

**SZENT ISTVÁN UNIVERSITY
ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE DOCTORAL SCHOOL**

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN SUSTAINABLE RURAL
DEVELOPMENT:
THE POTENTIAL OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION
RESEARCH**

Thesis of PhD dissertation

BARBARA BODORKÓS

**GÖDÖLLŐ
2010**

Name of doctoral school: Szent István University
Environmental Science Doctoral School

Discipline: Environmental Science

Head of school: György Heltai DSc
Professor, Head of department, Hungarian
Academy of Science
Szent István University
Agriculture and Environmental Science Faculty
Institute of Environmental Science
Chemistry and Biochemistry Department

Supervisor: György Pataki PhD
Assistant professor, Senior researcher
Szent István University
Agriculture and Environmental Science Faculty
Institute of Environmental and Landscape
Management
Environmental Economics Department
Environmental Social Science Research Group

.....
Approval from head of school

.....
Approval from supervisor

Premises

Rural landscapes constitute particularly important spaces for sustainability. 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. According to ecological economists ecological sustainability in rural landscapes cannot, however, be stripped from social, economic, cultural and political relations.

According to the new rural development paradigm development of rural areas should be based on bottom-up processes with active participation of local people using local resources and capabilities. Key resources for such development are traditional products and production methods, local languages and folklore, and historic sites and landscapes.

Ecological economists claim that social justice entailed in the ideal of sustainability requires the political quest for a more inclusive democracy and taking more responsibility both at an individual and at a community level. It is possible to contribute to strengthen human capabilities for taking responsibility for rural development related decisions through Participatory Action Research (PAR).

My dissertation is built around the design and implementation of a participatory action research project in the Mezőcsát Micro-Region. PAR is a scientific research approach, which connects understanding and change, theory and practice, and which generates knowledge based on a close cooperation between researchers and locals. Action research offers partnership to “subjects” of its research, furthermore the design and implementation of research is also part of the research. Action researchers give over the stick to locals in designing and implementing participatory research processes.

Through my dissertation I would like to contribute to the radical democratisation of science and learning for sustainability.

Objectives

The main objective of my dissertation is to explore and analyse the rural development potential of PAR derived from the framework of Ecological Economics.

My research questions are:

1. Theoretical research question

How Participatory Action Research can contribute to transferring the theoretical underpinnings of Ecological Economics – namely problem orientation, sustainability, transdisciplinarity, methodological pluralism, sensitivity to marginal groups, reflectivity to power relation, policy-orientation – into practice.

2. Methodological research question

- a) What are the main features and constraints of practical applicability of participatory action research?
- b) How participatory action research can facilitate planning for rural development at the micro-region level?

3. Contextual research question

- a) What are the main contextual features of participatory action research at the national and micro-regional level?

Methodology

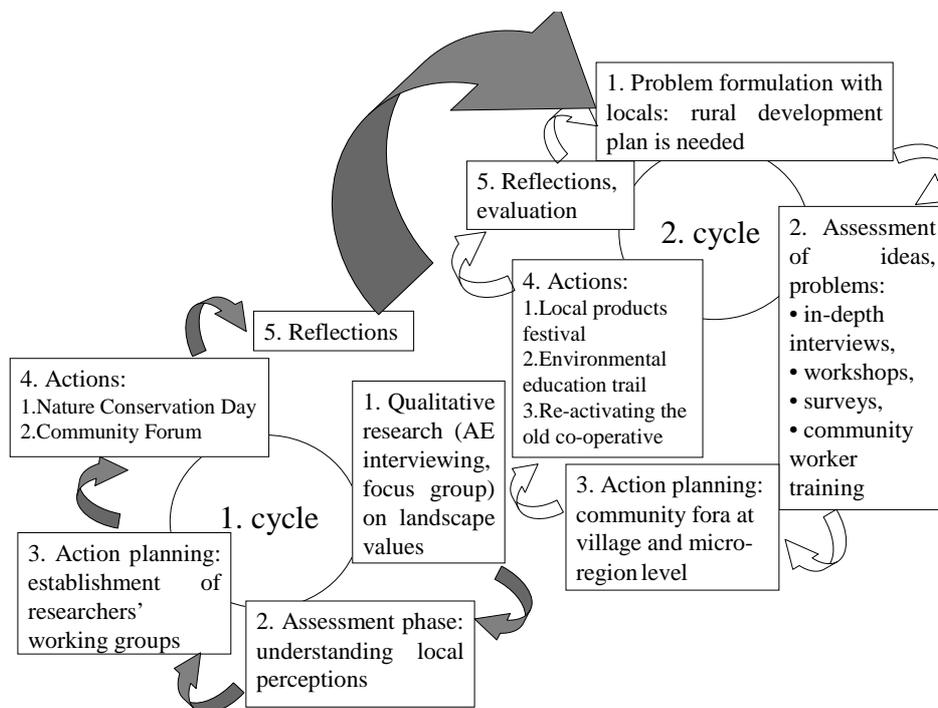
Theoretical background of my research covers the following areas: ecological economics, participatory action research, participatory planning and development and sustainable rural development. Multiple perspectives, methodologies and approaches originating from these areas provided me with tools to

