

## COMMUNITY-BASED SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH-BORSOD REGION, HUNGARY

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### Abstract

In this paper, we present a complex participatory rural development project in a socio-economically disadvantaged floodplain area of Hungary derived from a framework and common ground of ecological economics. We discuss the difficulties encountered during the fieldwork and reflections of the research team on the research processes. This still ongoing research project directed towards the issues of bottom-up sustainability planning can be conceptualised as a mutual learning between local and scientific perspectives with a strong commitment to a participatory approach. Its community-based appreciative research framework anchored in a hermeneutic and constructivist epistemology puts special emphasis on the systematic testing of ecological economics' theoretical bases in live-action contexts and development of deliberative institutional arrangements in order to offer valuable methodological tools and insights for ecological economics.

### Introduction

In this article we first explore the theoretical underpinnings of our complex participatory rural development project in a socio-economically disadvantaged floodplain area of Hungary and its direct implications for the research design and implementation. We then proceed to the detailed presentation of our fieldwork, an action research process, that aimed at putting theories into practice and the concrete participatory methodologies used for different problems. All these were allowing for real problem-orientation and effective participation, enabling people in the research area to identify and express their important issues and needs, to stimulate discussion and analysis, and to take actions. Finally, we summarise our initial findings concerning both our theoretical questions and methodology.

### Theoretical background

Ecological economics as a heterodox, non-coherent school of economics (Gowdy, 2005) started only recently to consciously seek the alternatives of

neoclassical economics. Its disciplinary self-definitions centered around the boundaries, limits and common grounds of this field of study (Røpke, 2005; Gowdy–Erickson, 2005; Müller, 2003; Ramos-Martin, 2003; Costanza, 2001; Costanza, 1989; Norgaard, 1989; Proops, 1989) following the notion that methodological pluralism proposed by Norgaard (1989) should not mean that “anything goes” (Söderbaum, 2000). However, there seems to be an agreement on certain tenets of ecological economics (Gowdy, 2005; Røpke, 2005; Söderbaum, 2000; Norgaard, 1989; Proops, 1989), which forms a theoretical basis of our empirical research as well.

Ecological economists as problem- and policy-oriented researchers aim to influence decision-makers in public policy debates on human-nature issues to the achievement of sustainability (Chiu, 2003; Söderbaum, 2000; Tacconi, 1998; Proops, 1989). As a science of sustainability, ecological economics is to deal with problems and topics of interest to lay audiences, where economy is considered to be embedded in natural and socio-cultural systems, and its growth and scale has biophysical as well as social limits.

Ecological economics as a transdisciplinary field of study (Söderbaum, 1999; Norgaard, 1989) attracts scholars even beyond the disciplines of economics and ecology to join together in their theoretical and empirical enquiries so as to better identify, understand and solve interrelated economic, social and ecological problems. Again, recent discussions claim that transdisciplinarity should not justify anything identified as ecological economics (Røpke, 2005).

Ecological economics as a co-evolutionary framework of thought focuses upon the historically situated, long term interactions between complex ecological and human systems, the interrelations between economic activity and ecosystems (Norgaard, 1994; Proops, 1989). This study field also implies an awareness of historical specificities, context-dependency (space and time scale as well) and temporalities involved in conducting research.

Ecological economics as a post-normal science is not striving to deliver truth or objective reality anymore (Funtowicz–Ravetz, 1993), much rather to seriously reflect upon the social and ethical consequences as well as values and ideologies of its works (Söderbaum, 1999). Democratization of knowledge, openness, self-reflectivity, awareness of one's assump-

tions, values and explicit statements, plurality of perspectives, continuous process of reflection, the presence of an extended peer-community who take part in the quality assessment of information (Funtowicz–Ravetz, 1994) in the research process and in the production of scientific knowledge as well, are considered to be the most important elements of post-normal science (Müller, 2003; Tacconi, 1998; Funtowicz–Ravetz, 1994).

Ecological economics in its ideal for a sustainable society is committed to the political model of deliberative democracy (Prugh et al., 2000; Söderbaum, 2000; Costanza et al., 1997; Gowdy, 1994). Many authors offered new epistemological standpoint for ecological economics (Tacconi, 1998; Norgaard, 1994; Funtowicz–Ravetz, 1993). O’Hara (1996) has introduced the idea of discourses and discursive ethics to the field of ecological economics and environmental evaluation, while Meppem similarly, has brought communicative approaches to ecological economics (Meppem–Bourke, 1999; Meppem–Gill, 1998). Aldred and Jacobs (2000) have offered Citizens’ Jury, another constructive methodological proposal for ecological economics. In contrast to neoclassical environmental evaluation processes (particularly contingent valuation method), citizens’ juries are derived from the ideals of deliberative democracy. Although ecological economics favours empirical enquiries based upon extended peer community, including people affected by a particular issue, it certainly has paid much less attention to power relations, reproduction of social inequalities, participation and social interaction (Radcliffe, 2004; DeFilippis, 2002; Kapoor, 2002; Söderbaum, 1999).

