

ARTICLE

Local communities empowered to plan?

Applying PAR to establish democratic communicative spaces for sustainable rural development

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the second cycle of an ongoing participatory action research (PAR) project that aimed at facilitating bottom-up, sustainability planning and development in one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged micro-regions of Hungary. The process at the very beginning started as conventional qualitative research, and gradually emerged to a PAR process as deeper relationships with local people were developed and previous research practices and research focus were questioned. Current institutional changes, such as the availability of European Union funding for rural development and the micro-regional re-districting driven both by top-down and bottom-up processes, were structural factors that created a more promising context for participatory planning. Although a PAR project generally targets silenced groups, for this to happen it is arguably necessary to legitimize such development work in the eyes of local decision-makers and funding organizations, in order to establish more inclusive communicative spaces around future rural development. However, this also creates a controversial situation: breaking away from prevailing structural inequalities and hierarchies remains difficult through a process which is designed around consensus-building.

KEY WORDS

- ecological economics
- Hungary
- PAR
- rural development
- sustainability

Introduction

In past decades, PAR was mostly applied in the field of social work, education, community development, work life and health (Nielsen & Svensson, 2006) both in the countries of the North and South (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003). However, it was recently proposed that action research skills should and could be brought into sustainability issues in order to open communicative spaces for the most pressing concerns on the current public agenda, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and other issues of sustainability (Nielsen, 2005; Reason, 2007). PAR seems particularly relevant in sustainability contexts since discourses of sustainability have explicitly politicized issues of ecology and enacted them through social justice and participatory democratic politics.

Rural landscapes constitute particularly important spaces for sustainability as an increasing number of PAR researchers have recognized (Kamali, 2007; Peckham & Sriskandarajah, 2005; Pedersen, 2003; Wadsworth, 2005). Natural ecosystems that provide various ecosystem services for all societies are mainly maintained in rural areas; thus rural communities play a key role in creating a sustainable future for human societies (Midmore & Whitaker, 2000). Ecological sustainability in rural landscapes cannot, however, be stripped from social, economic, cultural and political relations. Social justice entailed in the ideal of sustainability requires the political quest for a more inclusive democracy. Current approaches to sustainability therefore emphasize and call for creating communicative spaces open to all stakeholders, particularly to 'lay' members of local communities, in order to arrive at collective and mutual understanding and generate collaborative actions (Meppem & Gill, 1998).

Communicative space as understood in this article refers to the social arenas for constructive dialogue and creative problem-solving among stakeholders on issues of common concern. The quality of a communicative space can be judged by the building of trust and working relationships, the space for multiple forms of communication, and the creation of common ground for action. Inevitably, a communicative space involves transformations in the lives of participants. These transformations and changes take place at various levels (individuals as well as groups) and in various ways, such as through behavioural or value changes or acquiring new understanding. Communicative spaces can further be judged by the extent to which they provide a sense of agency for each person participating; ideally leading to the transformation of power relationships in the direction of a greater democracy (Greenwood & Levin, 1998), and broader and more equal participation. Therefore, it is also important to consider, when judging the quality of a communicative space, these types of transformations.

Creating uncoercive communicative spaces and discursive communities is a common theme and effort aligning PAR researchers with scholars of sustainability. The concepts of participatory democracy, communicative rationality and

discursive communities require gearing the sustainability agenda towards social learning processes with a real participatory nature rather than projected sustainable future outcomes (Meppem & Bourke, 1999; Meppem & Gill, 1998). Moreover, it should be recognized that institutionalizing a socially inclusive learning process poses challenges to existing cognitive and institutional frames of democratic politics.

In this article, we present a PAR process which has been in existence for five years and is still ongoing. As researchers, our engagement with the landscape started with applying various conventional qualitative research questions and techniques focusing on economic valuation of ‘natural capital’. However, as we were spending more time conducting fieldwork, we have become emotionally attached to the landscape and her people, and found ourselves engaged more and more with the problems of living sustainably in the landscape. Our wish to explore and understand human–nature relationships and interactions gradually changed to a motivation to use knowledge generated through research for something useful to local communities and to a growing commitment to participatory research methods. Our research focus and methodology underwent several revisions and changes along this process in order to create problem formulations which better addressed initial problem definitions brought by locals in various phases of the research. There were two research cycles of our engagement with the landscape and now the third cycle is evolving around strengthening the self-organizing capabilities of the historically oppressed Roma people, trying to make up for one of the main failures of the second cycle.

Recent institutional changes both in the Hungarian rural development system and at the local level, such as the availability of European Union funding for rural development and the micro-regional redistricting driven both by top-down and bottom-up processes, have created a more promising context for the planning process and a better match between our academic and personal agendas and possibilities and those of local people. However, these shifts not only had enabling effects but also brought along dangers, such as the possibility of researchers and the local elite dominating the ongoing development processes and perpetuating the existing social and power status quo. Other influential institutional dimensions of opening communicative spaces for more inclusive rural development, such as the controversial role of the funding organization, will also be highlighted.

