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WORKSHOPS AS A METHOD OF SOCIAL CONSULTATIONS IN THE PROCESS OF LOCAL STRATEGIC PLANNING

WARSZTATY JAKO METODA KONSULTACJI SPOŁECZNYCH W PROCESIE LOKALNEGO PLANOWANIA STRATEGICZNEGO

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Summary: The article discusses problems typical of strategic planning in local self-government units. On the basis of the conducted research, the author defines the concept of social consultations as such and also the social consultations in local strategic planning. Apart from the above, the author defines, in an analogous and dual manner, the category of strategic workshops and also identifies the main goal and sub-goals of workshop-based social consultation. Moreover, their typical course, key characteristics and the most frequently made mistakes, as well as the phenomena adverse for their proper implementation are presented.

Keywords: strategic workshops, social consultations, local self-government, strategic planning.

Streszczenie: Artykuł poświęcony jest problematyce planowania strategicznego w jednostkach samorządu lokalnego. Na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań autor definiuje pojęcie konsultacji społecznych jako takich, a następnie konsultacji społecznych w lokalnym planowaniu strategicznym. Oprócz tego analogicznie, dualnie definiuje kategorię warsztatów strategicznych, a także identyfikuje cel główny i cele cząstkowe warsztatowych konsultacji społecznych. Ponadto określa ich typowy przebieg i kluczowe cechy oraz najczęściej popełniane w tym zakresie błędy i zjawiska niesprzyjające ich prawidłowemu przeprowadzeniu.

Słowa kluczowe: warsztaty strategiczne, konsultacje społeczne, samorząd lokalny, planowanie strategiczne.

1. Introduction

The implementation of tasks for which local self-governments were appointed in democratic countries requires preparing and carrying out many different plans.

One of them, currently gaining popularity especially in post-communist countries, is of particular importance. It covers the most extensive spectrum of activities; its timeframe is usually the longest and it is regarded as superior with reference to all other plans, at least in theory. It is obviously another name for the strategy of development, also referred to as the long-term and multidimensional plan, which plays analogous functions.¹ International, professional literature discussing the problems of strategic planning in territorial self-government units is very extensive. Its list covers numerous books [e.g. Blakely, Leigh 2010; Healey 1997; Sroślak, Kozieł, Krzyżanowski 2004; Binniecki, Szczupak 2004], scientific papers [Robson, Deas 2008; Wysocka 1996; Heffner 2008; Kożuch 2011; Pina, Torres, Yetano 2011; Sztando 2009] and press publications.² It is also supplemented by the publications offering guidelines [e.g. CEMR 1994; OECD 2001; Schöler, Walther 2003] and online information compendiums.³ However, the application of theoretical decisions in practice always encounters numerous obstacles. This is confirmed by the flaws in both local development strategies themselves and administrative systems for their implementation. The existing research conducted by the author, as well as literature studies, allows for concluding that the above-mentioned flaws refer to: the diagnosis and forecast of a territorial self-government situation and the key elements of its environment, strategic choices, the range of strategic goals and tasks, the components of strategy implementation system and their mutual relations, social consultations and their interpretation, as well as taking advantage of their results. Failing to recognize or ignoring these defects always reduces the broadly understood quality of a strategic plan and therefore the efficiency and effectiveness of accomplishing set objectives is limited. Even though indirectly, it does reduce the rate of territorial unit development to a great extent. Therefore, a need arises to continue the research and create theoretical apparatus support based on the obtained results and aiming at its higher practical usefulness.

The author's desire to follow this stream resulted in focusing attention on the last of the above-mentioned problems, i.e. social consultations and narrowing down the analysis to a method frequently used by self-governments in practice – strategic workshops. The information presented later in the article is the result of the carried out research aimed at defining the concept of social consultations as such, to be followed by social consultations in local strategic planning. Moreover, the discussion covers an analogously and dually defined category of strategic workshops. The purpose of the article is also to present the author's research results regarding the major goal and sub-goals identification of social consultation workshops, their typical course

¹ Later in the article the author addresses local development strategy, but the information provided also refers to self-government development plans which play analogous functions.

