Community and institutional capability: sharing a social contract on environmental issue in the South of Italy

Author's Names and Affiliations:

Salvatore Patera, (Educational Sciences Dept. - University of Salento) viale dell'Università, – Lecce (IT) P. 1-2

e-mail: toto.patera@gmail.com - mobile: +39 3383744713

Ezio Del Gottardo, (Educational Sciences Dept. - University Valle d'Aosta) – Strada Cappuccini 2 – 110100 Aosta (IT) P.3-4-5

e-mail: eziodelgottardo@libero.it - mobile: +39 3292034000

Corresponding Author:

Salvatore Patera, (Educational Sciences Dept. - University of Salento) viale dell'Università, – Lecce (IT)

e-mail: toto.patera@gmail.com - mobile: +39 3383744713

Abstract

This paper is based on several Action-Research (AR) projects managed in a rural area of Salento (Lecce-Italy) related to environmental issue.

Starting from AR experiences shaped after several case studies, we can affirm that participative evaluation/planning in environmental issues have enabled both collaborative/cooperative learning processes and improved community empowerment promoting solutions to achieve a shared vision on an environmental issue negotiating with local authorities and the client company. Community education as a goal of ecojustice think, considers citizens as co-responsible protagonists in deciding on environmental and territorial changes. AR has involved the social actors in sharing knowledge/decisions/actions aimed to define together a set of indicators both for monitoring the social investment and for evaluating the social risk related to the likely opening of a biomass energy station in that area of Salento. AR in a systemic and no-dialectic perspective permits a mediation between both top-down decision-making processes and the risk of bottom-up protests thanks to the improvement of initiatives of participative democracy. This process of social/institutional capability is aimed both to inform multilevel policies related to environmental issue and to carry on initiatives of governance of common goods.

Keywords

Action Research, environmental education, ecojustice, community empowerment, participative democracy, governance.

Subdivision of the Article

1. Introduction

The growing demand of participation, underlines to technicians, evaluators, client company, cultural and environmental associations, local authorities and communities, the necessity to deal with new stakeholders starting from their complex needs, competences, desires, experiences, values, for an effective and "successful" planning-implementation-evaluation of interventions and projects in a territory (Le Galès, 2002). Many aspects of contemporary problems in the south of Italy related to environmental issues can be understood within the larger global crisis that is sweeping the top-down decision-making models characterized by self-referential and exogenous processes where local stakeholders and communities are systematically excluded, deceived, disappointed (Kloos, 2000).

Social and institutional participation is a complex phenomenon cause of the different levels of participation in which local actors can be involved: it may be a behavior or a feeling (Bobbio, 2000) involving citizens and communities in several levels of engagement. People can participate in performing an action, or simply sharing an interest or experiencing a feeling individually or with others. Participation may be a passion that remains confined within the potential, the recrimination and the dissatisfaction towards institutions, not translated into action. Conversely it may be a phenomenon that generates behaviors identified as inclusive, participatory, deliberative (Pascual Esteve, Pascual Guiteras, 2009). In the latter case, the participation processes, within a dialogic approach including local authorities and institutions, may enable negotiated decisions-making processes presupposing shared knowledge, decisions, actions and the evaluation on them (Parés Franzi, 2009). In a few words, participation set up in the theoretical and methodological frame of systemic AR, can improve processes of empowerment and agency aimed at the governance and at the managing of common goods in dialogue with institutions, local authorities, client company . The AR can facilitate/monitor both processes of social capability from the citizens and the communities in dialogue with the institutions both processes of institutional capability where the institutions increase the conditions of liberty of choice and deliberation for the citizens and the communities (Kooiman, 2003). AR is placed between the social planning (top down) and the social action (bottom up) and it aims to favor the "comparison on the cognitive requirements of the evaluated actions and on their consequences" (House, Howe, 2007). In this sense, learning processes in the institutions can be useful to identify the mutable circumstances in the social contexts finding at the meantime opportunities to pick up instances needs of social actors (Argyris, Schon, 1978).

The educational challenge of the AR is to mediate between founded strengths and founding emergencies thanks to intra/inter-organizational learning processes (Ander-Egg,1990). The AR aims to facilitate/monitorate processes of co-evolution (autonomy/interdependence) among institution-community-citizens. Such processes of organizational learning are concretized in practices of governance, subsidiarity, deliberative democracy (Leubolt, Novy, Beinstein, 2007).

The governance of these processes of social and institutional capability is possible thanks to the planning and the evaluation of good practices both in policy making activities and in management of common goods related to management of natural resources (Ostrom, 1990). In this sense, the territory becomes the privileged place in which to act and promote the sharing of ideas, values, projects, tools in the direction of participatory democracy with reference to the whole of the social

actors involved (Van Der Knaap, 1995). As Van Der Knaap says, "Contemporary literature on policy evaluation challenges the 'traditional', rational-objectivist model of policy evaluation. Instead, an argumentative- subjectivist approach is forwarded, conceiving of policy-making as an ongoing dialogue, in which both governmental and societal actors contest their views on policy issues by exchanging arguments".

