongly motivated by European cohesion policy (Dąbrowski and Piskorek, 2018). Therefore, municipalities started to create their strategic development plans with the main motivation of obtaining European subsidies for their development projects. The central focus of plans became their consistency with the supported areas to be eligible to apply for funding.

This practice has led municipalities to a one-size-fits-all model of strategic plans that do not allow for contextual reflection of perceived quality of life. This approach, without taking into account local or regional institutions, has resulted in a series of copycat plans. This situation has been described as an isomorphic approach to development (Chien, 2008). Ježek (2015) speaks of a long-term crisis of strategic planning as it is characterised by particularism and resignation to the overall concept of the municipality development. Nevertheless, this experience has also brought some positive aspects, such as the planning proces and partnership approach being learned. Today's situation opens up the challenge of developing methodological approaches to be more reflective of local conditions, needs, actors and their preferences and value orientation. Three gaps and needs are to be addressed:

a) Only general methodologies are commonly used for strategic planning and management of local development with the aim to protect the basic quality and structure of the planning process and resulting strategic documents (Binek et al., 2014; Přikryl et al., 2014). These steps are supposed to be creative activities. However, contrary to proclamations about the creativity of the planning process, very often only a mechanical application is observed in practice. A technically well prepared analysis cannot or will not assess the deeper relations and influences on the future development of the community.

b) The current challenge is to move beyond the traditional sectoral approach. Instead, it is supposed to coordinate the separate sectors for the purpose of the overal, holistic development of the settlement. The conventional development plans focus on addressing particular sub-aspects of the municipality, such as transport, environment, facilities, education, tourism etc. The fact that they try to "integrate" these sub-objectives into some overarching vision or global goal does not change the matter. This sectoral methodology is universally replicated in different municipalities, notwithstanding the fact that local contexts vary.

c) Especially in small municipalities, there are a number of obstacles, in particular weak institutional structures, leading to a low quality of the process of preparation and approval of public strategies. However, the process of developing a strategic plan is perhaps even more important than the final strategy document itself (UN-Habitat, 2009).

2.3 A framework for research on holistic approaches to community development and strategic planning

The above-mentioned arguments and many years of experience with practical strategic planning of local and regional development in our post-socialist context led us to propose and test a model that attempts to eliminate some of the fundamental shortcomings or at least to contribute to a more comprehensive consideration of the various dimensions of municipal development. We refer to this model as "integrated community development" (ICD)[1] (Jíra, Krbec and Vyhnánková, 2018). It emphasises the role of local context, informal institutions and the action-based nature of the development programme.

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[1] Although we are aware that in the context of cohesion policy, integrated planning is considered to be simply the bringing together of sub-topics into a coherent set of projects to be financially supported by different operational programmes, we stick to the name ICD in order to encourage thinking about a truly integrated approach.

Common development strategies focus on the questions: what do we (already) have and what do we (still) need in our town. But, a strategy is meant to seek answers to very different questions: who are we (as a community), where are we going and what ought we to do. A community is not a collection of assets in a defined area, but a community of persons. If we ignore this key issue, we devalue citizens into mere users of infrastructure and services and the community into an institution that provides them. This reduction notwithstanding, it is this concept of the municipality, which is predisposed only by the economic view, that prevails in real planning. The municipality is defined here only by its usefulness to its inhabitants. While this reductive planning understands the development of a municipality as growth – the growth and management of assets (infrastructure), we wants to expand the concept of development to its qualitative dimension, i.e. the maturation of its community. If the pursuit of real, integral (not just material) development is to be successful, it is desirable to enrich the current practice of objective, pre-established goals with tentative ones. Tentative goals require a specific methodological approach that accepts their openness and tentativeness, but at the same time does not abandon the claim to a holistic view and necessarily envisages the personal participation of the individual in their formulation, reflection and implementation. And here we come to the key role of informal institutions. Informal institutions are related to the culture of the society and operate (unlike formal institutions) at a tacit level, shaping the perceptions and judgments of persons and communities in their environment (Escandon-Barbosa et al., 2019). The institutional environment is therefore closely linked to the values and principles adopted by the community (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003), which should be reflected in community development plans.