From the perspective of the common ground of ecological economics presented above, one has to face the rather disturbing state of affairs that only a few empirical studies reflect clearly these theoretical underpinnings, “core beliefs” of ecological economics (Røpke, 2005, p.6.) and state explicitly values and ideology (Söderbaum, 2000), motives, assumptions, in their problem definition, in their scientific, pragmatic and political goals and ways of conducting empirical research.

### **Constructivist participatory methodology**

The task of understanding how complex ecosystems and socio-economic activities interrelate required a transdisciplinary research approach. The research combined the existing disciplinary tools and concepts through forming of interdisciplinary cooperation between ecologists, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, aiming to build a platform of shared theoretical and methodological knowledge.

The research team used a hermeneutic-constructivist approach which aims to facilitate better understanding of the social, economic and ecological

phenomena within the researched community (Tacconi, 1998). This paradigm also implies that local perceptions, reality constructs, belief systems, mental models not only created through people’s mind, but through reflective actions of their communities (Braun, 2002; Reason, 1994).

It offers a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology with several traditions of participatory research approaches, theories and practice that empowers local people and facilitates social learning. In the case of PAR, theory emerges inductively from practice and reflects on what works and what not (Chambers, 1994). Its twofold objective is to produce useful knowledge and action through research, adult education and socio-political action, on the one hand; and to empower people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge, on the other hand (Reason, 1994).

Throughout the appreciative research process, rather than directing or controlling the research process, the role of researchers is that of facilitators, offering participants an opportunity to think about the future of their communities (Balázs et al., 2005). The Appreciative Enquiry approach entering community-development from the business and management research (Ludema et al., 2001) is directed towards identifying what works in a community and how to do more of what works. Instead of problem-oriented methods that are searching for external help and entrenching a sense of dependency in that community, achievements, existing strengths and local capabilities were assessed in an attempt to “create our sense of reality” by the power of language and discourse (Braun, 2002).

The emergent research design with a continuously evolving and developing conceptual framework through the fieldwork was used to be able to become “receptive to local idiosyncrasies” (Miles–Huberman, 1994). Qualitative research methods – including in-depth interviewing, appreciative enquiry, direct observation and participatory transect walk – were applied in order to explore, understand and be engaged with the subject matter of the research. Data analysis proceeded in an inductive fashion, avoiding forcing a priori theories to fit in this specific context. Finally, the application of participatory methods enabled the research team to negotiate the outcomes of the research with local people whom the data were derived (Tacconi, 1998).

### **The promise of deliberative democracy**

The road to global sustainability is leading through the political activity of local communities. A sustainable society requires strong democracy, wherein the different social, governmental aims and the necessary processes for reaching these aims are generated in community-based discussions involving the largest possible amount of people with an equal standing with

experts (Prugh et al., 2000).

Deliberative democracy promises that the democratization of procedures, planning and development will lead to the common good, as in the deliberation process participants are more likely to go beyond their individual interests (Wilson–Howarth, 2002) or perhaps change their attitude and values through collective actions. Building strongly on the fairness of processes, communicative rationality, the open discourse of equal parties, deliberative democracy enhances understanding between various parties on various issues and the articulation of different values, interests and perceptions. The procedural norm of discursive ethics accepts and creates space for free and open debates, with well-informed mutually recognized, and accepted participants (O’Hara, 1995).<sup>2</sup>

The community forum in Mezöcsát aimed to create a ground for a “deliberative arena” (Renn et al., 1995; Barber, 1984) being structured and assisted by the researchers as facilitators. Based on the principles of discursive ethics (O’Hara, 1996), representatives of key stakeholder groups could start to discuss and share their ideas about the possible visions of their micro-region.

### **Social learning**

The application of PAR methods implies that the research is conceptualised as a process of mutual learning. This co-construction means the recognition of self-referentiality, that is the critical awareness of being part of the researched system (Norgaard, 1994) and a commitment to local knowledge instead of scientific/expert knowledge. The ideals of endogenous development and giving voice to traditional communities (O’Hara, 1995) as well as traditional ecological knowledge, therefore, were taken seriously throughout the research.

Effective actions for change are the products of knowledge, experience and practice (Chiu, 2003).

Participatory approaches emphasise the importance of experiential knowing. The aim of PAR methodologies is that, beyond an increase in understanding, a learning-approach of different knowledge types is generated at a social level leading to concrete and constructive action. In this sense, the research component of action research is a tool for action, too, not an end in itself. For knowledge generation, participatory processes are required to involve and evolve stakeholders perceptions and values through learning. Learning here is understood as the “accumulation of insights into system cause and effect by all those interests in a decision or an issue,” wherein learning is a never-ending process. (Meppem–Gill, 1998). In the learning process, guaranteeing the quality of the process of decision-making, the real participatory nature of the process is what counts more than the concrete outcome of the process (Ramos-Martin, 2003; Meppem–Gill, 1998; O’Hara, 1995).

