Constructing communities around symbolic public issues: Instrumental and symbolic aspects

Közösségek konstruálása szimbolikus jelentőségű közügyek mentén: Instrumentális és szimbolikus szempontok

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Abstract

This study examines a specific, mostly hidden process of local development programs: the way the program influences the symbolic contents, in particular, the identity of the local community for the successful implementation of the program.

The social constructionist theory on communities serves as a strating point for the current paper. Cohen's theory, which conceptualizes the community as a constructed entity is one of the foundations; the other comes from the idea that the construction of a community is not necessarily a spontaneous process, but may result from purposeful political efforts.

According to Summers' typology, development programs can be labelled as either 'development in the community' or 'development of the community' programs, the former directed to modify the potentials of the community and the latter the internal relations of the community. The study concludes that this typology is inadequate for describing the relationship between the local development program and the local community. In fact, every development program consists of two sub-programs: the first (visible) subprogram has declared (instrumental and/or symbolic) objectives, and the other, mostly hidden subprogram is directed at manipulating the symbolic relations of the community to help realize the goals of the first one. This second subprogram could be most influential in the cases when the manipulation affects strong symbolic entities, first and foremost, the identity of the local community.

Keywords: *local development programs – social construction of local community – social construction of identity – manipulation of symbolic meanings*

Összefoglalás

A tanulmány a helyi fejlesztési programok egyik sajátos, többnyire rejtetten ható folyamatát vizsgálja: azt, ahogyan a programok tervezői hatást gyakorolnak a helyi közösség szimbolikus tartalmaira, különösen pedig identitására, a programok sikeres végrehajtása érdekében.

Az írás a szociális konstrukcionizmusnak a közösségre vonatkozó elméleti megállapításait veszi alapul és fejleszti tovább. Az egyik alapot Cohen elmélete jelenti, mely a közösséget konstruált jellegű entitásnak tekinti. A másik alapul vett nézet szerint a közösség konstruálása nem feltétlenül spontán folyamat, hanem származhat céltudatos politikai vagy más törekvésekből is.

Summers közkeletű teóriája szerint a fejlesztő programok feloszthatók 'közösségben fejlesztő', illetve 'közösséget fejlesztő' programokra; az előbbi a közösség lehetőségeinek, az utóbbi a közösség belső viszonyainak a módosítására irányul. A tanulmány arra a megállapításra jut, hogy ez a tipológia nem képes a helyi fejlesztési programoknak a helyi

közösséghez való viszonyát adekvát módon leírni. Valójában minden fejlesztési program két alprogramból áll, melyek közül az első, látható alprogram valamely (instrumentális és/vagy szimbolikus) célt fogalmaz meg, és törekszik annak elérésére; a másik, többnyire rejtett alprogram a közösség szimbolikus viszonyait módosítja az első cél megvalósulása érdekében. Különösen nagy hatású lehet a második alprogram, amennyiben képes a helyi közösség identitását a program számára kedvező módon megváltoztatni.

Kulcsszavak: *helyi fejlesztési programok – helyi közösség szociális konstruálása – identitás szociális konstruálása – szimbolikus tartalmak manipulálása*

Introduction

There is an inherent relationship between a development program and its geographical context, and the area is inseparable from those who are living there. The place and its population have a decisive impact on the development program and an adequately planned development program will have an impact on the place and its population. Behind the evident correlation there are hidden, serious academic problems, of which the present study intends to deal with the relationship of a development program and a local community. This relationship can be conceptualized according to several theoretical viewpoints, implying different goals, methods, and results.

Dominant economic, infrastructural and other priorities of regional development programs favor the functionalist approach, ignoring other aspects concerning the reactions of the local community. In reality, nor the planners, nor the members of the local community are neutral passersby, but active participants of the intrinsically interactive development processes. Participants can form the situation – among others – by construing their own interpretations on themselves, on the other actors, and generally on the whole context of the developmental program.

In every program, there are two parallel subprograms: an instrumental and an interpretative one. The instrumental ('visible') subprogram is linked to another ('invisible') scheme, in which the planners are manipulating the interpretations and the identity of the local community. This second subprogram can have a huge impact on the local community in the cases when issues with strong symbolic significance are placed at the center of the discourse.