PAR in human–nature relationships

To be transparent on our research team’s values and the sub-systems researched (Peckham & Sriskandarajah, 2005) or ignored, and make the ideology (Söderbaum, 2000) as well as the various choices (Reason, 2004) behind our research explicit, it is important to clarify the original and main professional background

and source of inspiration of the research team, which in this case is ecological economics (EE). EE influenced the research team in choosing research sites, in stated and espoused values, and in social, political and ethical engagements. Not defining itself as a discipline, but as an issue-driven inquiry toward a science of sustainability, EE aims to deal with problems and topics of interest to policy-makers and lay audiences in human–nature relationships (Söderbaum, 2000; Tacconi, 1998). In EE, economy is considered to be embedded in natural and socio-cultural systems in a co-evolutionary way (Norgaard, 1994), and its growth and scale has biophysical as well as social limits. EE is also committed to the ‘local politics of global sustainability’; that is a communicative, deliberative and participatory democracy (Prugh, Costanza, & Daly, 2000). Deliberative arguments used in EE for participatory natural resource management suggest that the conservation and cultivation of landscapes and ecological systems should be seen as a history-making co-evolutionary process that cannot exist without the involvement of local communities, without their own efforts, knowledge, skills, and capabilities.

PAR is not attached to one specific discipline (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). It is a research methodology, a special way of thinking about scientific inquiry, as well as an attitude to the role of science in society. Often, it is used for crossing and bridging various disciplines, be they natural sciences and/or social sciences. Although many of the epistemological foundations of PAR (Greenwood & Levin, 1998) – such as being context-bound, focusing on real-life problems, seeking for diversity, having strong democratic aspirations, trans-disciplinarity, highlighting the importance of extended peer-communities, etc. – have a lot in common with EE, ecological economists have not yet put PAR to their methodological toolbox.

Some empathic critics of participatory processes (see Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Kapoor, 2005; Mohan & Stokke, 2000, among others) warn researchers and development workers of both the Northern and Southern countries that participatory processes might regenerate existing power and value structures. There is a clear danger in unwittingly promoting the interests and desires of the creators of such projects (usually the more powerful and resourceful ones), while in their rhetoric focus is always put on ‘the other’s empowerment’ (Kapoor, 2005). Keeping the above-mentioned controversy of participation in mind, we claim that a participatory planning process on future rural development directions offers a communicative space (Reason, 2007) for cycles of planning, acting and reflecting, and that it can be seen as an opportunity for initiating and fostering progress towards the direction of sustainability as social justice.

National context and the research site

The current rural and regional development policy in Hungary reflects the paternalistic legacy of the previous socio-political regime that has created a culture of dependency. Scientifically trained territorial planners, agricultural and rural development officials draw up universal, expert-based plans, which many times ignore the specific local context and circumstances (Csirté, 2005; Nemes, 2005a, 2005b). As a historical legacy, people tend to be waiting upon outside resources and in most cases are still trapped in paternalistic power relations (for example, between local government and citizens). All these make it quite challenging for creating socially inclusive communicative spaces in a Hungarian rural context.

The Mezőcsát Micro-Region (MMR) – situated in northeast Hungary, along the Tisza River and in the Borsodi Mezőség Protected Landscape Area – is an ideal landscape for exploring social-ecological systems and their co-evolutionary dynamics. Over centuries, local people settled along the river have developed tools and practices adapted to take advantage of the pulsing patterns of flood and drought. People could harness the energy of floods by developing a special economy and culture in the floodplain. However, the logic of modern, industrial agriculture has conquered traditional polyculture and converted the diverse agriculture of a floodplain economy to the monocultures of wheat fields. In the 1970s, a new dike defence system was installed, by which the most important natural landscape forming force (water) was eliminated resulting in a significant loss of ecosystem services providing the basis for the economic activities of local people. Most of the vast marshlands with a high amount of endangered plant and animal species are acutely threatened by invasive species replacing the indigenous flora and fauna to a great extent. Nevertheless, nature conservation and national park management have started to play a very important role in the landscape. The area is both under the Bonn and the Ramsar Conventions, part of the European Union's Natura 2000 system and Important Bird Areas.¹

After the regime change in 1989, the region, along with inevitable decline of a collectivized industrial agriculture, was spiralling downward into an inescapable social and economic depression in the 1990s. Depression was fuelled by the restitution process associated with agricultural privatization and land reform. Breaking out of growing hopelessness, nine settlements formed a new statistical micro-region, the socio-economically underdeveloped Mezőcsát Micro-Region (MMR) in January 2004. The micro-region as a formal institution is operated by the Mezőcsát Micro-Region Development Agency (MMRDA), the operative body of the Mezőcsát Multi-functional Micro-Region Association of local governments, financed from central government budget. Previously, those settlements belonged to two other, economically more developed micro-regions. The reason for this change of borders was threefold. First, the economically and socially less developed micro-regions in Hungary can count on higher level of governmental

and European Union funds. Second, the borders were re-drawn based on taking into account the specific landscape characteristics of the settlements; MMR covers the settlements of the Borsodi Mezőség landscape, which was considered a better unit of development processes than administrative borders. Third, the town of Mezőcsát wanted to regain her previous position as the centre of the region.