Learning as active listening to each other is about how we learn, by whom and for whom. Learning should be taking place putting people’s priorities first (Chambers, 2000), inclusive of all stakeholder interests, values and perceptions with particular attention to those who are in a marginal position, in our case Roma ethnicity, poor villagers and women. Still, this wide range of stakeholders should be allowed for “being affected by not privileging some knowledge” (Meppem, 2000). Social learning must be amplified with empowerment of communities; communities should be made responsible for making decisions about their life (Shrivastava, 1995) especially in an area, where “upward-looking”, seeking external help is an integral part of everyday survival.

In light of the pluralism and multiple paradigms behind Ecological Economics we do not claim that an Ecological Economics empirical analysis could only follow one research methodology, nor we want to prove that we have got our participatory research process fully right. In the followings, we turn to practical

<sup>2</sup> When used in ecosystems evaluation, the role of a discursive process is to help the community to learn about and articulate values and preferences for certain ecosystems goods and services (Wilson–Howarth, 2002)

examples of research methodologies, structures, approaches, processes derived from the framework of Ecological Economics that might support and ensure effective community participation and problem-orientation.

### **South-Borsod Floodlands – the study area**

The current rural policy in Hungary is a centralised, sectoral and top-down approach leading to the exclusion of local resources, initiatives and local participation from development processes in general. As a consequence of the EU rhetoric on sustainability and participation, domestic policies will hopefully give more attention and support for a participatory rural development approach.

Since the fall of 2003, a participatory rural development project have been being implemented in the South-Borsod Floodplain by researchers from 6 Hungarian universities.<sup>3</sup> The key element has been to engage local communities in the development and implementation of a shared vision and strategy in a manner that reflects the needs, concerns and aspirations of the community.<sup>4</sup> The study site is situated in the Borsodi Mezőség Environmentally Sensitive Area, which is an ideal landscape for studying human-social-ecological systems interactions. This natural setting of the research helped to understand local realities and interactions among nature, economy and society in their own context. The historical relationship between nature, society and economy has gone through considerable changes in this particular landscape for the past couple of decades. From the interviews and a focus group discussion on the relationship of local people with water, it has become clear that these formerly interdependent three systems have got separated from each other, and seemed to have needed reconnections, re-linking. Disconnectedness of local nature, society and economy was identified as a general problem of ruralities and the main focus of our research. However, the specific problem perceptions, possible solutions and visions were to be identified by the local people

using or tailor-making various participatory methodologies depending on the characteristics of the problems (Balázs et al., 2005).

According to the official classification of regions, the Borsodi Mezőség region is located on the areas of the Borsod floodlands small region and the Borsod flatlands (Borsod richlands) small region. Our research focuses on the southernmost part of the region, along the river on the area of Borsod-Ártér (Borsod-floodlands) in the following villages: Négyes, Tiszavalk, Tiszabábolna, Tiszadorogma, Ároktő.

(See Figure 1, next page)

The villages are located in the floodplain of the Tisza River where the main characteristics of the landscape have been formed by water. 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. Along the river, 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. A dike defense system was constructed as well as all natural water flow resources have been drained from the area. By eliminating the most important natural landscape forming force, all the ecological services which formed the basis of the economic activities of local people were also eliminated.

The region, along with inevitable decline of a collectivized industrial agriculture after the regime change in Hungary, has been spiraling downward into inescapable social and economic depression in the 1990s. Unfavorable demographic conditions, ageing and shrinking population are due to the change in the availability of jobs. Death/birth ratio is the worst in this region, as compared to the same data for the whole county, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén. The villages of the

3 The interdisciplinary undertaking comprised of the Institute of Environmental and Landscape Management, St. István University, Gödöllő together with the Faculty of Law, Pázmány Péter Catholic University; the Water Engineering College, Baja; Department of Plant Taxonomy and Ecology, ELTE University; College for Social Theory, Budapest University of Economic Sciences and Public Administration; Department of Anthropology, University of Miskolc. Part of the research team was already familiar with this area due to a research conducted there in the summer of 2002 on the economic evaluation of natural capital of environmentally sensitive areas, on the relationship of local people and wetlands, and on the impacts of the Hungarian agro-environmental payment scheme.

4 The micro region in question is not totally unfamiliar with bottom-up initiatives since in the mid-90s it has established a civil association for rural development and initiated a planning process involving local opinion leaders. However, failing to raise sufficient amount of financial resources, this initiative lost its credibility among people, and could not go beyond a kind of wishful thinking. The failure was partly due to insufficient mobilising of local resources and capabilities and too much waiting and hoping for external financing. Therefore, this time an emphasis was put on local capabilities and a community-based, participatory planning process has been initiated.