We realise that informal institutions have a special, let's say twofold form: (a) the culture of the community (values, people's relationship to reality, interpersonal relations, etc.) is mirrored in the decisions made about their future (i.e. the culture of the society is mirrored in the concept of plans, i.e. in the planning culture), and at the same time (b) the planning culture (how people think about the future, about development, what they consider changeable, etc.) shapes that social culture. We have attempted to operationalize informal institutions using reference to organizational culture theory (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Schein, 2010; Sýkora, Raška and Koutský, 2022). In the context of planning culture, informal institutions can be divided into three levels: from (1) general cultural and social contexts in which we generally operate and cannot be reshaped in the short term, such as religion or tradition (these are called social environments), through (2) those that influence the conditions for the planning process (planning environments), to (3) the most specific ones that can be targeted with direct actions (planning elements).

3. Methodology

The aim of the research is to investigate ways to incorporate informal institutions into strategic planning and management of municipal/community development, fully aware of the difficulty of this task. A significant risk, even if this attempt were to proceed successfully, is the danger that it could be formalised again, emptied, made into a mechanical process. Therefore, in our attempt to create such a model, we must take care to prevent this from happening. Institution building is influenced by a number of contextual factors, so there is no one-size-fits-all solution. We have tested the model in three rural communities in the Ústí nad Labem region (Tisá, Blatno, Velké Chvojno) within the framework of the social innovation project "IKM Communitas".

We set three research objectives:
1) Together with local actors in small villages, seek an expression for informal institutions that is understandable and inviting to them (laymen, non-experts) in both language and content.
2) To find out what importance local actors attach to them and how they treat them in their thinking and actions. Then specifically test how they can be treated in strategic planning or implementation of community development.
3) To test methodological ways to integrate them sustainably into strategic work. We defined two basic planning elements that we tested: the community platform and the community coordinator.

The role of the community coordinator facilitates or initiates communication (between citizens and the municipal council, between associations and interest groups etc.); maps needs and opportunities and mobilises local potential and mutual aid; connects and animates the community platform through daily activities. She/he seeks solutions to care for citizens and communities within and from outside. The community platform is then not only an amoebic group of local leaders, but above all a space for meeting and dialogue, a relational space where citizens engage with their community. It develops its agenda related to the expression of values, visions and priorities, seeking shared goals and a path of implementation. Its purpose is also to draw the others into a dialogue about the future of the municipality.

We followed these methodological steps:
1) Features of the municipality as an set or mix of informal institutions

Based on content analyses of strategic plans and ideas about informal institutions from the literature, we have preselected and articulated several features of holistic, evolved planning that will augment sector-focused infrastructure planning. These features describe informal institutions in their dynamic conception, i.e., as both outcomes and agencies. They include: The thematization of values as what is personally more important to residents to be protected than something else, and whether they can agree on this. Personal anchoring in the village, attitudes towards the village through questions about what the village does for the residents and what the residents do for the village. The thematization of interpersonal relationships and consideration for others through questions about what they know about the quality of life of their neighbours and how solidarity manifests itself in the village. It is about perceptions of their village, ideas about its future, growth and shape; the extent to which they share the vision; and how the development programme is perceived and formed.

2) In-depth interviews

According to these features, we have prepared basic thematic headings of questions for citizens. In each of the three model villages we conducted initial interviews in the form of semi-structured individual in-depth interviews and focus groups. Thus, these were not standard interviews such as what is lacking in your village, list the five biggest needs etc., but rather a deeper insight into their perception of their own life in the village, asking how they evaluate their life, what they are facing, how they are doing, how they feel anchored in the village.

Approximately 35 respondents participated in each village. Initial interviews were conducted by a member of the expert research team in the presence of the community coordinator. After the first 5-7 interviews, the coordinators took the initiative independently, sharing the transcripts with the team so that we had a check on the quality and comparability of the data collected. The interviews were not audio-recorded but were carefully recorded in written form as notes. All interviewees were given the opportunity to check that their statements were correctly recorded and, if necessary, the opportunity to modify them further as they wished (approximately 10 % of respondents took advantage of this opportunity). From a methodological point of view, it is important that 80 % of the interviews were carried out by the community coordinators of each village, which allowed them to (a) get to know the village in depth, (b) get to know the local actors and (c) establish their role in the village.

3) Validation of the community platform and community coordinator model

From these initial interviews, an initial snapshot of the community was created, mapping the specific situation, relationships, sentiments, values, attitudes and insights of the different communities in the participating villages. This became the starting point for the following activities in each community. The presentation of the community input snapshot opens a problematic situation, a tension to be discussed among local actors. This was intentionally used as an opportunity to initiate the crystallization core of the future community platform. We assume that by bringing informal institutions into focus through questions and organizing community platform meetings, local actors start to think and discuss them more and are encouraged to look for a common agenda for their platform. The process, in fact, is that informal institutions are not only thematized (in words) but begin to imprint themselves in their attitudes and actions. There is no pressure to engage them, but rather we just reflect together on which ones take hold and how.