The micro-region is a relatively new level in the Hungarian public administration system for rural and regional development. Therefore, it has few historic roots and weak public, civil and business ties. The MMR covers villages with a population ranging between 350 and 2600 people, and the town of Mezőcsát as the centre of this statistical unit with a population of 6500. Population is decreasing in five settlements due to migration and natural decline, while those places where there is a significant Roma ethnicity (four villages), population shows a growing tendency. In MMR, 27 percent is the (official) unemployment rate. MMR is now characterized by rising ethnic conflicts between the Roma and the non-Roma people. EU funds targeting disadvantaged regions offer some promises for a breakout from this social and economic depression.

MMR is not totally unfamiliar with bottom-up initiatives since in the mid-1990s a civil association for rural development was established and a complex programme was prepared that focused on an ecological, economic and social rehabilitation process. The lobbying activity of this association contributed to the relative success of the Environmental Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme of the national agri-environmental programme in this landscape (half of the local farmers participating). However, all the activities initiated by the association were dominated by its rural development manager. Consequently, involvement of the wider local public was not at all characteristic to decision-making. Partly due to this and partly due to the initiative failing to raise sufficient financial resources in accordance with raising local expectations, the association lost much of its credibility among local people. For our research and for the possibility of opening communicative space, this meant, on the one hand, that local people had lost hope in these kinds of development processes, and had become tired of engaging in these. Therefore, there was a potential risk of indifference towards our PAR project. The research team, on the other hand, could reap the harvest of the association's work: there is a general agreement now in the micro-region that the scale of development – one of the most important dimensions of sustainability – should remain modest and ecological values should be conserved. This has made the opening a communicative space around the issues of sustainability much easier for us.

Steps to the participatory planning process

In opening a micro-region level communicative space to address complex ecological and socio-economic problems and construct common understandings of future rural development directions, the expert-led planning and development traditions were challenged (Briassoulis, 1999) by an emerging, community-based appreciative research framework and various PAR methods. These methods – in order of their application – included a community development workers' capacity-building workshop, in-depth interviewing, participatory observation, transect walks, micro-region level workshops (on agriculture, tourism, local youth, local employment), agricultural survey, community planning fora (in each of the nine settlements), and a micro-region level planning forum. The process steps were designed and the methods were selected in a way that both individual and group level contributions, both 'I and We rationalities' (Vatn, 2005), could be taken into account when designing the development plan. The selected methods reflected the research team's previous experiences in rural areas of Hungary and included taking into account marginalized people's uneasiness in group situations and their preference for one-to-one conversations, as well as the need for capacity-building in order to encourage citizen participation. Furthermore, attention was given to possibilities for changes in local power relations, and for involving formal power holders to formulate a legitimate process.

The participatory planning process, that is the second cycle of our PAR project, emerged from the first cycle aiming at understanding local people's perceptions and meaning making on the historical relationship between nature, society and economy in five settlements of the current borders of the micro-region (see Figure 1).

In the first cycle, it became evident that these settlements needed to prepare some kind of strategy for their common future if they wanted to break out from their socio-economic impasse. Therefore, our aim was to help to launch and facilitate a future search process. A so-called 'Vision-to-Action' community forum was organized by us in order to bring local people and decision-makers together to share their visions and discuss possible actions within the newly established micro-region. Participants from some of the villages requested researchers' help to conduct similar type of events at a settlement level. This was an idea which later became the focus of the next cycle of the PAR project. Due to a lack of financial resources, but most importantly the lack of momentum for further participation by local people, at that time the community planning process did not continue beyond our intervention. We realized that it was not realistic to expect that some local capacities already existed for the takeover of the process (at that time the MMRDA did not exist). However, we felt that we managed to establish rapport with local people; our appearance was not a one-off in the area, and local people could see that we kept returning.