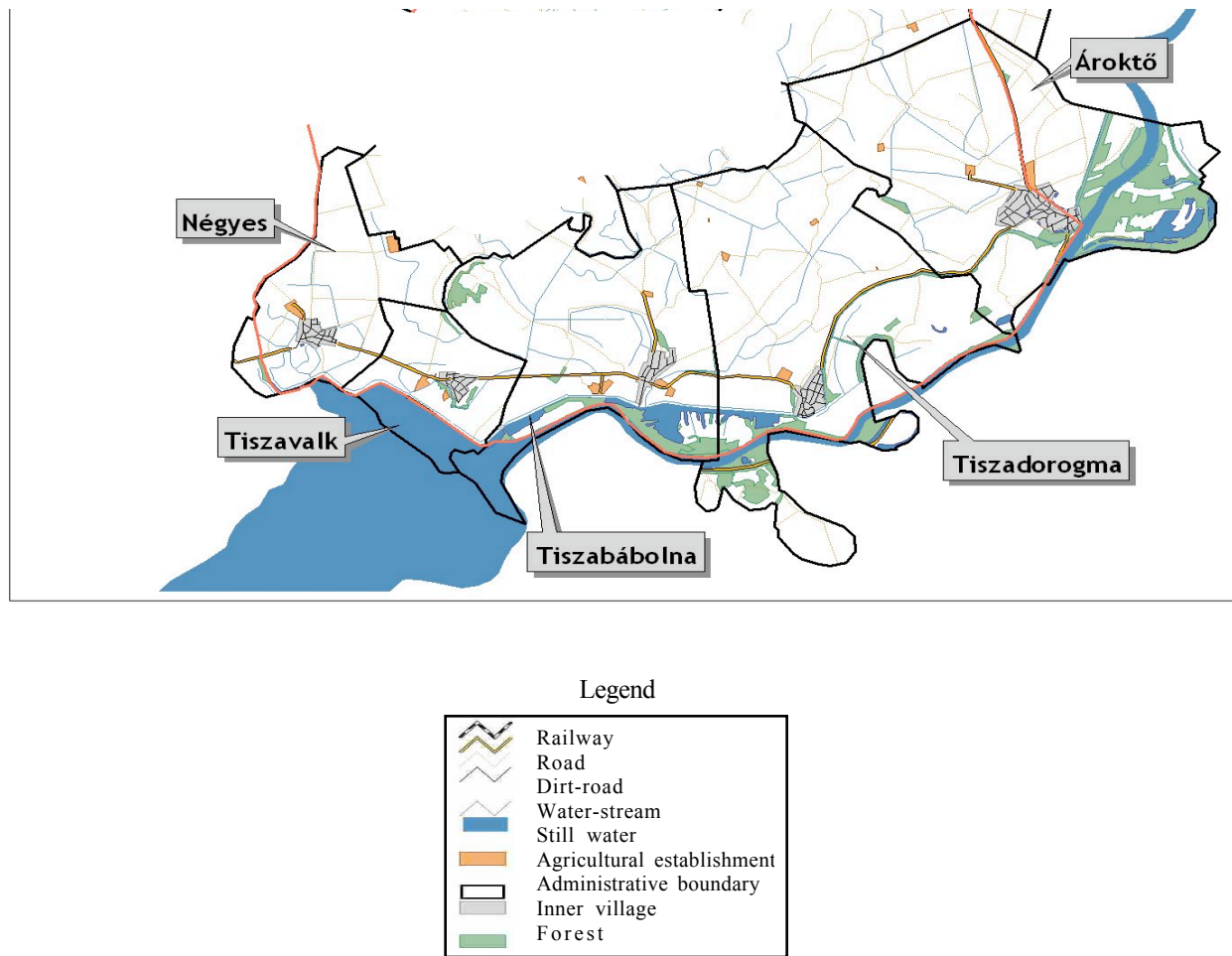


Figure 1 - Study Area (Source: GIS Studio at SIU-IELM)

South-Borsod Floodplain are officially designated as a most disadvantageous area of Hungary in economic and social terms with a significant Roma ethnicity in 3 villages. Furthermore, the minority-majority linkages are full of conflicts: in Ároktő, a significant amount of people of majority blamed the Roma population for the village not being successful to becoming a rural tourist destination. The general stereotype of local people on the Roma people is that of too lazy to work and living on the benefits of the Hungarian social security system.

In 2002 the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) scheme was introduced offering new contract-based incentives for the application of environment-friendly agricultural methods for a period of at least 5 years.

In 1998, 1999, and 2000 there were catastrophic floods on the Tisza River in Hungary. The last wave of floods threatened the entire Hungarian Great Plain with direct inundation. The recent serious flooding events experienced in previous years have demonstrated that new ways of water and wetland management is needed in order to move towards sustainability. Officially, two competing future scenarios exist for decreasing the risks of flooding. A technical water engineering one which would construct reservoirs along the Tisza River, or a wetland restoration one which prefers supporting an traditional extensive agriculture. According to the first scenario, reservoirs will prevent inundation from high water levels, in the event of a high peak flood wave. By contrast, with the wetlands restoration scenario, flood waters will not be drained off quickly but will be spread over land and remain there as long as they are useful for ecosystems and for extensive agricultural practice.

### **The research process**

PAR projects go through two main phases. One is the participatory appraisal and action planning phase, and the other is the participatory implementation of action, monitoring and evaluation phase. Action was considered an equally important phase of the project as the exploratory research component itself. However, we did not consider actions as a one-time event, but we have tried to design the action process as an ongoing process (Balázs et al., 2005).