² The world oldest self-government journal entitled "Municipal World," which has been regularly published since 1891 until today.

³ E.g.: <http://www.futurecommunities.net>, <http://www.regional-studies-assoc.ac.uk>, <http://americacityandcounty.com>, <http://www.frdl.org.pl>.

and key characteristics, as well as the mistakes most frequently made within this subject matter or the phenomena unfavorable for their correct implementation. The discussed research was performed following three methods. The first one consists in direct interviews conducted with over fifty individuals currently, or in the past, working as executive bodies for 45 local self-governments in Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine, where such workshops were conducted in the course of an adequate development strategy creation. The second method takes the form of analyzing documents (statements, reports, etc.) presenting the results of workshop consultations. This was supplemented by the analysis of 25 other development strategies in which workshop efforts were described prior to the strategy preparation and which were adopted by Polish, Czech and German local self-governments. The third and final method consists in the observations made by the author in the course of his involvement in the social consultation works or while acting as an expert team leader responsible for conducting them, which constituted one of the stages in constructing 41 Polish local self-government development strategies. The overall study covered 111 cases of the workshop consultation method application in the period 1995–2011, of which about half originated from Polish experience and others, in more or less equal proportions, from the other above-mentioned countries.

2. The concept and goals of social consultations in local strategic planning

Social consultations represent the process of information exchange which occurs in the dual partnership system created by a particular group and its authorities, mainly aiming at co-deciding while making decisions about this social group by due authorities and also co-influencing processes of their implementation so that their results are in line with this social group best interest. In the dimension of the discussed self-government units it refers to the local community and also law enforcement and executive bodies representing local authorities. In some countries such consultations are of obligatory nature. For example, in Poland it happens when municipal authorities want to establish a self-government auxiliary unit, for example a village administrator, a quarter or a residential estate. Nevertheless, in the majority cases it is performed by the European self-governments as an optional activity. Self-government legislation mostly provides that consultations can take place with reference to diverse issues, important for local communities.

The creation of local development strategy is regarded as one of the most important and sometimes, indeed, the most important planning act carried out by the self-government authorities. The participation of local community in it seems unquestionable since following the localism ideas, modern democracy principles and territorial self-government concepts, such as decentralization and also the empowerment of units and their communities, becomes the electorate for these authorities and simultaneously the leading beneficiary of their activities. Theoretically, one can imagine at least a few

forms of such participation; however, the research conclusions and the self-government practice confirm that it should, indeed, concentrate on social consultations. In other words, the suggestions made by the legislators as resulting from social consultations receive particular attention in the creation of what is crucial for territorial management, i.e. strategic development concepts.

Based on the above-mentioned facts as well as the indicated general definition, it is possible to suggest a definition of social consultations in local strategic planning, according to which it becomes the process of information exchange between the local community and the local authorities. Its main objective is to define, and later implement effectively and efficiently, a strategy for such social, economic and environmental sphere changes within the local system, which could be referred to as local development. In the context of this definition, the local community is understood as the residents of a local self-government unit representing natural persons, but also entrepreneurs or members of other private and public entities; however, the indicated main goal can be diversified into the following sub-goals:

- ensuring the desired strategy content accuracy with the preferences and aspirations of residents, the expectations of local entrepreneurs and requirements of local ecosystems;
- strategy optimization as the result of obtaining mainly quality, but also quantity data regarding given territorial unit characteristics, as well as factors influencing its development;
- creating or obtaining new, preferably innovation oriented concepts of territorial unit development;
- creating local community initiatives aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of strategy implementation;
- identification of local community reactions to the key or potentially controversial concepts presented by self-government authorities regarding territorial unit development;
- providing local community support for territorial unit development concepts prepared by local authorities;
- identification and entering into cooperation with the potential strategic partners of self-government authorities;
- reaching strategic compromises as the methods for finding solutions to the most important conflicts between major actors of the local scene;
- ensuring support or at least a neutral attitude of the opposition towards those in power regarding the strategy adopting and implementation;
- social monitoring initiative aimed at observing how self-government authorities meet their obligations included in the strategy;
- providing local community support – after adopting the strategy for implementation – in terms of its goals and projects aimed at meeting them.