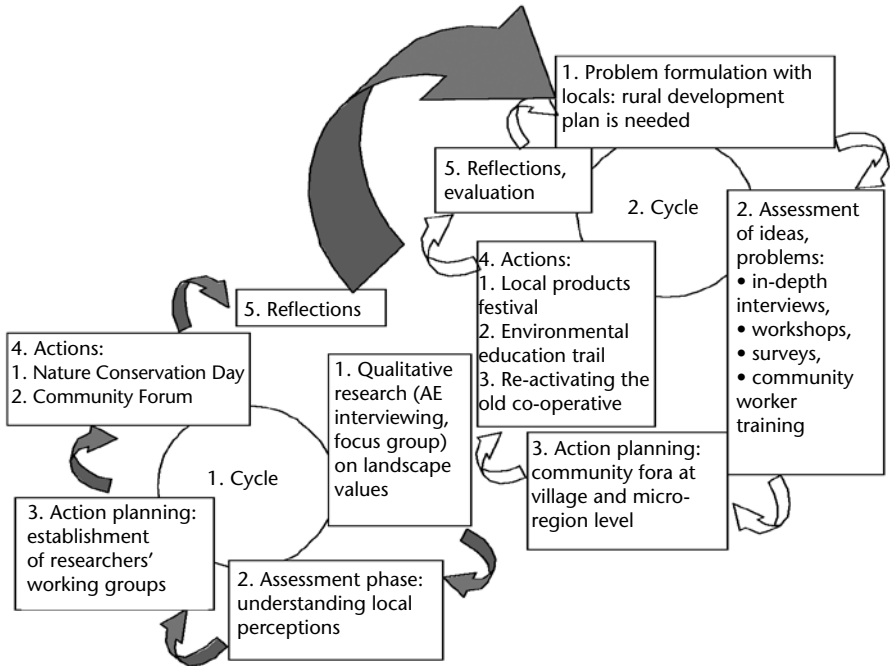


Figure 1 The two cycles of the participatory rural development process

During the break, our team delved into another phase of self-reflection both at an individual and research group level: not only to analyse data and experience gathered and gained, but to reflect upon the roles we took during the research. An important question arose: what kind of responsibilities do researchers have towards communities? Local people are brought into a process in which expectations might be raised again and then frustration might come if there are no actions or follow-up results. We realized that we needed to be more transparent and clear about our intentions and motivations toward the community, and to be more aware of our special responsibility as action researchers if we are really about to open a communicative space that reflects local concerns more clearly.

To ensure the relevance of the research project to local needs the output goals and principles of the process were kept on a micro-regional level. Scaling the project to this level seemed obvious under the current macro-level context, although we knew that the micro-region is a new administrative level which local people do not identify with; they are more attached to the River Tisza or to their own settlement. Furthermore, we were also aware that the potential degree of participation of local people in the process and the possibilities of opening an all inclusive communicative space could strictly be limited by this decision: the micro-region level evidently does not allow for the same level or quality of partici-

pation as the settlement level, while running the risk that more powerful, micro-region related stakeholders may benefit more from the process. Our micro-region level approach was confirmed when we approached the MMRDA with our ideas and it turned out that the micro-region needed an official, legitimate rural development plan to be able to absorb European Union funds in a year. Furthermore, the first author of this article planned to conduct her PhD at the micro-region level, too.

Since the MMRDA was not able to finance our work, the research team had to involve a foreign foundation who was ready to support the research work if it was focusing on agriculture and nature conservation. Therefore, we had to carefully manoeuvre among and balance local needs, the aims of the funding organization, and our professional and personal value systems as well. The PAR project therefore became a complex process of negotiating among different needs, expectations and commitments. Moreover, different arguments were applied in order to make the PAR project legitimate for all the different stakeholders involved. The potential for EU subsidies proved to be a good instrumental argument to initiate discussions with and open communicative spaces on local values, assets and development directions. Applying instrumental arguments was especially important in terms of inviting local citizens to join discussions around a very specific, tangible topic as previous research experiences demonstrated that locals, due to their earlier disappointments with a similar initiative, do not see any potential in very general discussions.

Active participation of local people or simply encouraging a participatory planning process was not an important criteria either for the funding organization or the MMRDA at the beginning of the negotiations: the former was more concerned about very tangible, biodiversity focused actions, while the latter was more interested in the rural development plan in itself and in funding specific rural development initiatives. Although the funding agency's representative already had specific actions in mind for implementation without prior knowledge of the landscape (such as conversion to organic agriculture, protecting cultural landscapes), by referring to recent failures of top-down rural development processes in Hungary the foundation agreed to finance only those project ideas which were identified through the participatory planning process but were partly in line with their commitments. However, we were also aware that this compromise would have implications for the participatory nature of the project and for the issues brought up in the communicative space created; that is, probably not the most pressing local concerns, such as creating employment opportunities, would be targeted first by local action groups but those that are in line with the initial plans of the foundation.

PAR methods for opening communicative spaces

In the following sections, the use of PAR methods and their most important implications on local power relations and on the formation of the communicative space will be explained in detail (see Table 1 for the summary of the full process).