The following parts illustrate how a complex participatory rural development research project has been managed so far, and look ahead to the future activities. The “core beliefs” of ecological economics and participatory methodologies are illustrated with practical experience to provide feedback to theories and to identify what works and how in practice and what not.

### **Appraisal and action planning**

The initial step in the research process was a preparation for working in an interdisciplinary team of researchers through various self-organised workshops in order to help the diverse members of the research team to grasp each other disciplinary framework and build a platform of shared theoretical and methodological knowledge.

The second step was an extensive appreciative enquiry interviewing so as to create an empowering discursive situation between the researchers and members of local communities. A major objective of this stage of semi-structured interviewing was to uncover visions, the patterns and differences in local attitudes, problems, knowledge, perceptions, and values attributed to living in this particular landscape of Hungary. Positive stories and capabilities of the community were gathered from local people: local residents, including young people, old people, new inhabitants, women, men, etc., local farmers, teachers, micro-region managers, local government officials, local entrepreneurs. Key-informants were interviewed as well such as National Park or Water Management Authority officials, who had much access to information on most of the research issues based on their specific knowledge, experience, social status. Snowball technique was employed together with referrals and peer-recommendations from local resource-users for identifying interviewees. The interviews – based on a flexible guideline – were conducted by pairs of researchers, whom were of different disciplinary background and generally of different gender to ensure diverse insights into the complex issues of the research area. The interview guideline focused on interviewees’ individual perceptions exploring the natural environment, economic settings and societal relations of the particular community. The interview protocol ensured that the same information was gathered from all interviewees and also provided flexibility to the interviewers to allow new topics to emerge.

Next, a more structured interviewing phase was designed so as to check whether and how actions can be carried out and support can be built for the proposed actions among local community members.

Altogether 126 interviews were conducted between December 2003 and February 2004 in the five villages. The length of the interviews was varying between half an hour to 3 hours, the average length of the interviews was around one and a half hour. Almost all of them were recorded to tape, then a detailed interview summary was compiled for each.<sup>5</sup> Appreciative Enquiry (AE) type of questions had quite an added value to the research. AE questions encouraged inter-

<sup>5</sup> Except for the cases where the interviewee did not feel comfortable with tape-recording. In these cases, the interviews were recorded by taking extensive notes.

viewees to have positive reflections on their local traditions, such as basket weaving, matting, fishing, etc. and on their natural resources (Tisza river, local riparian forests, floodplain orchards, etc.). They could feel proud of their local values, such as clean streets, cultivated land, rare local plant and animals species, local celebrations. Local choirs, local NGOs, local books, folk dance groups, drama groups, local school and its teachers were valued highly. Interviewees could feel proud of their capabilities/skills – such as knowledge on traditional fishing practices, carpentry skills, or agricultural skills. AE questions encouraged local people to appreciate already existing local initiatives, such as the organising of a local trainband, or the cleaning up of a local lake; local heroes were named. In some cases, AE proved to be a powerful tool to make the interviewees think about their future, vision and dream. Important elements of these visions were the establishment and strengthening of local undertakings (“a new packaging factory”, “a free beach resort area”, “a new sewery”, “thermal bath”, “new accommodation places for tourists”, “organising of transect walks for tourists by local people”, “more active participation in the agro-environmental programs”, and “establishment of local NGOs”).

The answers to AE questions have shown that quite strong and diverse emotions are attached to the Tisza River. This river can still be considered as a place of high importance for local communities, with quite a significant place attachment. However, according to some of the interviewees, this place attachment seems to be somewhat lower now than some decades back and many people are only attached to their villages because of their family: they will more easily move away if there are no more relatives nearby. It seems that “outsiders” or weekenders tend to appreciate the value of nature much better than local people.

The power of AE questions in initiating change and encouraging concrete actions was also visible in many interview situations: “If there were nature protection actions, and if I had the time, I would be glad to join you”; “It would be worthwhile to learn how to mat”. In these interview situations, some elements of a new future could be constructed. In summary, many of these examples reveal that AE set the stage for finding stories that are empowering for local residents.

Though AE questions were not targeted to uncover problem areas, in many interview situations, local people raised unsolved, depressing issues. One important story of this type was the damage done by industrial agriculture (by breaking the co-evolutionary path of the landscape). The introduction of modern industrial agriculture (large-scale crop cultivation) required a dike defence system in order to divert all natural water flows from the area. Dam buildings in the 30s and 70s has resulted in aridity and secondary salinity in a major part of landscape. Through damming and flood protection embankments, the Tisza River lost its natu-

ral characteristics and huge areas of flood plains dried out. Therefore, traditional ecological knowledge of local people was no longer valued since size of local wetland areas has radically shrank. Before the installation of the dike defence system, people could bath in the Tisza river; the banks of the river had been important community places, while afterwards, due to the high rise in the level of the water at many of the villages, this is not possible anymore. This way the villages have lost some community gathering places as well. The disappearance of water from the floodland areas resulted in the disappearance of ancient professions as they have lost their basic material inputs, such as sallow. Many local people were expecting the “uplifting” of the villages from the second dam construction project in the 70s. However, these hopes were not fulfilled. Most of the interviewees considered the changes of the landscape, due to the second round of dam construction, as a big loss.