Therefore the question presents itself: To what extent can the interpretive work – making and applying interpretations and exchanging them between the participants – influence the planning and application of local development programs?

The issue became highlighted in connection with one of the current land development programs in Hungary, the Old-Drava program. The declared goals of the project are the following:

"Old-Drava Program is a complex regional development program equally affecting the natural, social and economic spheres, which can create the conditions of sustainable development in the long term in one of the most disadvantaged regions of our country, the Ormánság. The Program may become the first national model program for regional and rural development resulting in durable solutions and, if successful, it can also be a model at international scale. (…) The Government of Hungary made a resolution on the Old-Drava Program on 17 July 2012." (Government resolution No. 1242 of 2012 (VII.17.)) According to the aims of the Government, complex conditions of long-term sustainable development, equally affecting the natural, social and economic spheres based on the

surface water system to be created at the planning area of the Old-Drava Program (which includes the major part of the Ormánság).

By analyzing the text the following observations can be made:

- The program defines goals which are predominantly oriented to the development of local economics, to management of the landscape and natural waters, and declares measures accordingly. Connected to these goals, there are some general objectives which relate to the local population ("to create quality of life"). The program has no specific measures for these general objectives, but considers them as evident consequences of the measures of economic development, landscape and water management.
- The document provides the interpretations of the planners as the only valid perception of the situation. Considerations that the local community may have different interpretations about the issues of their region or about the meaning of better quality of life are entirely missing.

Development programs are classified in the literature on the basis of how they relate to development of the local community. Programs can have different objectives regarding the local community: some focus on the development of the community, and others give priority to economic development and to other contextual elements. Although programs concentrating on economic and other environmental factors do have an impact on the capabilities of the local society, this approach is not considered as the development of the local community.

As Summers has asserted: "The development of specific community areas and systems, while contributing to enhancements of the local community, is not sufficient enough to lead to the emergence of community. The development of community seeks to enhance the social realm and relationships between people." (Summers, 1986, p. 352)

In order to make a clear distinction, Summers differentiated between development *of* community and development *in* community. The first directly affects the relationships within the community, and the second influences the opportunities of the members of the community. This approach became widely accepted in the development literature. (Summers, 1986; Luloff & Swanson, 1995; Luloff & Bridger 2003) According to Brennan (2013): "Community and community development are based on the assumption that they contribute to the social wellbeing and the self-actualization of community members. Community is enhanced when residents work together to address common issues. However, for development to be most effective and to maximize its impact within the locality, it must incorporate both social and economic needs. In understanding this process, the distinction between development of and development in community is important."

Another relevant typology in the literature classifies community development programs based on the theoretical aspects manifested in them. According to Hustedde and Ganowicz, local development programs usually relate to the local community following the logic of one of the three classical social theories to answer the main issues of community development (structure, power, and shared meaning). (Hustedde & Ganowicz, 2002) For a follower of the functionalist approach, it may be evident that the transformation of various structures (such as improving the economic opportunities) alone can create a better quality of life for the local population. However, from the perspectives of conflict theory or from a symbolic interactions view this is not at all obvious. This paper – with regard to the above distinctions – intends to deal with

'development in community', and not with 'development of community'-type of programs, from an interpretationist, namely, social constructionist approach.

The goal of the paper is to identify relevant theoretical frameworks for interpretive processes, creating and transmitting meaning between the planners and the local community, taking place in the context of 'development in community' programs (programs aimed at enhancing economic and similiar opportunities). There is a real need to understand the complexity of this relationship, but in the Hungarian academic literature it is not is not so common to apply an interpretive, more specifically, a constructionist approach to the relationship between the development program and the local community. What makes the situation most complex is that neither the designer nor the local community members are simply reflecting reality (which is 'out there'), but are constructing an intersubjective or internal reality, which they objectivate and identify as external. The interpretations of designers, community members and other stakeholders are real forces, which determine the identity and behavior of the participants. This, in turn affects the planning, implementation, acceptance or rejection of the program.