- ❖ better understand relations, interactions and feedback mechanisms among local economy, environment and society and then
- ❖ to design and implement the participatory action research process, and finally
- ❖ to be able to provide feedback to the various theories applied.

I have studied participatory action research cases of other countries both from methodological and substantial perspectives. As in Hungary only one study was published on PAR, my focus in the Hungarian case studies was placed on sustainable rural development and community development initiatives. I have selected these case studies as they have been built on similar principles and modes of cooperation among settlements similar to the one initiated in the Mezőcsát Micro-Region.

Although my participatory action research originally consists of three cycles of actions and reflections, my dissertation presents only the second cycle of the process (taking place 2006-2009) in the field of sustainable rural development. Main elements of these were: in-depth interviews with local citizens (130), agricultural survey (sample of 97 farmers), community worker training, community fora (9 settlement and 1 at a micro-region level), and small-scale sustainability initiatives (Micro-region level local products festival, Environmental education trail between Tiszadorogma and Tiszabábolna, Launch of a cultural landscape small project scheme).

The following picture summarises the main process steps:



Results

1. I have systematised the theoretical background of Participatory Action Research and Ecological Economics (EE). I have identified major theoretical and practical challenges of PAR and EE. I have connected these two fields and applied them in the field of sustainable rural development.

Major challenges of EE are application of its theoretical underpinnings in practice and handling of power relations in its empirical research.

In my dissertation I have presented how Ecological Economics can be put into practice through PAR along its main pillars: problem-orientation, operationalisation of sustainability (adequate scale and level), transdisciplinarity, methodological pluralism, policy-orientation, sensitivity to marginal groups and handling unequal power relations. Through connecting PAR with EE I have made a contribution to the theory and practice of EE.

PAR needs a different problem structuring process than conventional research in order to be able to first identify most pressing local concerns, then to deal with complexity and integrity of socio-economic and ecological problems in rural development. It requires a collaborative research problem definition relevant not only to researchers but to locals: negotiation needs to take place about the issues researchers come with and what local people define as important.

Major challenges of PAR are: time- and resource intensity, disparities between physical (epistemic/existential participation) and political involvement, and its limited acceptance among scientists.

PAR is proposed to be applied in the field of rural development as it facilitates moving into the direction of sustainability: this is feasible mainly through creating communicative spaces for important public issues, and putting taboos on the development agenda (such as questioning the dominant development paradigms, issue of the integration of Roma people etc.).

2. Through applying approaches and theoretical frameworks of PAR and EE I have designed a participatory planning process for the Mezőcsát Micro-Region then implemented it in practice together with local stakeholders.

Along the participatory rural development process I have applied five different participatory methods built strongly on each other:

- ❖ in-depth interviews based on the appreciative enquiry questioning technique
- ❖ survey
- ❖ community fora at a settlement level
- ❖ community forum at a micro-region level and
- ❖ capacity-building trainings (community worker training, local product marketing and cooperative development).

These methods were selected and designed based on the literature of participatory planning and development, on my own participatory experiences (studying at community

development training). For the selection of methods I have accounted for the features of the region (geographical location, population, premises of the process) and for the objectives to be reached (to design a local development plan, and parallel to this to initiate activities in the field of nature protection) as well. The process steps were designed in a way that both individual and group level contributions, both “I and We rationalities” could be taken into account in designing the development plan. Drawbacks of each methods could be at least partly eliminated.

3. I have explored the main features and constraints of PAR in the Mezőcsát Micro-region

Through the various participatory methods the various stakeholders can be mobilised around collective actions. It has however various constraints related to the following factors:

- ❖ who can be involved (elite or other groups, too)
- ❖ financial background of the project (how independent it can be financially)
- ❖ support of local decision-makers (local governments, national park directorates) to the process (support, neutral or oppose it)
- ❖ previous experience of locals with participatory process (open or resist due to earlier bad experiences)
- ❖ potential of connections to national or regional level planning processes (more legitimate if it can).

Without building capacity for participation for planning and development such processes might lead to conservation of prevailing power relations and structures.

4. I have identified the main challenges for the application of participatory action research in a rural development context in Hungary: difficulties are not only based on the approach itself, but on the national and micro-region level context specificities as well.