The policy of the local water management authority gives place for some conflicts. The former areas of floodlands with fruit orchards now belonging to this authority are not taken care of and completely getting bewildered and destroyed (“not even wild boars are able to cross”). However, the need for the regeneration of floodplain orchards is still alive: some local people have the opinion that the cleaning up of floodplain orchards could be a good employment opportunity for many unemployed.

The relationship between the National Park and the local people is not without problems either. Most of the local people view the NP, on the one hand, as an authority which constraints their activity and the development of tourism and agriculture. On the other hand, many interviewees expressed their positive concerns about living in a nature protection area.

Not surprisingly, the two most important reference points for “good old times” are the times before the installation of the dike defence system (“there had been so lovely maize and cabbage grown and fish caught here”) and the “agricultural collectives”-times. The former is associated with the older people, whom were children in that time, the latter is by the middle-age or older middle-age people, whom learnt agriculture practices during the socialist era. The agricultural practices and knowledge of these two generations greatly differ: one is the agriculture of taking advantage of the pulsing patterns of flood and drought, and which is now only to be found in the memories and worldviews of elders (“...the wise peasant is missing, this group has become extinct”), while the other is more of an industrial agriculture. The first knowledge system developed over generations of experiences and observations with nature and naturally occurring resources within the very specific setting of the floodplain. Regeneration, discovery and acknowledgment of traditional ecological knowledge could be the basis of

developing alternatives to recent natural resource management practices.

Many criticisms have been formulated by the interviewees concerning the everyday life of their villages (“even people’s morality is getting lower”), but still, passive and envy behaviour is reigning. Majority of local people accept their “destiny”, that their villages are not able to go one step ahead to stop spiraling downward to even bigger depression. The ability of local people to act is completely missing, blame is put on each other and on the local governments. Enthusiasm towards local celebrations is decreasing as well. Public participation in decision-making is at a very low level.

The disconnectedness of nature, society and economy was especially visible in case of local children: although they live in a rural area, “they do not have a close relationship with local animals, plants at all.” Furthermore, due to the closure of some of the local schools, many children spend their schooldays outside of their home villages, losing connections with them. This was one of the main reasons for organising “Nature Preservation Day” for local children together with local teachers and experts of the two nearby National Parks.

#### **4.2. Implementation phase**

A group of researchers together with local teachers and experts of the two nearby national parks organised a “Day of Nature Preservation” for local children. Another group of researchers organised a community forum in order to bring local people together to share their visions and discuss possible actions within the micro-region.

In the following, the community forum will be presented in detail as the first concrete action of the project. By January 2004 the five villages in the research area with four other settlements have established the Mezőcsát Microregion.<sup>6</sup> Based on the decision of local mayors, the town of Mezőcsát was appointed as the leader of the micro-region, and the mayor of Mezőcsát was nominated as the head of the micro-region. During the interviews, it has become evident that there have been numerous reasons – such as the prospects of higher government regional development funding due to its disadvantageous economic and social situation – for this bottom-up initiative, but it has been clear as well that these settlements needed to prepare some kind of strategy for their common fu-

ture. Therefore, our aim was to help to launch this process. Following the principles of discursive ethics (O’Hara, 1996), our proposal was that representatives of key stakeholder groups could start to discuss and share their ideas about the possible visions of their micro-region. Based on the idea of deliberative democracy, a community forum was planned to strengthen local decisions and empower local lay knowledge. The community forum as a participatory method is able to create a ground for a “deliberative arena” (Bobbio, 2003; Renn et al., 1995; Barber, 1984) being structured and assisted by the researchers as facilitators. The presence of “outsider” facilitators and the participation rules laid down at the beginning of the forum were the tools used for governing participation and group interactions. Kapoor (2002) misses “systematic rules or legitimating force” governing participation in PAR processes. He questions for example that the facilitator could be enough for a “free and equal deliberation” (Kapoor, 2002, p.106.) as the facilitator is then granted a broad power and is considered as a “superior expertise”, which is against real deliberation. In this sense, facilitators can intervene in discussions and prefer certain participants to others. However, in our case the “non-decision-maker” participants did not feel intimidated by the formal authorities present.

The aim of the forum was that local people holding politically and socially significant positions – including mayors, local government representatives and the key personalities of certain micro-region initiatives – attend the forum and grasp the idea, as well as some technique of community-based, participatory development. It was also of primary importance to involve the representatives of those local or regional authorities, whose operations have a huge impact on the landscape and community viability, including particularly the two national parks.

The agenda of the forum followed the participatory model of “Vision to Action Forum” (VAF)<sup>7</sup> bringing together a broad range of members of the community to “assess their community’s strength and opportunities and to identify problem areas, to share ideas and hopes for their community’s future, and to shape and launch an action plan to achieve their specific goals” (Clark, 2003, p.4.). VAF has three overarching goals: to strengthen community vitality, to build civic engagement and local leadership and to promote sustainable development. The most important outcomes of VAF are concrete “community projects”

<sup>6</sup> Microregion is the smallest level of regional development policy and funding in Hungary, a „NUTS 4-level” according to the terms of the European Union regional policy.