To raise a fundamental question: are planners of developmental programs are passive onlookers of the discursive processes, forming the interpretations and identities of the local community, or do they explicitly seek to change the way the local population looks at itself? The current paper reviews the perspectives on the construction of the place and the community; distinguishing instrumental actions of the development programs from the actions directed at modifying the interpretations and identity of the local community; and considers the methods used for the second purpose. Finally, the paper outlines a pilot research project that aims to deepen our knowledge on the issues of altering the interpretations and identities of the local community.

The construction of place

In principle, the relationship between the development program and the local society can be divided into two different relationships: one towards the place and another to the population. This option is limited since space cannot be discussed without the inhabiting community; and the community (generally) cannot be discussed without its spatial context. Despite this limitation, I focus on the nature of 'space' and 'place', which are the territorial contexts of local development programs.

In the literature the recognition is reflected that in this relationship it is not the 'space', but the 'place' that provides the relevant context. In their paper Dicken and Malmberg (2001, p. 345) interpret different views of the interconnections between economic activities and territories: "territory may enter the picture as geographic distance, as the spatial distribution of location factors, or as a notion of territorial milieu". Their own conception is what they call "firm-territory nexus", which is a "mutually constitutive relationships between firms and territories". According to Ettlinger (1994), the context of the economy involves different local, national, and global factors, and in this relationship local factors can mediate between the global factors and economy.

The meaning of place is widely discussed in areas as geography, spatial and urban development, sociology and social psychology. The literature clearly differentiates between the meanings attached to the terms which have similar meanings in everyday talk. It is emphasized that special connotations are attributed to the delimited piece of the land (the topographical entity) if various aspects of the related context are taken into account. The connection between the land and the people is expressed in categories such

as 'senses of place', 'place affiliation', 'place preferences', 'place meaning', 'motivation place', 'place attachment'. (Butz & Eyles, 1997; Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Keogan, 2002; Kyle, Mowen & Tarrant, 2004)

Although the use of terminology is not settled yet, fundamental differences can be demonstrated in some comparative studies on terminologies. (Cross, 2001; Kyle & Chick, 2007) The main categories used to denote the topographical entity are as follows:

- Space: the geographical area;
- Place: the space with the symbolic meanings and relationships attributed to it;
- Setting: the person's immediate surroundings, including both physical and social elements;
- Sense of place: the particular experience of the person in the particular setting;
- Place attachment: the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space.

The two basic terms that differentiate between the piece of land without a social context and with a context are 'space' and 'place'. (Instead of 'space', often 'territory' is used). Tuan (1977, p. 6) expressed the distinction between space and place: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endowed it with value." Therefore, the place is a space to which people (individually and collectively) relate in some way.

Relations of human beings to the place are conceptualized in many different ways, emphasizing the psychological, social psychological, cultural and interpretative aspects. (Schein, 1997)

'Place attachment' is mostly motivated by social psychological concepts, but cultural and other elements combine with it. Low enhances this concept with cultural elements: "Place attachment is the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space of piece of land that provides the basis for the individual's and group's understanding of and relation to the environment (...) Thus, place attachment is more than an emotional and cognitive experience, and includes cultural beliefs and practices that link people to place". Low suggests a wider conception: "affect, emotion and feeling are central to the concept" but these "are often accompanied by cognition (thought, knowledge and belief) and practice (action and behavior)". (Low, 1992, pp. 165-166)

The widely used 'sense of place' concept can involve social psychological, interpretive and interactionist approaches. In their popular work Butz and Eyles (1997) give an in-depth analysis of the 'sense of place' category. Three elements of community are identified: "place or area, people and their institutions, and a sense of belonging". (Butz & Eyles, 1997, p. 63) This means that a person does not individually connect to the place, but as a member of a (real or symbolic) community. Further, the relationship of the place and the local community is based on effective and on symbolic relationships.

