

Hierarchy or Participation? Government or Governance? Theoretical Issues of Local Democracy

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Abstract: *In the past decades, the traditional, hierarchical formalised structure of local government has ceased to function efficiently. Local communities have generated new, diversified needs, therefore the number of challenges and their complexity has been growing. Additionally, the authorities have had to compete with other units of local government (vertically and horizontally). Local policy, with limited material and organisational resources, based only on local government, has not been able to fulfil its tasks effectively and efficiently. It is necessary to break this monopoly and to allow local community institutions the decision-making and implementation process. Thus, a departure from hierarchy towards partnership and participation has taken place, from government to governance. At the same time, by achieving the synergy effect, the effect of mutual actions has exceed the effects which could be achieved acting individually. The added value is that the civil society has been created by stricter integration of local communities.*

Keywords: *Local democracy, local government, hierarchy*

Introduction

The issues of local government are most frequently discussed in science. Each discipline defines this issue in its own way¹. From the legal perspective, it is a form of decentralisation of state administration, which on its own behalf and account, under

state supervision, satisfies local needs. From the sociological perspective, it is a social structure “contributing to strengthening of ties constituting a certain type of social collectiveness, namely the local community.”² From the perspective of organisation and management, it is an organisational structure, within which the decision-making process is conducted aiming to solve local problems (of regulatory nature). Finally, it is a special form of public authority joining the local community and local institutions acting for its benefit coherently and forming a local political system³.

The subject of this authority, as it results from the aforesaid arrangements, is the local community — a group of residents of a specific area, a community which, by virtue of law, constitutes its total number of residents.

The purpose of local authority and its local policy, in turn, is to take actions aiming to satisfy the needs of the local community. It is a field corporation, which as such is not able to perform the entrusted functions. They are directly performed by the bodies selected by members of local community by means of elections.

In the traditional model of executing power, the powers to rule are transferred in a democratic manner (i.e. by majority) to selected authorities. This selection results in the citizens’ obligation to respect the actions taken by the authorities⁴.

Modern approach to local democracy, in turn, postulates the model based on the participation of a local community and its institutional organisations in executing power based on partnership, dialogue, negotiations and cooperation.

It is easy to notice that the models refer to the differentiation made by J. Burns between hierarchical authority and leadership. What is more, based on C. Stone’s concept, in the former case, local government is the authority ‘above’ the local community, since having the capacity to materialise the objectives of the entity holding power, regardless of whether or not they match the objectives of the subordinates (M. Weber), it is limited to giving instructions, imposing its will by hierarchical dependencies. However, in the latter case, the power is open, turned to it (‘power oriented ‘towards’)⁵, directed towards the mobilisation of resources, which allows the achievement of the assumed objectives. Participants of the undertaking are not forced in any way; the resources necessary for the achievement of local objectives must be joined on the basis of voluntary, usually informal arrangements⁶.

Therefore, the transition is postulated, from traditional local government to modern local governance (from ‘government’ to ‘governance’). It assumes developing such a model, in which the decision-making process is effected on the basis of interactive public and private entities in the community, and where the integration results in the differences being less distinct⁷.

The active role of the social community in the process of governance determines the new quality of local governance⁸. This means a departure from hierarchical, formal procedures and institutions. Local government loses its monopoly of direct power to decide and execute public tasks. According to the principle of subsidiarity, there are no hindrances to local community actors to take action for the benefit of the community, if they are able to perform them better than the local government. Considering differentiated needs, the tasks before the local government are multiplied and complex. It is necessary to take collective action, participation is needed from the stakeholders who have the knowledge of those needs, the manner of satisfying them, and often of organisational and financial capital. Then they are efficient and the results exceed those which could be achieved by the partners acting individually.

Nearly all contemporary political concepts assume that the local community participates in formulation and implementation of public action plans⁹. This does not mean that participation is not present in the traditional model. It is limited to participation in elections for local government, or possibly to lobbying, demonstrations or meetings with authorities¹⁰. Decisions, however, are made by the selected decision makers. Nevertheless, modern democracy assumes dialogue and cooperation; solutions are sought which would satisfy all the stakeholders, and consensus is reached through a broad public debate. The local community supports political processes, as authorities are open to their participation in decision-making processes. Here, the authority is not above the community, but it becomes its integral part¹¹. Thus, civil society is formed, based on a trust to selected authorities elected in democratic manner, with certain control over the authorities identifying themselves with the local community.