<sup>7</sup> VAF is developed by the Vital Communities and Antioch New England Institute drawing on models developed by the Cooperative Extension Services of the Universities of Vermont and New Hampshire. The forum process has proved to be successful in many communities in the United States and Central Europe.



imagined by the community and published in a “Vision to Action Forum Report” distributed to all participants.

The original VAF approach had to be modified and tailor-made to fit the local conditions and needs. VAF is broadly inclusive and the most different groups of the community are present, while our idea was first to get key local decision makers and community leaders acquainted with the idea of participatory planning and community development and present in a half-day forum the most important methods and techniques of this approach to them. “Real” VAFs will be conducted in all villages of the micro-region only in a further step of the research.

During the VAF, four working groups were assigned to do one part of a SWOT analysis which presented a remarkably thorough analysis on their region in a relatively short time. Participants also identified visions which could be implemented with the fewest resources and voted on all visions. The preferred vision empowered local community to have local use of local lands, keeping most of the profit at local people. Many votes have been received by visions in connection with nature protection and the use of ecosystem functions in balance with nature, such as rural tourism, local food-manufacturing, regeneration of floodplain orchards, etc.

The 20-page summary report with the results of the forum was distributed to the participants and the local governments of the micro-region. In the local government offices, the report was made available to other local people as well, who did not attend forum. The report contains all background information on the forum, including the programme and the outcome of the exercises of the forum, pictures, the address of the participants, etc.

The participants were very active all along the forum and despite of the high level of pessimism in the microregion, plenty of good examples and memories of a healthy community were expressed by them. For many of the participants, this was the first time to be publicly heard, and the first real opportunity to listen to the colleagues in the nearby villages. The forum helped to make the participants see themselves as a stronger community, which is able to make changes and helped them to realise their strengths and opportunities, which were thought to be hidden or non-existing. The forum was an ideal tool to mobilize socio-cultural and economic networks; networks of communication, co-operation and co-ordination. Such networks can represent enabling opportunities and help to have local control over local resources, initiate social learning, contributing to sustainable development of the region.

The research team is now in another phase of self-reflection not only to analyse data and experience gathered and gained so far, but to reflect upon the roles they have taken during the research. Further exploration is needed whether the transcript/report of the fo-

rum as a collective product turned out to be a useful tool in supporting further reflections about the future of the micro region and/or the villages or facilitating any further actions (Balázs et al., 2005).

As a next step, a capability assessment would help to identify all local resources and skills through which the common vision comes to reality and on which the concrete actions and projects can be built. Capability assessment is a tool to map the traditionally ignored “gifts”, that is skills and non-economic abilities of residents, which may contribute to development. Some villages already requested very similar type of fora on a village level. One of the research team’s aim for the near future is to help these communities in organising these fora.

## Conclusions

The research project has already gained valuable experience in the way that is good for examining the interactions between ecological and human systems and for creating a vision for a sustainable future of the community. Our initial results suggests that participatory and democratic aspirations behind action research are much harder to achieve in practice than in theory. We have been able to make some interesting methodological observations concerning participation, which can help to prepare participatory action research plans in the future.

## Participation and direct democracy in practice

**Research design.** The main concern of participatory processes is who initiates the process, who would be responsible for the definition of the research question/research problem and for the design of the research. In our case, the research process was initiated by the interdisciplinary research team, implemented together with local people without giving them any role in determining research methods and research design. Still, the concrete actions truly reflected the problems identified by local people.

**Handling over the stick to locals.** Strong value commitments towards nature conservation and sustainable development made it especially hard for ecologists to stay back in the role of a “facilitator” (Chambers, 2000), not dominating neither the research process nor local people. Our task of being facilitators was to establish adequate conditions for a learning environment, where the future development and planning concerns are generated through a community level discourse process. The facilitators can neither determine nor influence the outcomes of this process, even if the results of this process and decisions are not in line with their values, expectations, scientific background or strong commitment to sustainability, etc. Social learning must be amplified with empowerment

of communities made responsible for making decisions about their life (Shrivastava, 1995). Experiencing the consequences, the institutionalised social learning process can provide opportunities to adjust development plans or planning concerns in case values or preferences changed through open debates. Therefore, the discursive process has to ensure and include reflexivity, the handling of unexpected consequences/impacts and anticipation of possible impacts on a community level. Still, the results of the interviews and the community forum suggest that the vision of a local community to have local use of local lands, keeping most of the profit at local people was popular.

**Rapport building.** Interview situations were new to rural residents, therefore successful rapport building with the local people was crucial for a good interview and for the whole research process. Local people did not consider our presence as a “one time shot”, and with their active participation in the forum they have expressed their trust towards the research team.