Obviously, the above list is a model one and it is difficult to find the practical examples of social consultations during which organizers and participants would

attempt to be fully aware of the challenge. Nevertheless, all of the above sub-goals are, indeed, present in such activities. Apart from the above-mentioned goals, social consultations, as part of a strategic planning process, are also performed in order to increase the popularity of self-government members in the local or even supra-local socio-political environment. The full understanding of this phenomenon does, however, require a detailed analysis as to how such consultations are conducted, but it is also an easily noticeable fact that quite frequently a strategy development and accompanying meetings with local community representatives occur in the final period of their term, i.e. just before the next election date. Another sub-goal of the discussed consultations is meeting the formal requirements necessary to obtain external support for projects to be realized within the framework of strategy implementation. There are certain forms of external support for self-government activities, most frequently based on the resources coming from the European Union, applying for which should be supported by underlying social consultations. The significance of both these goals for the authorities involved in creating a strategy is either smaller or bigger in the real life practice; however, beyond any doubt these goals should not be the dominating ones among the reasons of a planning process. Otherwise this could result in the lack of possibilities for leading objective achievement. Unfortunately, self-government practice does know such cases.

In the author's opinion, it is founded to put forward a thesis stating that the above presented definitions, as well as the listed goals, can be regarded as reflecting the core concept of social consultations correctly not only with reference to local self-governments functioning in the countries covered by the study, but also in the local self-governments of other decentralized and democratic countries.

3. Strategic workshops as a method of social consultations

In the process of local strategic planning social consultations can be carried out by means of different methods, e.g.: public opinion surveys, electronic dialog, meetings held in villages or residential estates and also other meetings with inhabitants, direct interviews or focused group interviews, correspondence, as well as strategic workshops. Some of them are ensured by a two-way information exchange (e.g. electronic dialog) and therefore can be applied as independent methods, others offer a one-way information flow only (e.g. public opinion surveys) and hence they have to be supplemented by other methods. Strategic workshops represent a two-way method and currently they are used quite often as a method of social consultations in a strategic planning process.

Generally, while attempting to define the concept of strategic workshops, one can state that they take the form of joint meetings gathering a group of development strategy creators, producers and beneficiaries of a given organization development strategy, but also other individuals having significant influence on this organization and aimed at the strategy preparation and its implementation in the manner most consistent

with beneficiaries' interests. Trying to specify this concept with reference to local self-government, it seems well founded to express an opinion that such workshops are nothing less but working meetings gathering experts responsible for the strategy preparation, but also involving the due authorities and self-government administration, local community representatives (in the above indicated understanding), as well as other decision making bodies and individuals capable of influencing the key conditions of discussed area development, aimed at its strategy and implementation system modelling in order to achieve adequate local development through its realization.

The analysis of subject literature and case studies indicates that such workshops can be divided into three and, in some cases, four stages. The first one consists in constructing a team made up of local community representatives. The team forming entity is the executive body of a self-government unit, which is responsible for appointing such a team by inviting⁴ selected individuals to participate in its works or by issuing an official order⁵ addressed to them. In order to obtain the highest possible level of this representation, the following individuals are invited or appointed to the team: local self-government unit councillors, executive body deputies, farmers having the largest farms, leaders of political parties, editors in chief of local media and also the heads of: local self-government office units, organization units and companies owned by local self-government, the largest enterprises independent from local self-government, entities performing infrastructural services⁶ in the area of local self-government units, farming advisory entities, forestry administrative entities, entities managing large housing estates,⁷ major entities of the so-called business environment, leading associations of farmers and entrepreneurs, active non-governmental organizations, the largest sport clubs, major trade unions, as well as the key aid and health care units. Apart from the above-mentioned entities an invitation to support the team in its work is also extended to the persons who, in the area of local self-government units, perform managerial functions in state government administration units, representatives of executive bodies in a neighbouring self-governments at the same level and also the selected persons performing functions of territorial self-government bodies at a higher level. Sometimes other people of great public trust and popularity are also welcome, e.g. priests or any other interested residents. Obviously, the above list is, by no means, closed or final, since as practical research results indicate that it is subject to ongoing modifications depending on local conditions and needs. Its role is to illustrate the significance of strategic workshops and indicate their personnel composition.