A further step enriching the conception of Eyles and Butz is the recognition of the fact that the 'sense of place' is a socially constructed category. The difference between meanings of 'places' and 'spaces' is that spaces are "part of any immediate encounter with the world, and so long as I can see I cannot help but see them no matter what my purpose. This is not so with places, for they are constructed in our memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex associations." (Relph, 1985, p. 26) According the constructionist view – as Kyle and Chicks formulate it – "places are

symbolic contexts imbued with meaning. These meanings emerge and evolve through ongoing interactions with others and the environment. The meanings individuals and collectives ascribe to a place are reflections of cultural and individual identity. This process of place creation also serves to reinforce and shape individual and collective identity." (Kyle & Chick 2007, p. 212)

As pointed out by several authors, the relationship to the place is not constant but it can change as a result of various factors. Not only external (objective) factors, but internal factors (based on interpretations) can modify this relationship. (Reitzes, 1986) An example is provided in a Polish research, which explored how the steps having been employed by the municipal government could alter the existing interpretations attached to the city. (Young & Kaczmarek, 1999) The research of Mazanti and Ploger demonstrated that urban planning and regeneration programs tend to apply measures for creating positive identity and a stable and positive sense of belonging. In their research they studied the processes in which residents create meaningful place identities. (Mazanti & Ploger, 2003) The meaning of the place is constructed by the participants. As Gallimore explains: "activity settings are in part social constructions of the participants. The socially constructed 'meaning' of an activity setting is a complex mix of ecological, cultural, interactional, and psychological features." (Gallimore et al., 1993)

The construction of the local community

The place and the community are not only linked but are mutually contributing to each other's creation. In Warren's work several definitions indicate that the place is one of the constitutive elements of the community. (Warren, 1978) Warburton interprets this relationship as one involving two components; the notion of 'community' relates to the two dimensions of 'people' and 'place'. It emphasizes the relationships among people; and between people and the place or locality in which people live. (Warburton, 1998) Wilkinson lists three components of the community: territory or place, social organizations or institutions, and social interaction on matters concerning a common interest. (Wilkinson, 1991) These definitions indicate that the existence of a community is not the context but a prerequisite for the place.

A local development program is related not only to the place, but also to the people inhabiting the place, although the interpretation of the relationship can have many faces. The main dichotomy is which posits human beings as a set of individuals on the one hand, and as local society or even local community on the other hand. Individuals are either perceived as isolated entities acting according to the rational choice principle; or as a social entity tied together by interactions and symbolic meanings. There is a tendency in local development programs to represent the local society according the first approach; but it is not adequate when one wants to understand shared meanings and the interactions affected by them, which are characteristic of local societies.

In the literature several terms are applied to denote people who share a common locality and are in contact with each other and behind the expressions different connotations can be identified, e.g., local society, local community, or neighborhood. This connotation frequently involves normative elements, expressing values attached to the "good" community. In the sociological analysis of the community different aspects can be emphasized: the community as social interaction, as process, or as imagined reality. (Warren, 1978) Each point of views expresses one dimension of the complex relationship which exists between the place and the people.

In recent decades, great attention is directed to the idea that the community is a socially constructed phenomenon. The most important topics of this approach are the discourse on the social construction of the community and the discourse on the social construction of the identity. The conception of symbolic construction of the community is connected to seminal ideas of Anthony Cohen. Cohen – unlike the representatives of previous traditional approaches – found the core and essence of the community not in the variety of structures, but in the interpretations creating the community: "Community exists in the minds of its members, and should not be confused with geographic or sociographic assertions of the 'fact'. Similarly, the reality of their boundaries lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms. This reality of community is expressed and embellished symbolically." (Cohen, 1985. p. 98)

The community is built up by those meanings which the people (members and outsiders) attribute to the community, and which determines their actions related to the community. A well-developed description of this approach can be found at Ballesteros and Ramirez (2007): "A community is built up and maintained by commonly construed and shared symbolic meanings. Therefore, living in the same geographical area or taking part in the same activity is not a sufficient condition to give rise to a community: members should also define themselves as belonging to a given community. Common symbolic targets may generate a community even without any instrumental benefit for the members. Symbolic communities construct their unique interpretation of the world. Such interpretations are powerful tools for drawing the boundaries of the community and mobilizing the members for a common goal."