When applying PAR attention needs to be paid to the national and micro-region level context specificities. Major challenges for applying PAR originate from general distrust, pessimism, apathy, culture of dependency and negative visions for future in Hungary. Changes are expected to come only in the longer term, if willingness for taking responsibility grows.

Women were more open to participation both in planning and in implementation, which is an often neglected fact in analysis of rural development processes.

The micro-region level set for social planning evidently does not allow for the same level of participation as the settlement level – with a couple of hundred people – or the level of smaller neighbourhoods or organisations: this might result in certain individuals turning away from the process, if communication about the process and its results do not reach them. This might be counterbalanced at least partly by the action researcher (or planner) taking a higher level of responsibility in providing regular feedbacks about the process.

5. I have made recommendations for the planners’ profession in order to improve the quality of such processes. Through this I have contributed to improving quality assurance in planning.

Participatory planning just like any other planning process is not value-neutral; it is connected to the ideals of deliberative democracy. Rural development decisions should not be based only on rationality, but space should be provided for locals' value choices (what is to be sustained, for whom, why and how) as well.

I recommend the regional planners the acquisition of participatory research and planning methods in order to institutionalise planning for sustainability. To be able to fulfil the role of such planner, wide range of competences and capabilities are necessary to be attained, which on one hand help to fulfil professional/substantial commitment, on the other hand help the facilitation of the process itself.

A new, simple language is necessary to be adopted for participatory planning: decision-supporting documents need to be put in a form and in a language easy to follow and understand. This puts again more responsibility on the shoulders of planners.

Planning is proposed to be a mechanism which is able to handle the oppressing power structures (such as the system of call for proposals) and widely spread access of various stakeholders to resources, information and decision-making processes. Responsibility of the planner in this sense lies in the ethical management of power relations.

Regional and rural development institutional system in Hungary is proposed to provide for the necessary financial, time and especially human resources for such processes as currently available resources and time frames for planning (usually working under time pressures) might regenerate existing power and value structures.

Conclusions and proposals

The main objective of my dissertation was to explore and analyse the sustainable rural development potential of PAR based on the theory of ecological economics.

The road towards sustainability can be considered as a social learning process, requiring continuous learning and reflections on consequences of processes and public policy decisions.

PAR is particularly relevant in sustainability contexts since discourses of sustainability have explicitly politicised issues of ecology, from environmental pollution problems to the traditionally de-politicised field of nature conservation. PAR opens communicative spaces for most pressing concerns on current public agenda such as decisions about a landscape.

A major challenge for the Hungarian regional and rural development policy is to create the basic conditions for endogenous development. PAR has a great contribution to this as we can learn about rural life and its conditions together with and from people living there.

PAR can be of interest to various professional groups, I would like to highlight my main messages to them in the followings:

PAR can bring refreshment and new insights for **researchers** (both for social and natural scientists) through integrating local knowledge with scientific knowledge. An action researcher works face to face with real life, and can conflict theories with practice straightaway. As the research problem definition is based on a negotiation process between researchers and various stakeholders, it is for the interest of a wider audience: knowledge generated through action research reaches wider public than a conventional research.

In the frame of social responsibility of the **higher education sector** I recommend strengthening relationship of universities and local communities through PAR. In most phases of a PAR project students can be invited to join as co-researchers, for which they receive course credits and most importantly the opportunity to acquire life skills.

Capacity building trainings for participation by the Hungarian **community development professionals** have an integral role in providing a supporting environment for participatory action research. The focus of the community development profession is on the social dimension of sustainability, however, I recommend integrating environmental perspectives as well. Community planning processes provide a space for this change, as practical experience shows that participants usually go beyond their individual interests and are more open to include environmental aspects when taking common decisions.

Another recommendation is to integrate local knowledge with scientific or expert knowledge and actively search for and build relationships with the extra-local environment.

I propose the adoption of participatory research and planning methods for the regional planners in Hungary. Through this planners can become a hybrid planner, who mobilises, plans, negotiates, reflects and intervenes if necessary. These skills and competencies are necessary for being able to build bridges among the various disciplines, sectoral interests, social group and their stated and espoused values.

It is inevitable that the representatives of the various regional and rural development institutions (such as regional development agencies, micro-region offices, national park directorates, extension service providers, educational institutions etc.) learn about participatory planning, understand its advantages, risks and constraints, and then adapt these in their work. Methods applied in a routine way and under serious time pressure reverse back even processes initiated with very good intentions.