⁴ Refers to independent individuals of a self-government executive body.

⁵ Refers to individuals professionally subordinate to a self-government executive body.

⁶ Refers mainly to electric power engineering, gas supply, telecommunication, road and railway transport.

⁷ Mainly housing cooperatives and developers.

The second stage of the discussed method consists in conducting many hours or even days lasting meetings involving the above-mentioned team players during which, following the debates and substantive argumentations the first, direct (initial) team work product is created, i.e. the key local self-government characteristics are identified and valued along with major factors responsible for its development and also the vision of its desirable condition is defined for at least a few years ahead together with its development goals and groups of ventures possible to implement and aimed at such development accomplishment. A good practice to follow, which significantly improves the quality of workshop efforts, is holding a training prior to a workshop about strategic planning in territorial self-government units and self-government strategies implementation addressed to all workshop participants. It is also useful to divide them into thematic working groups; however, representatives of local authorities and strategy authors should participate in each of them. Workshops predominantly take the form of moderations, e.g. visual ones conducted by a qualified moderator and, in most cases, the subsequent author or co-author of the due strategic plan. It has to be emphasized that even though workshops focus on the above listed characteristics, factors, visions, goals and projects, some expected, indirect (secondary) workshop outcomes can also take the form of: new, innovative and development oriented initiatives created in the course of their progress, the strategic consensus of local scene partners, their determination to cooperate, new concepts for their strategic cooperation and also the initiation of new, strategic partnerships between self-government authorities and other entities. The revitalization or development of such values – if they were present before – can also constitute such an indirect product. An increased general interest in the problems of local system strategic management among workshops participants is usually a valuable supplement of these products, since they are a part of the system and also its users. These products are difficult to obtain and hence attempts to do so are not always successful. However, they are definitely as important for successful strategic planning as an indirect product itself. An opinion may be suggested that they are even more important. Conceptualization of the above characteristics, factors, visions, objectives and projects, performed in the course of workshops is never full, which results from the public nature of multiplayer work type such as: limited time framework, no possibility for advanced tools application, lobbying aspirations of some participants and the frequently conflicting interests, and also only general rather than expert knowledge resulting from the functions they perform which has nothing to do with any kind of planning. Therefore, it could and should become the determinant for further work conducted on the strategy performed by an expert team. The specific strategy framework has to be strengthened by new elements, often partly transformed and supported by a network of mutually and correctly related diagnostic, prognostic, scenario oriented, planning and evaluation components. Thus, it should be referred to as indispensable resource for further planning, the imperfections of which can and should be removed using various methods described in the recognized economic, management and legal theories, however, but not as a strategic plan itself.

Meanwhile, the above-mentioned secondary products play the role of such a resource to a small extent only, but they have strong impact on institutional, personal and social environment in which a development strategy is to be implemented. The importance of such environment cannot be overestimated because even the most perfect strategic plan does not have the self-realization capacity. Mutual dependences between such a plan and the changes in the real local system sphere pass through the bodies of many institutions, the minds of numerous decision makers and other leaders which – in the conditions of local democracy, decentralization and subject to legal regulations autonomy – become highly influenced by the public opinion. In connection with the above presented facts, the range and the level of the already specified social consultation goals are directly proportional to the completeness and quality of an indirect and direct effect of strategic workshops.