In particular, this is evident if we consider the policies that inspire a new concept of economic growth known as "sustainable". That is, the process of developing can not ignore the requirements of a social balance and an environmental protection that local communities ask (Beato, 1991). This goal can be achieved only by encouraging a communicative and dialogic exchange between different stakeholders starting from the perceptions given by the citizens. In this sense, relationship between local authorities, economic actors, third sectors, citizens, could be redefined cause of those actors can contribute to build both a definition of quality of life and well-being respect on the complex needs they represent (Sartori, 1993).

From this point of view education could be considered the goal of ecojustice think. Ecojustice gives relevance to place-based learning processes situated both in everyday life and experiences and indigenous knowledge systems (Mueller, 2009). Starting from this consideration, a territory cannot be defended by an oppositional and jacobin environmentalism, but it must be the same common ground on which to engage in a dialogue with local authorities and client company as an opportunity for hold together development, sustainability and identity.

In this sense, ecojustice is oriented on the holistic ways of knowing ourselves in relation to others. taking in account how we should live in relation to other people and the Earth (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). Moreover, ecojustice can be understood in a systemic approach of integrated relations, which is impossible to distance from humans and the more-than-human (Abram, 1996). Local communities and the other stakeholders, although starting from their interests and not from their static positions, become more and more convinced to reduce risk factors that increase environmental and social impacts by raising awareness and co-responsibility in managing complex projects (Beck, 2000).

Many of them may find fertile ground in the activities aimed at promoting community empowerment on environmental issues strengthen local agreements and social contracts for innovative and low-impact projects and investments. Between these knowledge, participatory action-research approach is aimed at working on the quality of relations between the various stakeholders and, therefore, among the visions they represent. In a participatory key, local stakeholders can be the agents of socio-economic change that is primarily a cultural change following the approach of the learning communities working together for a sharing social contract related to environmental issue (Van Hecke, 2003). Strategic decisions must be planned and evaluated starting form the opportunities that citizens and social groups promote, in cooperation with the local authorities, to achieve shared and socially useful goals (Cohen, 1997). The local authorities that share these pathways have the opportunity to strengthen its action through the creation of "spaces and places" in which the local community can participate in the definition of the decisions that affect their future. Set "spaces and places" means to activate "laboratories of participation" and open them to local actors and civil society in order to draw locally shared development scenarios (Ames, 1993).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 The Action – Research process: Through a process of participatory evaluation, the AR project aims to explore the dimensions the community considers relevant (cultural, social, economic and environmental) with respect to the threats-opportunities associated with the probable building of a biomass energy station (AA. VV , 2003). Thanks to AR it's possible to produce the transformation of declarative and procedural knowledge of the community in a set of indicators to monitor and evaluate the performance of social investment and for evaluating the risks annexed. The output resulting from research phase (Guidelines, Integrated Balance of Community, Report of the participatory process, Report of decision-making supervision process, Comparative table with the set of indicators) are aimed to guide local authorities in decision-making process and will form the basis for building a "social contract" between the community, local authorities, client company.

The link participation - evaluation makes virtuous circularity between institutions, community, citizens, client company, in the logic of promoting social and institutional capability (Andreoni, 2009).

The participatory evaluation is not only a means to achieve a more effective, but can be seen as an end because: a) it favors collective learning processes, b) promotes the growth of social capital and to make it more inclusive and democratic decision-making processes (Kazepov, 2005).

One way to design sustainable and cooperative actions in pursuit of a common goal is to turn on reflective practices of learning within the community, starting from the meanings that community assigns to the relationship with the territory (Dewey, 1966).

The interaction and negotiation of knowledge and decision-making processes, along paths of reflective learning, go in the direction of dialogic, inclusive and deliberative democracy. In this sense, participation and evaluation are two sides of same coin, as are two convergent and complementary ways to ensure an active role for the citizens (Patton, 2000).

The information capacity of research for returning information to policy-makers ensures an appropriate rights of citizenship. From another perspective, the participatory evaluation promotes community empowerment and involves informal and spontaneous aggregation of social actors in a dialogue around both on common issues, shared interests and mutual development exchanging ideas and solutions (Ibrahim, Alkire, 2008).

The AR proposal is not a simple oriented reading of the reality, whose purpose is purely cognitive, but it facilitates change. It takes place in four phases that can be summarized as follows:

a) Research activities based on empowerment evaluation;
b) Educational activities and participative methodologies aimed at pursuing a learning community;
c) Co-construction of a set of indicators for an inclusive evaluation framework of bio-mass energy station;
d) Drafting of a shared social contract among community, client company, local authorities.

AR, in the framework of *empowerment evaluation* (Fetterman, 2000) and of *Fourth generation evaluation* (Guba, Lincoln, 1989) is aimed at involving stakeholders in the development of shared perspectives of change with reference to the definition of objectives, procedures, results. The literature in the field of evaluation focuses on the possibility of combining the empowerment evaluation with the pragmatic approach to standards from the contributions made by the realist

evaluation (Stufflebeam, 1994). In this sense, AR is focused on:
- Point of view of politicians (objectives);
- Point of view of independent investigators (standard);
- Point of view of citizens and community (needs and competences).