**Combining local and expert knowledge.** The universities brought theoretical and technical knowledge and research expertise into the research process, which was then successfully combined with the knowledge and the other assets of the local people: local people started to get engaged in a social learning process through the community forum organized by the researchers, while researchers gained precious insights into local ecological knowledge. However, researchers were sometimes “given” or “charged with” the status of experts, as their knowledge was esteemed higher by local people than the knowledge of local people. Researchers needed to be aware of this inequality and at the same time were trying to underplay their role as members of academia.

Indigenous ecological knowledge of elder people is not anymore culturally embedded in the local knowledge systems; it is appearing less and less in a collective form of community-level (shared) knowledge. The transfer of indigenous knowledge to future generations is not assured, so possible future actions might be oriented towards this issue

**Local capabilities.** It has become clear that local people are very much able to analyse their own situation, to clearly reflect on their lives, to understand their own problems and opportunities. Those opposing or being skeptical about participatory processes in Hungary often claim that it is difficult to address and involve the different groups of local people in participatory processes, adding that Hungarian society and local communities are not yet ready and prepared enough for democratic processes, like the one presented in this article. The community learning environment of the forum empowered people to do much of their own analysis and community planning, and cooperate in an unexpected situation and in a new environment. Nevertheless, the discursive processes and direct democratic

institutions or mechanisms of deliberative democracy, such as a community forum, can only be strengthened and learnt when continuously practiced.

**Diversity and working together.** Diversity of values, perceptions, exceptions is a main principle of PAR. A lesson learnt during the community forum is that it is difficult to retain and recognise a sense of community diversity meanwhile there is a need for working together and producing a summary report for action. The exercise of seeking consensus risks simplifying diversity (Kapoor, 2002), “silencing” or “excluding some community voices” (Kapoor, 2002, p.109.).

**Expectations and responsibility.** Local people are brought into a process in which expectations might be raised and then frustration might arise if there are no actions or follow-up results. To avoid these, researchers needed to be transparent about their intentions and be aware of their social responsibility toward the community. Due to temporary lack of financial resources, the research had to be stopped for quite a long time, which was hindering further common action. The damages will be seen only when research continues.

**Time-intensity.** Participatory approaches take a lot of time and efforts; the mutual learning process is time-consuming. Researchers have to spend great deal of time on listening to the local people and understanding their priorities, problems, visions. This can assure flexibility being always in response to local ideas and allowing local people to gradually become more and more involved in the social learning process. Even in a strong rural community many conflicts might arise: ethnic, social class, etc.

**Power relations.** Each of the several social groups within a territorial community is likely to see its own situation from its own perspective, and power relations between them need to be explored. Lack of time might result in a failure to reveal power relations, the different perceptions of reality, local dynamics, and hierarchies. Issues of entrenched power and power structures, such as local government's, water management authority's, National Park's, Roma population's should not be dismissed, structural inequalities and power dynamics within the community must be managed in a careful manner. “Meaningful community change involves redistribution of power, authority and influence in decision-making processes” (Schafft–Brown, 2003; DeFilippis, 2002). One of the difficulties of power issues lies “in the systematic checking of arbitrariness and power inequalities” (Kapoor, 2002, p.110.). The self-critical epistemological awareness (Chambers, 2000) embodied in doing participatory research should be extended to power relations both within the local communities in question and between researchers representing academic institutes and local lay people. The research group should find time for itself to reflect more not only on the working of PAR techniques, but as suggested by Kapoor (2002) also on

discussing the theoretical assumptions behind them, and broader issues, such as localism and the role of power in PAR projects.

### Methodological conclusions

**Design of the research process and research team.** A lot depends on how the research process is organised in an interdisciplinary research team, and how the research team itself is organised; how it is able to work as a team with researchers of different disciplines. One of the biggest conflicts in the research team have arisen apparently between the natural and the social scientists. The former have not been familiar and been used to “emerging” research design and were expecting a much more tighter and pre-structured research process. This conflict forced both disciplines to face its roots. Disciplinary conflicts such as this need to be brought up to the surface as suggested by Söderbaum (1999) and handled constructively. Enough time and occasion should be left for getting insights into each other’s disciplines. However, a great deal of diverse information was generated this way and the different disciplines could sort them out, understand, and interpret them quite effectively. In this way, the disciplinary biases when each professional might seek for information from his/her point of view could be better eliminated.

**Mixed methods: PAR and AE.** The methods used need to be assessed in relation to the objectives of the project and the context in which they were applied (Röpke, 2005; Ramos-Martin, 2003). When the research focus is complex and broad just as in our case, qualitative research techniques can be used together in mixed-methods studies to provide more information than could be obtained by using either one alone. The adoption of PAR has proved to be a dynamic, non-standardised and flexible methodology, which helped the researchers to adopt to real-life situation as the research was unfolding. Admittedly, the use of AE has been difficult during the interviews: AE questions received a bunch of complaints as answers. However, AE questions certainly have helped a lot to bring up many positive feelings, ideas, visions to the surface. We can only hope that even by simply asking AE type of questions we have managed to achieve a little change. Certainly, AE worked much better during the community forum, where it has evolved to a more participatory and people-centered approach than in personal interviews.

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