The models of participation reflect the social relationship – cooperation in the process of determining and executing the local public policies, by representatives of local public authorities, or managers of local public institutions, citizens of the commune or recipients of the services rendered by local institutions¹². Their essence is the scope of the influence (power) possessed by the both group actors. The higher the participation of the one group, the lower that of the other, and vice versa. The application of this basic criterion, i.e. the scope of power possessed by citizens and public authorities, allowed the identification of the following models of public participation:

- asymmetric — minimum participation of citizens, maximum participation of local authorities,
- consultative and advisory — dominant participation of local authorities with significant participation of citizens,
- symmetric — balanced participation of both parties,
- delegating — dominating participation of citizens with significant or minimum participation of public authorities.

The first model is based on an asymmetric relationship between “local authorities and members of community.” It assumes the priority position of public authorities and its dominant role at each stage of establishing public policies. Public authorities independently make the decisions and execute them. Citizens are passive recipients of decisions and activities undertaken by authorities. The idea of that model is based on a unilateral transfer of messages — from local authorities to citizens. The reversed transfer direction does not exist, the official channels of communication only serve to inform (with potential explanation) the public about the decisions (actions) undertaken by the authorities, and are closed for citizens.

The consultative and advisory model is also characterized by asymmetry, but the position of public authorities is compared with public opinion and may become modified. The authorities notify citizens about their plans and intentions, and either accept the opinions and suggestions formulated by citizens by taking them into account to a various degree, or obtain the citizens’ opinions by conducting public consultations and use them to a various degree to correct their plans. It needs to be noted that in the first case the authorities are only open to suggestions, while in the second, suggestions are initiated by conducting a process of social consultations, organized formally.

In turn, the symmetric model is characterized by a balanced relationship between local authorities and members of the community — the assumption is that the position is formulated in a manner that is (relatively) based on partnership. None of the parties has either the priority or the dominant position at any stage of establishing public policies. Before making the decisions and undertaking the activities, public authorities initiate cooperation with members of local communities and plan the activities together.

Deliberation is applied here; negotiations in the form of informal workgroups or teams that are formally appointed (by the council, the commune head, the mayor or the president) which are comprised of citizens (including social organizations, trade unions) and representatives of the commune authorities (councillors, commune head, mayor, president, officials)¹³.

This delegation model, as well as the first two models, is characterized by asymmetry of the “local authorities — community members” relationship, but in the reverse direction. The delegation entails not only the priority of the position held by community members, but rather that they receive full power of execution. In practice, this model means that public authorities transfer the making of the decisions, and the introduction of the activities, to members of the local community¹⁴. Certainly, it is highly improbable.

The diversity of scope of participation in power is subject to discussion. It is not known whether the “weakest” model of participation results from citizens’ passivity

or maybe from the authoritarianism of local authorities, while the “strongest” model results from the reverse situation.

It seems that an explanation needs to be sought at the level of local political culture. Therefore, it depends on the mutual relationships between the authorities and the society, because in the local culture the community is treated as a valuable, objectified partner in the exercising the power, or only as the environment for exercising it, a passive recipient of decisions¹⁵. The development of a civil society; the engagement into local issues.

Modern democracy is geared towards the attainment of aims. Such a local government gains legitimacy through the results of its work. Therefore, network management is needed. It mediates public policy, establishes structural and functional relationships between the local community and the administration in regards to the decision-making processes, and it educates the society¹⁶.

However, there are many threats to the aforesaid model of modern local democracy. Above all, the authorities are reluctant to give up their rights. It is not only about the ambitions of the rulers, which would signify a complete lack of understanding of the rules of democracy in general, but about the practical problems associated with a concern about chaos in the decision-making process. The responsibility for the results of undertaken activities may become less transparent¹⁷.

A significant problem is the weakness of the civil society, lack of funds, knowledge, organizational resources, and of the will to participate in the decision-making and executive processes.

There exists a real threat that the stronger groups, more affluent and better organized, will influence the authorities by dominating the debates. These groups would not be supported by the majority, which in turn would violate the rules of democracy.