The participatory planning process was officially endorsed by the MMRDA. This was an important legitimating step that was further strengthened by the research team's consciously connecting the planning process with ongoing other local, regional and national initiatives. One of these was a community development workers' training programme that was launched by a regional public cultural institute. Prior to the establishment of this programme, previously unorganized communities had been expected to plan in a co-operative way, but they lacked appropriate skill and capacity, and the researchers had not had the resources to rectify this. The training programme aimed at building local civil society's capacities to initiate local actions, focusing on techniques of public participation and the enforcement of civic rights. Participants learned about the approaches to generating and organizing local actions and community events and techniques for handling conflicts. But most importantly they were acquainted with the legal possibilities of public participation in local development issues. The training was important in establishing local CSOs who could gradually share ownership of the PAR project, and was explicitly used by the research team as an opportunity to introduce the idea of the planning process to the participants and start to involve them.

An important outcome of the training has been the establishment of a micro-region level CSO, called the Mezőcsát Micro-Region Community Development Workers' Association, which was set up by the trainees themselves to build and strengthen partnership among the settlements and improve the social and cultural life of the micro-region. As expected by the researchers, the members of this CSO proved to be the key local partners of the research group and were crucial contact points for increasing the quality of participation and representation of local people in the community and, for taking responsibility for some of the actions agreed upon. It was interesting to follow up on how the participants who did not really know each other started – as they claimed later in a publication – to 'search for the opportunities of contacting each other'. As one of the members put it looking back to the training:

We discovered that our problems are common. Almost in the 24th hour, finally, some kinds of conversations started in the micro-region. Positive processes have been launched, which were very much missing from the life of locals. I hope that the outward migration would stop and we will have a good time at the place where we live and raise our children . . . This is where we started to understand the importance of the idea of working at a micro-region level.

Table 1 The process steps of the PAR project

<i>Activity/Milestones</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Main purpose</i>	<i>Outputs for documentation</i>
Research on the evaluation of natural capital of the South-Borsod Floodlands	Summer 2002	To understand how people value local natural capital	Interview summaries, research report
Research outcome: to explore precious wetland areas and their local perceptions			
Writing new research proposals			
Research on 'Evaluation of wetlands'	Sept. 2003–	To understand local people's perceptions on nature, society and economy and their interrelations	Research reports
Reflections: draw up action plans	May 2004		
Implementing actions:	May 2004–	Action turn	Nature conservation event
1. 'Nature Conservation Day' with a local school	June 2004		Micro-region level forum
2. Micro-region level forum			Report for local people on the forum
Reflections: local needs for similar forum at village level	July 2004–July 2005		Research articles
Searching for external funding to continue			Research project proposals for funding
Planning the participatory planning process, consultations with the funding organization and with the micro-region development agency	Aug. 2005–Feb. 2006	Another action turn	Detailed and official process plan for the participatory planning process approved by all mayors
Desk research	Oct. 2005–Feb. 2006	Understanding of major economic, social and ecological characteristics	Article in the newsletter of the micro-region about the process
Community development worker training: action researcher as a teacher	March 2006–May 2006 (3 weekends)	Building local civil society's capacities to initiate and to participate in local actions	Desk research report
			Short report on the results of group work of the training

1. Cycle

2. Cycle

Table 1 cont.

<i>Activity/Milestones</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Main purpose</i>	<i>Outputs for documentation</i>
In-depth interviews in each villages on current situation and future plans (130)	April 2006– July 2006	Gain an overall knowledge on the economic, social and environmental situation Identify potential projects and project holders Prepare and build public participation for community forum	Interview summaries Communities studies on each village (9)
Micro-region level workshops on tourism, local employment, agriculture	May 2006– July 2006	Establishing a common ground for different sectors and different paths to local development Strengthening new and existing social networks	Presentation for workshop participants on the results of interviews
Workshops with local young people on youth	June 2006– Aug. 2006		n.a.
Conducting an agricultural survey among local farmers	Oct. 2006	Comprehensive picture on the importance of multi-functionality and exploring diversification possibilities for local agriculture	Questionnaires SPSS analysis
Community fora	Oct. 2006– Dec. 2006	Involve local citizens in planning their future, to seek for common goals and actions	Community forum reports (9) Article in the newsletter of the micro-region Video/audio records, photos

2. Cycle

2. Cycle

Table 1 cont.