Cohen's concept is widely used to examine and interpret various communities. From our point of view, these researches are relevant as they explain the development or modification of the identity of a community by creation of new symbolic contents, or, even more importantly, by purposeful manipulation and dissemination of those contents. Ballesteros and Ramirez explain it as follows: "The creation of a symbolic community is not necessarily a spontaneous process. It can be promoted by an activist group or by a political force. In development projects, both the instrumental and the symbolic factors should be addressed, as both of them contribute to the establishment and development of the communities." (Ballesteros & Ramirez, 2007, p. 681)

In connecting the place and community an outstanding importance is devoted to the conception of identity. Communities – unlike the group – usually have too many members to build personal interactions between each member and all the other members. So there is a need for symbolic substitutes for the real ties, which can be found in the identity of the community. In the case of a community (e.g. the national community) the identity is the element that allows the person to be engaged in the community. It is the identity that enables one to draw the boundaries of the community, and creates 'insiders' and 'outsiders' from different groups of people. Identity is built up of deeply internalized concepts from real and symbolic elements.

In building up the identity of a community, 'place' is a key component. Members of a community localize their community to a specific place, and attribute similar symbolic meanings to the place and to that community. Some even argue that the location, the community and the identity are interdependent categories, equally constructed and are of symbolic nature. (Ballesteros & Ramirez, 2007)

There is a strong commitment in the literature that the identity of communities should be considered as a socially constructed phenomenon. This view is summarized as follows:

"the social constructionist approach to identity rejects any category that sets forward essential or core features as the unique property of the collective's members. From this perspective, every collective becomes a social artifact – an entity molded, refabricated, and mobilized in accord with reigning cultural scripts and centers of power." (Cerulo, 1997)

Others focus on the social processes of constructing the community. Somers examines the narrative processes which are responsible for creating the constructions of community identity. (Somers, 1994) The collective identity does not necessarily occur spontaneously during the process; in fact, is a primary target of political and civil ambitions. In her research on identity-politics, Bernstein summarized the distinct approaches to this type of political activity (e.g. neo-Marxist and more general works that distinguish identity politics from class politics; new social movement approaches that differentiate class-based movements from other movements; and postmodern/poststructuralist analyses that view identity politics as political activism, rather than cultural activism.) Bernstein's work also indicated the relevance of the constructionist conception in the case of identity politics. The question is: Why status identities are understood and/or portrayed as essentialist or socially constructed? (Bernstein, 2005)

It means that the relationship of the development program and the local community cannot be discussed without realizing the constructed nature of the place, the community, and community identity. Interpretations of these phenomena are inevitably present in the thinking and in the actions of the actors. The planning activity is not simply a description of the societal circumstances, but is a process of altering the social constructions of local people. Thus, the designer cannot stay out of the situation, but is an active 'player of the game'. They participate in the 'game' in order to bring in their own interpretations, and to modify interpretations of the members of the community.

The local development program as the modifier of the symbolic contents of the local community

Summers' concept has already been introduced, which has made a distinction between the 'development of community' and the 'development in community'. (Summers, 1986) The former is a direct way to shape the relationships in the community, and the other is aimed at shaping the conditions of life in the community. The dichotomous distinction is appealing; however, it is not suitable for describing the complex relationship that exists between the development program and the local community.

The concept suggests that there are programs which are aimed at to modify the context only (economics, infrastructure, etc.), and there are those that seek to shape the internal conditions of the community. This division does not take one fact into account: that all programs have a component which is aimed at shaping the interpretations and identities of the respective community. It may be a visible subprogram with clearly expressed goals as regards the supposed effects on the perceptions and symbolic relationships of the local community. Probably it is more common that this symbolic agenda is hidden from the public or even from the participants as well. Whether there is a 'development of the community'- type of programs or a 'development in the community'-type, the representatives of the program are not neutral observers monitoring how the local community feels about the program. For them, the support received from the local community has a vital importance, be it instrumental or symbolic. Among the instrumental reactions there are key responses as participation in training programs; and

symbolic responses to the discourses, representing emotional and moral reactions to the development program.