The third stage of workshops is carried out by a workshop moderator and consists in their detailed documentation which, for obvious reasons, cannot be done while the work is still in progress. After a relevant report has been prepared, it is presented to self-government authorities as minutes of strategic decisions and to strategy text authors who will use such a direct workshop product in the already described manner. Sometimes it is also presented for public opinion in the form of a full copy available, e.g. on self-government websites or, in part, as current information delivered by the local media.

The above stage, in most cases, is the final part of workshops, however, nowadays one more, the fourth workshop stage is often added. This stage consists in performing workshops again; however, their subject matter is a strategy draft prepared during the period after the third stage has been completed. This time workshop participants do not focus on the general inventory of characteristics and factors or on defining development directions of a territorial unit, but rather on the proposals of substantive decisions and solutions presented to them as paths to take within these directions. Another good practice to be followed at this point is offering opportunities for analyzing these proposals in detail before actual works begin. The idea behind introducing the fourth stage is not only to improve the final result of the overall planning procedure, but also to focus on strengthening the indirect effects of social consultations conducted in the course of workshops. Yet again, the joint planning, performed by the main local scene actors, aims at maintaining and stimulating the development of components characteristic for the environment in which a strategy is implemented. It is a section on the path of these components development and finds its place among declarations, initiatives, concepts and compromises created during the second stage of works and the current, highly desirable, but equally difficult to perform cooperation of these actors in the course of the present strategy implementation, once it has been approved for realization by a self-government legislative body. Therefore, this stage is, by all means, useful and even though the improvement of a strategy final version during workshops may require a few repetitions, still its provision for the public should, no doubt, be regarded as beneficial.

4. Typical workshop mistakes and adverse phenomena

The analysis of the collected research material and several years of author's experience in the field of self-government strategic planning allows for concluding that there are at least a few typical mistakes made during the procedure of the discussed workshop consultations.

Incorrect selection of participants is one of them. The listed subject literature can be regarded as the sufficiently helpful source of support in this matter, but the practical preparation of the appointed and invited participants' list can have numerous flaws. They usually result from the local authorities being unprepared for the public confrontation with the opinions contrary to their own and voiced by other self-government community members. It also happens that they result from an incorrect assessment of the importance of some organizations and individuals in local development. Incorrect selection of participants reduces the level of working team representativeness for the interests of social, economic and environmental sphere of the local economy. It limits the scope and precision of the expected, initial workshops effect and also the secondary product components. Therefore, it reduces the quality of a strategy itself and also narrows down the probable range and efficiency of its implementation.

The second error consists in an incorrect organization of workshops and mainly their reduction to relatively short meetings of low substantive level in an inappropriate place and time, with participants lacking adequate preparation whose main objective is just to meet due formalities connected with a need for carrying out official consultations. It does also happen that as a result of abandoning grouping it is often attempted to create and moderate the discussion and cooperation of too many participants simultaneously which, for obvious reasons, is not possible. Such proceedings contradict the idea of holding consultations itself and cannot be regarded as meeting methodological, political or even moral obligations based on conducting social consultations in a proper and professional manner. It seems that the reason for such policy is either misunderstanding or lack of acceptance for the participation oriented planning, after all deeply embedded in the contemporary paradigm of territorial development. Its effects are analogous to the above-mentioned ones.

Another mistake refers to assigning an over extensive role to the primary product of workshop efforts. It happens that it is regarded as a final product of the entire strategic planning procedure. It is submitted before a self-government legislative body for passing just after it has been edited in a consistent and relatively logical form. Such an approach may be defended using an argument that local development strategy has to take into account, in all due detail, all the expectations of local community expressed by its representatives in the process of conducting workshops. This mistake originates from erroneous understanding of the idea of participation oriented planning, which recognizes the above expectations in a direct, "mechanical" manner, whereas in fact it should be understood as an indicator of numerous planning efforts undertaken

by experts and self-government representatives after strategy implementation. The implications of this mistake are manifested in an incomplete substantive scope of a strategy referring to all its parts, and also a frequently unrealistic goals that it includes. Such a plan, even if it was carried out in a strongly supportive environment, would have a smaller impact on local development.