Activity/Milestones	Date	Main purpose	Outputs for documentation
Preparation of project plans for actions: 1. local products festival 2. re-activation of an agricultural co-operative 3. design of an environmental education trail	Nov. 2006– Jan. 2007	To check whether and how actions can be carried out and support can be built for the proposed actions To make participants foresee the 'first successes' of the project	3 detailed project plans for local people prepared by graduate students
A forum with local farmers to discuss the results of the agricultural survey and provide feedback to the development plan	Feb. 2007	Validate the results of the survey	Agricultural survey report compiled for local farmers
Micro-region level forum on the rural development plan and on the three project plans	Feb. 2007	Immediate activation of local resources and networking across various stakeholder groups	Micro-region forum report for local people Video/audio records, photos
Writing the rural development plan	March 2007– May 2007	Socially grounded rural development plan	First draft of the rural development plan for the MMRDA
Implementing the three projects, publishing a call for proposals on the enrichment of the local cultural landscape	May 2007–	Immediate activation of local resources	Research articles Projects in process
New cycle of action research with a focus on improving the life quality of Roma people	May 2008–	Initiating concrete actions in the following fields: health, education, culture, income	AR plan Interview summaries

The next step in the participatory planning process involved extensive interviewing, applying the technique of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) so as to create an empowering discursive situation between the researchers and members of local communities and open up new horizons for a change process. AI originates from management research (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001) and is directed at identifying what works well and how to do more of what works. The reason for choosing this technique was that it was striking how often local people constructed their community as a place full of problems. AI was applied as a community development tool which lets the development practitioners go beyond conventional problem-centred methods to identify and build on past achievements and existing strengths within a community, using the power of language.

Interviewees included local people and experts covering possibly all important stakeholder groups, as well as key informants, such as the micro-region managers, local government officials, social care and labour centre officials, and Water Management Authority and National Park officials. Altogether 130 interviews were conducted with 150 people. The length of the interviews varied between half an hour to three hours, with the average length being around one and a half hours. Previous research experience in the region convinced researchers that interviews should not be recorded in order to put interviewees at ease. However, a detailed interview summary was compiled for all interviews and a ten-page community study summarizing the findings on each settlement was sent back to the interviewees a week before each community forum as a basic document for further discussions. These studies helped to establish a common understanding of current situation.

Workshops organized by the MMRDA under the framework of another regional project covered the areas of agriculture, tourism and local employment opportunities. We researchers joined these workshops and fed back the preliminary interview results to the workshop participants. These workshops could be characterized as important meeting places for establishing a common ground for different sectors and different paths to local development, meanwhile strengthening new and existing social networks among the settlements.

Based on the interview results, an agricultural survey was conducted with the involvement of 116 local farmers (97 valid questionnaires). The survey was motivated partly by the expectation of the funding agency to gain a more comprehensive picture on the state and possibilities of nature friendly agriculture in the region, and partly by the chance to spread further the information on the ongoing participatory planning process among farmers as major stakeholders in the future of the region. The survey results created a broader support among local farmers for a specific project aiming at improving farmers' co-operation.

Next, a more structured interviewing phase was designed with the involvement of the researchers' graduate students so as to check whether and how actions can be carried out and support can be built for the proposed four actions

that emerged during the interviewing phase, namely: 1) organization of a Local Products Festival, 2) design of an environmental education trail, 3) establishing, or re-activating, an agricultural co-operative, and 4) conversion to organic agriculture in the region. University students were involved in field research and developed local ideas together with locals into specific projects plans. These four ideas have long existed in the micro-region; however, no specific steps were previously taken to realize them.

Perhaps the most essential parts of the planning process were the community fora organized and moderated by the researchers themselves. The aim was to involve local citizens in planning their future through a transparent procedure, to seek for the common goals and actions for local development. Local people from all walks of life who were resourceful (in terms of information and knowledge, expertise, authority and ability to act) and/or in need (marginalized, with little power to influence formal decisions) took part in these usually two half-day (Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings) community fora. The fora, usually attracting between 20–30 participants, focused on three or four micro-regional development areas (generally agriculture, tourism, local employment and cultural life) and encouraged participants to transform their creative capabilities for planning short- and long-term actions through various exercises. The first phase of these events involved establishing a common understanding of the current situation and mapping the problem areas in plenary discussions based on the community studies. After this, visioning group exercises were used to help to create future scenarios in rural development. Finally, groups of five–eight identified projects for the near future and prepared action plans (including schedules and the identification of available resources for the ideas local people wanted to support). Combining plenary with small group discussions provided opportunities for all kinds of people to have a real voice and therefore benefited the quality of communicative space. Project-focused planning at the end of each discussion assisted to build working relationships and create common ground for action within each local community. One should, however, honestly face to the fact that the less developed rhetoric skills and lack of self-confidence of usually marginalized people to express opinion could not be improved upon with a one time event.

In villages with Roma population, the communicative space included straightforward discussions on sensitive issues, such as the conflicting relationship of the Roma and non-Roma population. In one of the fora, a Roma woman stood up and claimed that ‘everybody keeps silent about the Roma issue, so let’s face it!’ Although the Roma issue was identified as one of the most pressing problems during the process, it was visible that due to the long, historical oppression of Roma, the two ongoing Roma initiatives in the micro-region would not be able to grow much stronger without some extra support coming from ‘*gadjo*’ (non-Roma) people. Again, when further financial resources became available, the research team launched the third cycle of the PAR specifically devoted to this issue.²

Other sensitive issues covered by the fora were investments into the social capital of the villages. These events created a major shift in the local development agendas away from the last decade's purely infrastructural development path to a more human-centred, sustainable one. As one local participant observed:

Up till now we have been busy with infrastructural development project and did not have time for anything else, but it's high time that we move on to this new direction.