Publications

PUBLICATION IN SCIENTIFIC JOURNALS

ARTICLES IN SCIENTIFIC JOURNALS WITH AN IMPACT FACTOR

1. BODORKÓS B. and Pataki Gy. (2009): Linking academic and local knowledge: Community-based research and service learning for sustainable rural development in Hungary. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 17(12): 1123–1131 p.; (2009: 1,362)

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

2. BODORKÓS B. and Pataki Gy. (2009): Local Communities Empowered to Plan? Applying PAR to Establish Democratic Communicative Spaces for Sustainable Rural Development. *Action Research*, 7(3): 313–334 p.

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES IN HUNGARIAN

3. BODORKÓS B. and Mertens C. (2009): Kié a föld? Intézményi elemzés a természetvédelem helyi irányításáról(Who the land belongs to? Institutional analysis about the local level of biodiversity governance). *Természetvédelmi Közlemények*, 15: 103–118 p. URL: <http://www.mbtktv.mtesz.hu/teljesszoveg.html>

OTHER ARTICLES

4. BODORKÓS B. (2009): A tervezés mint közösségi ügy (Planning as a public issue). *Falu-Város-Régió* 3: 74–80 p.
URL: <http://www.vati.hu/download.php?ctag=download&docID=13236>,
5. BODORKÓS, B. Balázs B., Bela Gy. and Pataki Gy. (2008): Community-based sustainability planning and rural development in the South-Borsod region, Hungary. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 26(2): 7–18 p.
6. BODORKÓS B., Pataki Gy., Mérő Á.(2008): Participatory Action Research for Conserving Crop Genetic Resources: beans as gendered crops in the Őrség-Vendvidék Region, Hungary. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 26(2): 19–29 p.
7. Balázs B., Bela, Gy., BODORKÓS B., Milánkovics K. és Pataki Gy. (2005): Preserving bio- and socio-diversity through Participatory Action Research. *Living Knowledge: International Journal of Community Based Research*, 5: 11–13 p.

ARTICLES IN CONFERENCE PUBLICATIONS

Article in Hungarian (full):

8. BODORKÓS B. and Kelemen E. (2007): „Közös lónak túros a háta?” A társadalmi tőke és a részvételi akciókutatás szerepe a Mezőcsáti Kistérség gazdálkodóinak együttműködésében (The role of social capital and participatory action research in the cooperation of farmers in the Mezőcsát Micro-Region) I. *National Environmental Economics Conference for Ph.D students* 27th November, 2007, Budapest
URL: http://korny.uni-corvinus.hu/phd/1_kg_program.php

Articles in English (full):

9. BODORKÓS B. and Mérő Á. (2006): Participatory Action Research for Conserving Crop Genetic Resources: The Órség Region, Hungary. *ALARPM 7th & PAR 11th World Congress, Participatory Research, Standards and Ethics*, 21-24 August, 2006, Groningen, the Netherlands (full article on CD)
10. BODORKÓS B., Balázs B., Bela Gy. and Pataki Gy. (2005): Participatory methodologies for ecological economics: Community-based sustainability planning in the South-Borsod Region, Hungary. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics*, June 14-17, 2005, Lisboa, Portugal. (full article on CD)

BOOKS

BOOKS CHAPTERS IN ENGLISH

11. Balázs B., BODORKÓS B., Bela Gy. and Podmaniczky L. (2009): *Multifunctional Farming and Survival Strategies in the Borsodi Floodplain* in Piore, A.-Müller, K. (eds.): *Rural Landscapes and Agricultural Policies in Europe*. Springer, 285-305 p. ISBN 978-3-540-79469-1
12. BODORKÓS B. and Mertens C. (2007): *Institutional Analysis of Biodiversity Governance in Hungary - Local Farmers and the National Park in the Borsodi Mezőség*. In: Kluvánková-Oravská, T., Chobotová, V., Jílková, J., Šauer, P. (eds.) (2007): *Institutional analysis of sustainability problems*. Proceedings Book, Institute for Forecasting of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, "Emerging Theories and Methods in Sustainability Research" (THEMES), 42-66 p. ISBN 978-80-86709-12-3

BOOK CHAPTER IN HUNGARIAN

13. BODORKÓS B. (2007): *Participatory planning for rural development in the Mezőcsát Micro-Region*. In: Kajner Péter (eds.): *Gazda(g)ságunk újralfedezése. Fenntartható vidéki gazdaságfejlesztés elméletben és gyakorlatban (Rediscovering our economy/richness. Sustainable development in theory and practice)* Budapest: L'Harmattan, 137-144 p., ISBN 978-963-9683-92-1

Research was supported by the Zoltán Magyar Foundation for Hungarian Research and Higher Education scholarship provided for “Development of human resources in the civic sphere” and by the Pancivis Foundation