The final abnormality to be discussed is approaching strategic workshops as an alternative for all other consultation works. This is an incorrect approach due to the fact that even perfectly conducted workshops do not guarantee obtaining representative results for the entire local community. Therefore, in order to upgrade such representativeness to an acceptable level, workshops should be supplemented by complementary methods. It is indispensable since workshops may involve several dozen participants at the most, whereas local communities are inhabited by tens of thousands of residents. As a result, even if all participants are not just formally, but also actually and factually entitled to represent particular local community groups, it is never certain whether the effect of their work is sufficiently representative for an overall community. The following available supplementary methods are currently regarded as best: public opinion survey, electronic dialog, indirect and focused group interviews, and for small local communities the respective methods are: meetings organized in villages, residential estates and other types of group gatherings with residents.

Apart from the indicated mistakes two more phenomena may be observed in the course of workshop consultations, which are strongly unfavorable for obtaining success. The first refers to the fact that the individuals invited by the local authorities to participate in such workshops are not at all ready to play the assigned roles. The reason for such a situation is the lack of confidence in the relation between the results of workshop consultations and the subsequent activities undertaken by local authorities, especially if their experiences confirm such a standpoint. Additionally, the contemporary real life practice of self-government activities confirms that diversified forms of social consultations, similar to workshops, are becoming increasingly frequent. They are conducted on the occasion of different planning works, but also with reference to current issues. Therefore, their significance, as perceived by potential participants, keeps devaluating along with the motivation for taking part in them, especially if they do not perceive any crucial differences between strategic planning, operational planning and public relations establishment. The second adverse phenomenon consists in using workshops, by some participants, as an opportunity to carry out their individual objectives. They are not, in fact, interested in an optimal development strategy co-creating, but rather in the public presentation of their critical opinions about self-government authorities or other people and entities. In this way, they desire to undermine confidence in the influential and opinion creating representatives of self-government community participating in workshops towards the above-mentioned authorities and entities and, at the same time, improve their own social, political or even professional position. At this point, one has to emphasize that this particular

phenomenon is not only limited to workshop-oriented social consultations. It does cover a broad spectrum of the local public forums representing numerous local self-governments. Both presented phenomena, similarly to the above listed mistakes, reduce the scope and values of expected social consultation effects. In the case of the aforementioned mistakes, owing to the awareness of their effects and preventive methods discussed in e.g. subject literature, there is a chance to eliminate them almost entirely; in the case of these phenomena none of the available methods, aimed at preventing them, may provide for such a certainty.

5. Final remarks

As discussed in the present article, the social consultations carried out in the course of strategic workshops are, on the one hand, extremely important for an overall success of the local development strategic planning procedure and the strategy implementation to follow and, on the other, difficult to perform in a proper and error-free way. The author's practical experiences confirm that conducting workshops in an unquestionable manner is quite rare. Nevertheless, they are frequently applied and their popularity in self-government practice makes strategic planning more and more popular in this environment. The significant factors here are: the increase of knowledge and acceptance among local authorities for the idea of territorial self-government, the subservient role played by the authorities for the local community, the participation oriented democracy and the participation planning to follow. The European Union financial mechanisms are also very important since they not only function as the sources covering numerous self-government investment costs and other projects aimed at local development, but also influence the awareness and knowledge of decision making bodies and individuals in the area of strategic management.

To sum up, a conclusion has to be drawn that the previous practical application of workshop-focused social consultations in the process of strategic planning, even though still imperfect, does result in self-government units' development rate intensification in the analyzed countries. Therefore, more research is indispensable in order to improve the situation in this respect and further educational efforts are necessary to propagate the research results which, in its final effect, will result in an improved socioeconomic development of local systems and subsequently in the development of territorial structures at higher levels.

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