This shift can be appreciated to a greater extent if one recalls that during the plenary discussions at each forum many criticisms have been formulated by the locals concerning the everyday life of their villagers ('even people's morality is getting lower' and 'passive and envy behaviour is reigning'). One could often hear that majority of local people accept their 'destiny' that their villages are not able to stop spiralling downwards to even bigger depression; blame was put on each other and on the local governments.

The settlement-level community fora, in practice, had more of an energizing effect on the public, pushing participants out of their initial inertia, meaning a small transformation in the communicative space concerning their current understanding of the situation, as one of the members put it about the research group: 'you are coming to a sleeping settlement as young people, you bring along lots of impulses and energies and that is good for us'. At the same time, the micro-region level forum was to bring very tangible results, meaning specific acts in the communicative space, through discussing the project plans (on the local product festival, the environmental education trail, and the farmers' co-operative) in details elaborated by the students.

The PAR process enabled some people to see themselves as actors and to become actors. For example, a local female farmer took the initiative – with the financial assistance of the foundation – and started to co-ordinate farmers' co-operation. An environmental education trail is being designed between two villages, which would be extended later on to the whole micro-region, coordinated by one of the female mayors and an officer of the MMRDA.

At the time of writing this article, the second Local Product Festival of the MMR has taken place, so it is on its way to becoming an annual tradition. After the micro-region forum, the Mezőcsát Micro-Region Community Development Workers' Association took the lead, applied for funding and started organizing the event. The festival brings together producers of local products to celebrate themselves, their settlements and the micro-region and contributes a lot to include local products, cooperation, cultural and identity issues in the communicative space and, also, those locals who earlier did not participate in the PAR process. This festival together with the new CSO created future possibilities for further extending the communicative space to related issues and new participants, therefore contributing to building of trust and working relationships within the micro-region. Moreover, it brought along structural changes in the everyday practice of

the micro-regional administration by establishing co-operation between state and civil organizations. The most visible example of this shift is the possibility offered to the CSO to rely on the office infrastructure of the MMRDA.

Transformations are not restricted to community stakeholders. A major behavioural change became visible at the funding agency thanks to the communicative space opened: 'I will leave more time for project preparation and building participation in my future projects just as you did it.'

Time pressures for having to create a specific output with a deadline, and in many cases the passivity of the MMRDA, often created situations which forced us to take out the stick from the hands of the locals even in case of 'technical' coordination issues, such as writing and sending out invitation letters to the community fora or collecting local statistical data for the community studies. Although these always meant a step back on the virtual ladder of participation and on the quality of the communicative space, these were crucial in terms of implementing the process on time.

Conclusions

This article illustrates the use of a particular PAR approach for opening communicative spaces on sustainable rural development in a socio-economically disadvantaged micro-region in Hungary. Preferring a very loosely structured, inductive research approach to a pre-structured type proved to be one of the first crucial steps. The design and the conceptual framework of the planning process became clear only gradually through various negotiations and through discussion with local organizational partners and people. Moreover, both the design and framework evolved and developed continuously even during the process itself. At the beginning, we researchers determined the choice of research problems (human–nature relationships). Later, as the process unfolded, this situation changed, but it was still us who posed the research questions in consultation with local people. Researchers were aiming for a collegiate engagement, however, in actual practice this was in many cases only collaborative or consultative type due to various resource and time constraints, but most importantly due to the scale of the project (micro-region level). Towards the implementation phase of the PAR process local people took more control or sometimes, as in the case of organizing the local product festival, took full control.

Opening communicative spaces aiming for empowering dialogue takes a lot of time, patience, and commitment: we are engaged with the landscape now for five years and it took a lot of patience for us to build rapport with local people to be able to open discussions on topics meaningful to local communities and, at the same time, in line with European or national policies. Several revisions had to be made in order to have problem formulations which better addressed initial

problem definitions brought up by locals in earlier phases of the research, such as elevating the project to the micro-region level, dropping the ‘deep green’ project ideas of conversion to organic agriculture or restoring the old fruit orchards.

Existing social and power relations also highly structure communicative spaces in rural areas. We were one of many actors in a landscape and we knew from the beginning that we were not working in a power and institutional vacuum. Although a PAR project generally targets silenced groups, for this to happen legitimizing such a rural development PAR project among local decision-makers and the funding organization are key issues in being able to establish communicative spaces around future development directions. Using the instrumental argument for the importance of the absorption capacity of EU funds, together with the establishment of a micro-region level rural development agency, and pointing out to the failures of recent top-down initiatives in Hungary, became important aspects of the legitimizing strategy of the PAR process.

