

Power Analysis in Environmental Decision-Making – A Case Study of Urban Waterfront Development

Summary

Our paper examines the power structures in local environmental decision-making. We address the following questions: how do the existing power relations influence the opportunity of using a resource and the opportunity of taking part in environmental decision-making? What are the dynamics of these structures when environmental decisions are at stake?

Our theoretical basis is the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen. We argue that the capability approach needs to be supplemented in order to integrate a natural dimension. Therefore we synthesize a capability model with Elinor Ostrom's general framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems. First, we develop an analytical framework to investigate power relations. Second, we evaluate a case study: urban waterfront development in Szeged, Hungary using qualitative research methods.

Theme: 4. Power, politics, institutions and the reality of achieving change

Subtheme: 4.1. Power relations and overcoming vested interests

Keywords: environmental decision-making, power structures, capability approach

The problem

The number of arguments in favour of citizen's engagement in environmental decision-making are growing in the literature [1]. However the practice of public participation is – especially in Hungary - insufficient. Thus, it seems to be adequate to ask, what the reason behind this phenomenon is.

It is often mentioned in the literature that existing power structures are reflected in public deliberation; that is why power relations interfere or even impede real public participation [2]. As a consequence, certain groups and interests remain unheard or voiceless in decision-making. The goal of this paper is to scrutinize why and how power relations influence environmental decision-making? What are the dynamics of these structures when

environmental decisions are at stake? Our paper investigates these questions through a case study of urban waterfront development in Hungary.

Theoretical background

Our theoretical basis is the capability approach developed by the Nobel-laureate Amartya Sen [3]. The core characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be (their capabilities). With other words: what are their real opportunities in life. For instance: do they have the opportunity to be healthy, to be educated, or to take part in the life of the community? Therefore, the evaluation of a development process or a social situation should focus on capabilities, on real opportunities of the community. The capability approach is used in a wide range of fields within social sciences, for instance: evaluating policies as an alternative to social cost-benefit analysis [4].

According to Sen, there is a difference between means and ends [5]. If an evaluation focuses on means, such as income or different kind of resources, then it fails to capture the whole picture of state of affairs. Because between means and ends there are different conversion factors that influence the use of the given resource. For instance: a person can have the necessary rights to take part in decision-making, but if conversion factors, like discrimination hampers her in actually taking part in decision making, then she does not have the capability to enjoy this right [6]. With another example: a person can have the right to fish in the river, can have the necessary skills and equipment to do it; if the waterfront is occupied with private properties, and she cannot get to the river, then she does not have the real opportunity of using the river for fishing.

In our paper, we argue that existing power structures can be conversion factors, when it is about the capability of using and managing a certain resource, like an urban waterfront. To answer the question, how power relations influence these capabilities, we develop an analytical framework. This analytical framework is based on the capability approach and uses the basic categories of this approach: resources, conversion factors, capability set and functioning. But we think that the capability approach needs to be supplemented, for at least two reasons. First, the capability approach has difficulties, when it aims for an environmental application, because it cannot take into consideration the ecological fragility and relative scarcity of resources [7]. Second, temporal dynamics at a systemic level are missing from a simple capability model and power structures affect typically at systemic level and have temporal dynamics. To illustrate: the power from expert knowledge strongly influences the

utilization of a waterfront, and this utilization influence the capability sets of users in the future. For this reason, we integrate Ostrom's framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems into our analytical framework, which can reflect on interaction between different systems [8].

In our framework, we investigate visible, hidden and invisible forms of power. Forms of visible power are observable decision-making mechanisms, for instance: city council. Forms of hidden power are the processes of shaping or influencing the political agenda behind the scenes, for example: using expert knowledge. Forms of invisible power are actors or behaviour that support or resist social norms and beliefs, to illustrate: discrimination influences the opportunity to take part in decision-making [9, 10]. We believe that for a successful, transformative policy-making, which embraces the interests of the marginalized stakeholders, knowledge about the prevailing power structures is indispensable. Having a more complete understanding of the power relations at play will help decision-makers to identify appropriate strategies and entry points for development programmes.

Case study

In our paper, we analyse an urban waterfront development process in Szeged, Hungary with the help of our analytical framework. Urban waterfront is typically an urban space where several interests are in conflict. For instance: private and public interests, concerns of conservationists, forestry or water management.

The river Tisza has two kilometres long riverbank in the inner city of Szeged, described by city park, quay and floodplain forest. There are two development projects in progress in this area. The first one is about to build a mobile dam to protect the city and the second one is about to build recreation facilities. In our research, we use qualitative research method: we analyse local documents, like local press, reports and we carry out semi-structured interviews with stakeholders [11, 12]. This is an ongoing research; exact results are expected in two or three month. About the preliminary results, we can claim in general that local decision-making can be described by the group of established actors, who have the power over the outsiders, like marginalized groups of society or even interests of nature itself.

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