This participatory action research in the three municipalities has been running for about two years. Considering the participants, it was called the "integrated community development project". It involved three types of actors: (a) members of the academic research team as facilitators of the dialogue, and also in the roles of experts in management and strategic planning, social and field work, education, evaluation and philosophical reflection; (b) community coordinators, who are trained for their role in the research project; (c) local change agents who were approached by the project. The involvement of community coordinators and the formation of community platforms required the full commitment of the project team members in the field and deep insight into the social situation. The confidence and informal relationships that were gradually built up allowed for the application of an anthropological approach when applying the methodological procedures themselves and when evaluating their impact.

4. Results

In the following we present a selection of findings that came both at the beginning (4.1) and at the end of the research project (4.2) and are relevant to our research inquiry.

4.1 Initial findings on informal institutions

The aim of the initial phase was to gain insights from the residents of the community; rather than just working with explicit socio-economic parameters, as opposed to conventional strategic planning, the aim was to move into the realm of informal institutions. The interviews were conducted in an informal atmosphere, not pressuring people

to solve the problem, but rather may open up or just remind people of forgotten perspectives. The findings can be summarized in three points:

a) Values and the future
The explicit question about values took a significant majority of people by surprise: no one had ever interviewed them at such length and asked them about their value orientation and whether they shared it with others. However, it turns out when they get the opportunity, they like to start talking about it. They mention relationships – to a place and its specifics, to a place as one's home, to the people who live around, to a way of life. When they talk about shared values, there is a wish to maintain the rural character of the village, to preserve the quality of the countryside, quiet, good relationships and community life. They are afraid that it will be very difficult to defend this position because of external pressures (urban sprawl, developer influence etc.).

The initial research provided a key finding: what people consider valuable and important for a good life does not appear in traditional strategic plans. This gives a strong argument for working with informal institutions or tentative goals. Further important findings relate to the concept of values themselves. It has been shown how strongly embedded is the idea of values as some kind of ideals, substantives. Asking questions about how people themselves act towards these values or aspirations is new and in a way disturbing for the respondents. Most respondents were taken aback by the question of what they themselves do for the benefit of the community. After an initial hesitation, most answers tended to say that they participate in community events – some more passively, others more actively. A frequent response was: I would like to, but no one has called me. This reveals the need for communication within the community and identification of (informal) leaders.

b) Interpersonal relations, reciprocity and community
The question of neighborly reciprocity, help and consideration for the disadvantaged is again new to them, unprecedented. It is the only one of the whole set of questions in which the answers differ significantly. About a third of respondents perceive people in their neighbourhood as needing help and support from others. Some believe that most of them do not receive adequate assistance; that the municipality could do much more and that the level of neighbourhood assistance could be significantly higher. Others are of the opinion that the municipality is doing the best it can and that neighbourhood assistance and solidarity generally work very well. The third group does not see this issue as essential at all. These findings indicates very different social sensitivities in contemporary society, different individual concepts or attitudes towards the normality of human coexistence.

c) Development programme
There is very little awareness of whether the municipality has a development programme. If anyone knows of its existence, it is only vague, and usually states that it is a matter for the mayor and the municipal council. A shared vision for the development of the municipality, which respondents could at least frame, is completely absent. However, the majority of respondents declare their interest and willingness to participate in development planning. This is a further argument for a change of approach, in which citizens are not just passive observers of the process or, at best, those who take part in ad hoc discussions or comments on (someone else's) conceptual documents.

4.2 Nature of changes as reported by local actors

The participatory action research yielded findings or confirmation of three important factors: (a) the focus on the non-material sphere of development, (b) the importance of dialogue, and (c) the importance of local leaders. We present findings from the final in-depth interviews with 40 citizens. We observe what the participants perceived as the main purpose of the project and how they can describe it in their own words. We are not monitoring the procedural side of planning, but the inner changes in individual actors (attitudes, feelings, relationships, concrete actions).

a) The change in approach to community development: focus on the non-material sphere
Responses that indicate a shift "from the material to the immaterial / balanced development of the municipality, spanning both the material and immaterial spheres" are clearly predominant. Some have the "immaterial" linked to helping the disadvantaged and social work, some more generally to human relations and communication. In this sense, the project has clearly succeeded in achieving a real change in the thinking of active people in all three municipalities.