Certain changes in local, national, and international institutional arrangements might enable opening inclusive communicative spaces, while others not. For our work, the establishment of the micro-region level rural development public administration system and the presence of EU subsidies had an enabling effect on the initiation of the participatory process. Also, the birth of the micro-region level CSO, together with the establishment of the MMRDA, made it possible for local ownership of a development process to emerge, thus strengthening new communicative space for rural development. Both these factors were beyond our influence at the initiation phase of the project, but later on both were used to support the process as PAR was emerging.

It seems that through opening a communicative space on rural development the formal, decision-supporting organizations of rural development in the micro-region, such as the MMRDA, was able to find their development facilitator role – which is exactly their legally prescribed task – in the life of the micro-region. They contributed to the creation of a more inclusive communicative space around local development issues, which now involves not only mayors, but many more local actors and citizens as well. Through working with us they came to know their local partners and citizens much better. The longer term sustainability and extension of future possibilities of the communicative space is now supported also by the personal overlaps between these formal organizations and the newly established CSO. All the outcomes and outputs of the democratic communicative spaces established during the PAR project assisted the MMRDA in their design of the application for another rural development plan, the new phase of the LEADER programme in Hungary.

Clearly, our PAR project could contribute to establishing more inclusive spaces for social dialogue in the micro-region – communicative spaces that never existed before. The PAR process included multiple forms of communication, provided opportunities for building of trust and working relationships, estab-

lished common ground for action, and created a sense of agency among local people – therefore, contributed to the democratic qualities of communicative spaces. However, it should also be acknowledged that the communicative spaces oriented to consensus-building still favour the more privileged members of local communities. Furthermore, consensus-building forces participants to focus first on those issues on which it may be easier to agree (instead of the most pressing concerns), such as community or cultural events as they are more ‘apolitical’ and less embedded in local power struggles.

Global, European, national, regional and local institutional arrangements, existing power relations, histories of oppression of Roma people or poor people that structure communicative spaces in rural areas cannot be readily reconciled with the ideal of broad and equal participation already at the initiation phase of such a process under time pressures. Limits to creating equally involving communicative spaces can be traced back to, among many other factors, the difficulties of changing the historically rooted, paternalistic relationship between local people and local government, indifference or apathy to local issues, lack of a sense of self-efficacy, less developed rhetoric skills and lack of self-confidence of marginalized people to express opinion. More time and conscious efforts are needed to radicalize, or re-formulate, these communicative spaces in order to involve, to a much greater extent, the less advantageous groups of local communities. One answer of the research team to the need for radicalization was that we are engaged in the third phase of the PAR project, which specifically focuses on improving quality of life of Roma people and extending the communicative space in a way so that it is socially much more inclusive for Roma people.

When discussing existing social and power relations, we cannot miss discussing the role of a funding organization in such a project. In our case, discussions with the funding organization in some ways represented the ‘participation versus ecological sustainability’ debate. Ecological sustainability was made a condition of financial assistance, which in many ways influenced not only the topics brought up in the communicative space, but the specific actions generated through the space as well. This has meant that the most pressing local concerns, such as creating employment opportunities, were not targeted first by local action groups; instead, early attention was given to issues that were in line with the initial plans of the foundation. However, the PAR process inspired a behavioural change at the funding agency level, towards a more participatory approach. Relatedly, strong value commitments, stemming from our ecological economics background, made it especially hard for us to stand back in the role of a facilitator, dominating neither the research process nor the local people.

Further discussion would be necessary on gender dynamics of the process. Here we claim that our PAR project would not have become a PAR project if there was not active local female participation.

When opening a communicative space on a specific topic, one cannot exert

full control over what other issues in this space would be opened. Our PAR project created some conditions for discussions on rural development directions which brought along issues of local products, self-identity and community life. And probably even more issues which we as researchers are not even aware about.

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Notes

- 1 For further information on the region, please see the following weblinks:

Short description about the Borsodi Mezőség Landscape Protection area (by the National Park): <http://www.bnpi.hu/english/?c=34>

Pictures of Mezőcsát, the centre of the Micro-Region: <http://www.mezocsat.hu/?module=news&action=show&cnid=12229#MIDDLE>

Pictures of the River Tisza at one of the settlements of the micro-region (Tiszabábolna): <http://www.tiszababolna.hu/?module=news&action=show&cnid=14830#MIDDLE>

- 2 The third phase includes in-depth interviews, group discussions, and specific actions, such as creating a documentary film on a famous Roma singer, or writing together a project proposal on organizing free-time, education and work-related programmes for the disadvantaged Roma youth. This phase is financed by an

CSO helping the Roma communities in Hungary, who approached the research team to start pilot programmes together.

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