

Initiating transformative change towards urban sustainability: Participatory action research with marginalised social communities

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Summary

Since 2011 we work together with the Roma community in Szeged (Hungary) in the framework of participatory action research (PAR). We aim to contribute to social integration (urban social sustainability). We work in a hostile institutional environment – dominant social institutions do not support our goals because of extreme prejudices Roma face.

We analyse how PAR contributes to social change in such an environment. PAR helps in (1) understanding complex situations and (2) combining expert and stakeholder knowledge and competencies in creating initiatives for change. However, PAR is embedded in the wider institutional context influencing its capacity for success. Thus, there is no clear-cut connection between change initiatives as tools and transformative change as their result.

Although our case study is connected to urban social sustainability, because of the parallelism regarding the hostility of institutional environments our results are also useful to understand the transformative potential of PAR in environmental struggles.

Extended abstract

Concepts and approaches underlying our paper

(1) Local and/or urban level sustainability activities are important factors in the success of broader sustainability efforts. Within ecological economics intergenerational and intragenerational equity is an important aspect – or “decision criteria” (Gowdy-Ericksson 2005) – within the broader concept of sustainability. The urban context – often being characterized by extreme levels of density and inequalities at the same time – emphasizes this social dimension of sustainability (Pearsall-Pierce 2010).

(2) Beside, most **ecological economists** think that transformative/radical **institutional changes** (Spash 2012, Spash 2013) are needed in order to make significant moves towards sustainability, such as questioning economic growth as an ultimate social goal (Daly 1973, Illge-Schwartz 2009) and thus capitalism (Blauwhof 2012), fostering de-growth (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010, Kallis 2011) or overcoming the utilitarian approach of using cost-benefit analysis and monetary evaluation of the natural environment in social decisions (Spash 2013). However, these discussions in Ecological Economics do not meaningfully address the **role of scientific inquiry (within Ecological Economics) in sustainability transformations**, although serious doubt can be raised, whether conventional scientific research is able to support these.

(3) A specific scientific approach directly aimed at contributing to social change (beside scientific understanding) is **participatory action research (PAR)** which “*is a research which*

aims to include all relevant stakeholders in the process of evaluating a problematic situation in order to create changes and concrete actions” (Bodorkós 2010, 37. o.). PAR directly stresses participation in community decision-making processes and the changing of existing power relations. Its main characteristics are (Bradbury-Reason 2003, Bodorkós 2010, Bradbury-Huang 2010, Minkler 2004)the following:

- **Cooperative.** It is based on the continuous and regular cooperation (partnership, participation) of researchers and non-researcher stakeholder participants, from the setting of research questions to the utilization of research results.
- **Social science inquiry.** Researcher participants consciously apply the rules of scientific inquiry.
- **Action oriented.** One of its main component is action. The research process provides new ideas that guide action and it does not stop at the analysis and publication of research results but produces actions beneficial for the involved stakeholders and which are also ways of producing knowledge;
- **Reflexive.** Participants as change agents reflect on the PAR processes together on a regular basis.
- **Significant.** PAR is aimed at the solution of the problems of the voiceless/marginalized groups of society. It is aimed at establishing processes and knowledge which reach beyond the immediate context – it contributes to scientific knowledge creation, builds local capacity and empowers “powerless/voiceless” social actors.

The focus of our paper

Our paper is about our **participatory action research (PAR) work aimed at social sustainability transformations at an urban level.** Since the beginning of 2011 we (as researchers or researcher-activists) work together with members of the local Roma community in Szeged – we cooperate both with Roma leaders and families living in one of the local segregates. Our main aim – beside knowledge production – is to contribute to the local social integration of the marginalized Roma population.¹

Within the aforementioned aim our cooperation has changed a lot in the past years. Currently it is focused on three main areas:

(1) **Helping Roma families to be able to satisfy their present “basic needs”.** We have established close contacts with several (10-15) families. We support them on a weekly basis regarding their pressing everyday needs: housing (e.g. being able to heat their houses), basic health and educational expenses, helping them to be able to take part in public work programmes, etc.

(2) **Helping and empowering local Roma leaders.** Local Roma leaders are very actively involved in local politics – they try to give voice to the concerns of marginalized Roma people and foster social integration of the Roma.

¹ By integration we mean overcoming marginalization, exclusion and segregation by enhancing the capabilities (Sen 2003) of the marginalized.

(3) **Empowering future generations.** Together with local Roma leaders, a local Roma CSO and families we have established an educational program for children living in Roma segregates.

We have been running several **programmes/initiatives** in order to contribute to the aforementioned three areas. Such initiatives are (which are carried out in a cooperative way together with some of the local Roma leaders, a Roma CSO and families):

- We have established and run two **afternoon schools** in the closer neighbourhood of the two local segregates.
- We have also established a so called “**Patron Program**” where we connect local middle-class families with marginalized Roma families and the former help the later by (1) a small amount of money on a monthly basis and also with (2) other forms of help they need (e.g. helping to solve health and/or educational problems of their children).
- We **assist Roma leaders** with our resources and capabilities (e.g. our social capital and communication skills, but also with PAR projects like photovoice) in their political struggles.
- We help Roma leaders to **apply for funds and to be able to manage state- and EU-funded projects** in connection with health, education, public work etc.

Thus we can say that we managed to establish initiatives aimed at social integration of the marginalized Roma on the local level.

Transformative science for social change?

Our PAR work is carried out in a **hostile institutional environment**: an environment where **dominant social institutions** – as used in ecological economics (Vatn 2005) – **do not support the goals of our PAR project**. Our lay collaborators, Roma people face extreme prejudices in Hungary. Indeed, they are the social group facing the highest level of prejudices (Fábián–Sik 2006). Thus the general public (the majority of the non-Roma population) is often hostile towards integration efforts and meaningful/transformational integration is usually not-supported by utilitarian national and local politics (political elite) either – it is not supported by the wider institutional environment. On the other hand, CSO-s working on the issue of social integration often lack necessary resources (competency and/or money). Meanwhile, the extent of the “problem” is growing, the rate of marginalized Roma population has been continuously growing in the last decade within Hungary. In such a hostile environment social integration is a continuous struggle.

In our paper **we analyse to what an extent PAR is able to contribute to transformative urban social sustainability change** in a hostile institutional environment. We show how PAR is helpful in

- understanding complex situations of social conflict, and
- contributing to combine expert and lay knowledge and competencies in creating supportive and significant initiatives for change.

However, our experiences also show that **PAR is always embedded in the wider institutional context** which strongly influences its capacity for success, thus

- there is a significant difference, and no clear-cut connection between initiatives for change as tools, and transformative social change as a result, and
- achieving transformative social change in a hostile institutional environment demands long commitment from PAR participants (without a guarantee of success).

Thus **we analyse both the merits and limits of PAR in contributing to transformative social change in hostile environments**. Although our case study is connected to the social “pillar” of sustainability, we think that because of the strong parallelism regarding the hostility of the institutional environment regarding environmental struggles (Beddoe et al. 2009) our results might be useful to understand the transformative potential of PAR in environmental sustainability.

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