Some answers say how challenging but essential it is to learn to talk about things seemingly obvious. Not everyone is ready and willing to admit that people don't understand or can't interpret the concepts in many fundamentals and don't have answers to many "simple" questions. Working with these intrinsic shifts has become an important part of the project's work. Two years of participant observation has allowed us to map the development of their vocabulary and their ability to articulate this in their own words. Although a fifth of the respondents expressed that

they did not perceive a significant shift in themselves, the shifts are evident from the observations. The community coordinators, as central actors, also emphasize that some people attribute the changes in the villages to the project interventions only reluctantly, because they feel themselves to be their promoters. We see this conclusion positively, as it means that it has been possible to internalise the changes, to take ownership of them.

b) The importance of dialogue and communication platform
The actors clearly recognize a missing element in the functioning of the municipalities: to talk to others about their ideas, fears and dreams about the future of living together in our community. In the answers of local actors there is an increased emphasis on communication, relationships, connecting specific personalities, and on changing the perspective on coexistence in the village ("a group of active people in the village who can discuss with each other / ask questions about what life in the village means, what it should be like and what we can and should do about it."). They agree that this is necessary and important, but that it usually does not happen. In addition to the importance of dialogue, which is not about consensus, but about different opinions and perspectives ("issues opened up/disagreements emerged/debate started/more people voiced their opinions"), they also underline the need to find ways to talk to each other and to work with the answers. This is because without such a dialogue, a broader (public) specification for local development does not emerge.

This raises the question of who should be responsible for keeping such a dialogue going in the municipalities. The experience and opinions of local actors suggest that such a communication platform must be initiated and, at least initially, organised by someone "from outside" who knows how to do it (a community coordinator). They highlight a feature of apoliticality that makes it capable of polemics with the potentially one-sided view of the municipal council and sustainable in terms of independence from the election cycle. They suggest that it does not have to organize the municipal authority, although it should support it. These are important findings for further application of this model.

c) Personalities of local leaders and the birth of the community
Community and informal institutions are not just about cultivating conversations and opening up to non-material topics. The second feature of community is a sense of community, that is, kindness, gentleness, openness and sensitivity, acceptance of the other, personal maturity. Thus, the benefit of the community platform is therefore also the encounter with others as persons in themselves, which requires us to perceive and accept them with respect and dignity; it brings the cultivation of personal relationships. This feature and the changes are very difficult to demonstrate; they are implicitly evident in the way one's attitudes and actions have changed.

5. Conclusion

The project aimed to open up space for a shift in the concept of local development, reflecting the important role of informal institutions, and to test it in practice. The results of the research highlight the need to re-design the concept of strategic planning and development management and to show that new approaches represent a feasible way forward. In the context of planning culture theory, we used community platforms and community coordinators as the most concrete level of informal institutions (i.e. planning elements). Through their interventions, we sought to influence the middle level of informal institutions (i.e. the planning environment). The changes in the planning environment observed are a shift towards a dialogical approach and a value-based approach to community.

Among the concrete, practical results of the participation action research, three are the most important. Firstly, in one of the villages there has been a fundamental change in attitude towards the creation of a new development programme. The municipal council rejected the external developer's planning process and format, citing its lack of attention to community development, and advocated with our team for quality of life and community coexistence as the first goal of the programme. Secondly, in another village, the project brought together a larger elite in the village so that their activities and actions ceased to be isolated and began to work more synergistically. Because the group of local actors met regularly in a 6-week period from the project processes, the topics currently running in the village were brought to the table. In this way, the views of non-political actors were continuously reaching the decision-making sphere. Thirdly, the approach verified ways to engage "silent actors", i.e. those who have something to say but do not themselves claim a voice in public. The sensitive individual approach of the community coordinator has shown that they can be found and invited into the community platform. Reflection from the model villages shows that the process of gradual emergence of a community platform through individually mediated trust by a person, be it a coordinator or a citizen, has proven to be realistic.

In addition to the above mentioned contributions of the tested model of integrated community development, the project has provided further suggestions for future research topics. In particular, it is the requirement to focus on the non-material sphere of development. Here, the perspective opens up to develop the model of the mentioned

tentative goals of community development. The project has highlighted the contrast between the needs-driven versus the values-driven development. The issue of values, their meaning, identification and projecting them into the future development of the municipality definitely requires further research activities. Finally, even after the implementation of our project, there remains a persistent need for a methodological elaboration of the ways to make the new model a truly lived, implemented programme, not just a written one.

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