Therefore, the rule of representation may become breached, because the public tasks are executed by the organizations without democratic legitimacy.

Moreover, the implementation of the rule of equality is problematic — how is it possible to allow all the members of the community to participate equally in the activities aimed at satisfying the local needs? This could cause chaos and lack of efficiency. Therefore, it would be desirable to specify and formally restrict the scope of participation, for example, to certain stages of the process¹⁸.

Also, the threat appears of the occurrence of pathological phenomena that are characteristic of the junction between politics, economy and society¹⁹.

The execution of a modern, participatory model of local democracy requires that the civil society has attained a certain stage of development. Strong leadership is also required, in which actions based on one's own concepts are replaced with the preparation of joint solutions, the bureaucratic machine with mobilization of re-

sources through cooperation with various subjects, and the will of the majority, with consensus²⁰.

Since 1989, Poland has been consistently streamlining the activity of its local governments. The process of building them ended just 13 years ago, when the structure was supplemented by the level of poviats. Since then, authorities have been continuously investing in the quality of its operations. An increasing number of social organizations have appeared, and more and more business institutions and entities associated with them collaborate in favour of local communities. However, the degree of development of civil society is still insufficient. What is more, there is not the tradition of cooperation between society and the authorities. The latter brings negative associations, because it has always been strange and inaccessible. Quite naturally, there is no trust, which affects the possibility of effective cooperation.

However, this does not mean that such a cooperation is non-existent. P. Swianiewicz believes that partnership projects and undertakings implemented by local governments together with non-public actors are — to a degree — a result of the existence of external incentives²¹. The author quotes the examples of Great Britain or Ireland, where local partnerships have, among others, been developed with government programmes that encouraged local governments to undertake cooperation with other local entities. In other countries, the partnerships appear less frequently, but everywhere they result from the execution of the cohesion policy of the European Union, which pays special attention to local governments and partnerships, thus expressing the conviction that neither the market, nor the state, nor the civil society is individually able to handle the complex problems of economic development and the accompanying social changes²². The assumption is that the partnerships established in order to execute the projects financed from the European sources are to support the participation of local community and introduce it to local politics. The EU programmes play an important role also in Poland, but the expected results continue to be missing, mainly due to “unequal coalitions” established by authorities with social entities, for the purpose of executing development projects²³.

They provide funding, and divide the risks and responsibilities, but the factor that hinders their development is the weakness of civil society and the low level of trust, as well as the traditional administrative culture oriented towards hierarchical operations and formalistic compliance with the law. Another problem is a low level of innovativeness, which is hindered by the above-mentioned reasons.

An example of hindering partnership initiatives is the execution of the Integrated Regional Development Operational Programme, under the EU support for Poland in the programming period of 2004–2006. Regional Steering Committees were established for the performance of that Programme in the respective provinces, which presented a special kind of partnership, because they included the representatives of non-government organizations, trade unions and employers’ organizations. Such

were the EU requirements, while in practice there was no actual will to cooperate or trust each other. The manner of selecting those representatives and their activity in the work of the Committees continues to be problematic. It is doubtful whether such a forced partnership may help develop partnership habits or authentic demand for cooperation.

Conclusion

It is necessary to allow the decision-making and implementing process for local community institutions, and a departure from hierarchy, towards partnership and participation, from government to governance. The added value is that the civil society has been created by stricter integration of local communities.

Therefore, there is still a long journey ahead for Poland. It is worth taking, because the ideals of democracy may only be attained through local democracy. In fact, citizens want to act for the benefit of their own community, and to influence the decisions.

Notes

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- ² Ibidem.
- ³ Ibidem.
- ⁴ J. Wróblewska-Jachna, *Rządzenie czy współrządzenie/ Dylematy współczesnej demokracji*, w: E. Nycz (ed.), *Problemy mieszkańców. Dylematy władz. W poszukiwaniu lokalnego partnerstwa*, University of Opole, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa w Raciborzu, Towarzystwo Ziemi Kozielskiej, Opole 2006.
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- ¹¹ M. Sakowicz, *Samorządność w Polsce z perspektywy nowoczesnego zarządzania*, *Studia i Materiały*, SGH Warsaw 2011.

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- ¹⁷ Ibidem.
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