One approach to societal reactions is stemmed from the functionalist perspective which explains the public perception of the program by the perceived benefits gained: people recognize the blessings of the program and behave according the rational choice principle. But the public relationship to the program does not univocally depend on the functional aspects of the program. (It is even possible that the functional aspects have no influence on the acceptance of the project.) Therefore the positivist, particularly the functionalist perspective should be complemented by an interpretive, social constructionist.

The relationship of the local society to the development program is embodied in social constructions which describe and evaluate the situation. The main force which drives the constructions is the discourse: it builds a space for the individual to express his/her thoughts, and makes influencing others possible. (Lee, 2013)

The core question is what types of activities take place in a development program in order to shape the interpretations of the local society and the identity of the community. It is important to recognize that the modification of the collective representations on the development program are not spontaneous, but are purposeful or even manipulative. The relationship towards the program is build and modified alongside communicative interactions, in which politicians, professionals, and lay people as concerned participants influence each other and build their different interpretations of the situation. Those who are responsible for the success of the program can use not only instrumental reasoning (that the development will improve opportunities), but symbolic reasoning as well. Among the strongest discursive tools there are those that use these symbolic tools to establish a connection between the program and the community.

An example to the relation between the development tools and symbolic tools is the 'developmental discourse'. This discourse combines the functional aspects of development with a normative point of view; choosing the element, which can legitimize the program in a given cultural context. Typical forms are the development of alternative discourses, discourses reflecting different interests, and discourses organized around value conflicts (such as development, progress, innovation versus nature, sustainability and community). (Bordonaro, 2009; Whatmore & Boucher, 1993)

The discourse does not take place in the context of spontaneous processes, but as a part of targeted communication strategies, civil or political actions, which seek to shape, frame, or manipulate the interpretations on development issues. It is political in the sense that development programs deal with public affairs, but is political in the sense that – as Murray Edelmann stated – the political communication is the policy itself. The goals of this symbolic politics are to change the symbolic contents of the local society towards the desired direction. The symbolic tools of such politics are discourses, policy narratives, and political frames. (Jerit, 2008)

From our point of view, situations, in which the explicit aim of the action is the modification of the symbolic contents of the local discourse, and ultimately the modification of community identity, are of particular importance. The first group of tools includes actions which create a new symbolic meaning to the context of the development: the functional aspects of the program get a symbolic backing, in which the secular goals, the tools and the results will have a deep solemn meaning. This daily reality, rooted in secular goals and based on rational arguments, will nevertheless acquire some

transcendent nature. The second group is composed by tools by which the symbolic meaning and even the identity of the community is modified, so that members of the local community would readily identify with the program objectives. To put it more simply, there are two paths for a development program to have it accepted: either choosing targets that are useful and desirable for the local community or transforming symbolic contents in a way that targets seem reasonable and desirable for the community. In practice, most the programs are between these two extremities.

The coexistence of an instrumental sub-program and a symbolic sub-program in the same developmental program can be found at several different levels; from the local development projects to the programs of the European Union. International and national-level implementers of development programs frequently use symbolic tools and work on modifying the identity of the local community. An example provided by the EU was in its *Towards an Inclusive, Smart and Sustainable Europe of Diverse Regions* statement, which was agreed at the Informal Ministerial Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Spatial Planning and Territorial Development on 19th May 2011 Gödöllő, Hungary:

"The high value of European urban and rural landscapes should be protected and developed in qualitative terms. Areas rich in natural and cultural landscapes may need special attention in order to make best use of these assets. Environmentally friendly job creation and strengthened recreational functions can complement conservation. The local, regional and trans-regional management of cultural and natural heritage is of key importance. We support the protection, rehabilitation and utilization of heritage through the place-based approach. Improving regional and local identity by strengthening awareness and responsibility of local and regional communities towards their environments, landscapes, cultures and other unique values is also important."

There is enough reason to think that local development programs are of instrumental and symbolic nature at the same time, therefore it is time to propose more detailed research and conceptualization of the issue.

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