The design of AR has been developed in to 4 levels of research aimed at evaluating the participation in the processes of planning/evaluation of programs-projects-services:

- Meta-evaluation: The evaluation research of the AR device.
- Participatory Evaluation of cognitive and emotional learning processes of co-construction of knowledge produced by AR device
- Participatory Evaluation of decision-making processes completed by AR device
- Participatory Evaluation of actions / interventions / projects carried out by AR device

Consistent with that taken in the field of evaluation by Guba and Lincoln, the 4 drawings of AR's evaluative research can be referred to some meta-criteria such as *openness* to the views of stakeholders, *relevance* of information for those involved, *fair treatment and ethics* in management of information, the research and treatment of data (JCSEE, 2003).

2.2 The Action-research process: operational procedures:
- Identification and analysis of local actors to be involved;
- Awareness initiatives for all local actors through performing art initiatives focused on environmental issue;
- Social network analysis for mapping of local actors;
- Evaluative focus group for mapping some representations of the local actors on the topics of environmental issue;
- Needs mapping and assessment of competencies for local actors;
- Creating ad hoc training courses for local actors in order to improve awareness initiatives through informal education activities;
- Scenario Analysis among all local actors for a shared vision and strategy with respect to environmental sustainability initiatives to be activated in the territory tied up to opening biomass energy station;
- Activation of community planning processes;
- Opening a table of negotiation among local actors involved;
- Definition and implementation of projects and actions identified;
- Monitoring of the stages of AR through appropriate instruments;
- Verify, along with all those involved in the project, the capacity for governance of local resources and capabilities of process control by local actors;
- Lifelong learning activities for improving key competencies for qualifying multi-actors processes of territorial governance;
- Monitoring of the perception that the local community has of itself;
- Dissemination of good practice models of local development and program management leaded by local communities and stakeholders involved at local, European, Extra EU level.

3. Results

3.1 Research aimed at participative evaluation:
- AR Report;
- Guidelines for planning;
- Repository of projects promoting sustainable development of the community;
- Training support activities for empowerment of the local actors involved;
- Shared definition of a Set of Indicators for evaluating the impact of biomass energy station;
- Pilot projects for enhancement and self-promotion of local communities;
- Chart of Values for Ecojustice on environmental issue;
- Guidelines for improving Governance processes in future projects related to environmental issue;
- Seminars, workshops and roundtable during the whole process for the whole citizenship;
- Data Observatory for all processes and projects carries out;
- Dissemination Plan at local, national and transnational level;
- Drafting of the social contract.

3.2 Shared constructions of a set of indicators
The shared construction of an appropriate set of indicators to monitor and evaluate the social investment in that area of Salento with a long-term objective of sustainable development and community empowerment in dialogue with local authorities and client company.

3.3 The social contract:
In this context, the social contract has been understood as the intrinsic strength of a population, of a human group or of a network in a specific area. It deals with a strength determined by the interaction among different people, or rather the representatives of the civil society, the carriers of cognitive capital and the holders of the territorial factors.

The "social contract" is the necessary completion of a gradual effort to acquire equipment to monitor and evaluate the sustainability of the system in practical and measurable way. The social contract is also based on awareness, responsibility and confidence in the process of change because condensate resources, skills, desires and needs of a community in a dialogic and inclusive perspective with local authorities and client company.

4. Discussion
4.1 The action - research project for preventing local conflicts: The main objective of AR is to promote an integrated environmental management system (for organizations and communities), providing continuous supervision to achieve the objectives of participation, sharing and implementation of an environmental policies/projects. AR also can contribute to the prevention and management of local conflicts.

Social research, in an evaluation frame, becomes essential to provide useful information to co-planning and co-evaluate both the success of an intervention and the quality of a project or a service. Under complexity, an integrated and reflective approach on environmental issues is able

to establish a collective process of co-production of knowledge following a precise and flexible methodological framework in empowerment evaluation activities. In this way there could be developed sustainable and cooperative interventions in pursuit of a common goal for a long term period, guaranteed by a shared process of horizontal governance. In this sense, the *learning* function of evaluation is a circular practice of reflective learning that takes in account the meanings that actors give to the relationship with their context. Evaluation may offer effective guidance both for design (ex ante evaluation) and for evaluate ongoing and ex-post, the social consequences of an action by a integrated viewpoint.

The learning evaluation process enhances non-formal and informal learning in a way markedly socio-constructivist (Vygotskij, 1990), based on learning like participation in the life of community (Colazzo, 2008). Evaluation opens new dimensions to be integrated in interdisciplinary and innovative framework giving attention both to the process and to the success of local agreement. These elements are able to hold together the multiplicity of demands, needs, desires, skills, in a collaborative network that improves services and interventions, such as social collective experiences of co-design and co-evaluation. Both needs, desires, but also competencies and creativity of local actors and social relations (in the form of social-capital) are put at the center of the discourse with the intent to promote communities of practice (Lave, Wenger, 2006).

From a methodological point of view, the activities related to AR are based on active methodologies (learning by ding, reflective learning, problem based learning), in which local actors are called upon to make a contribution responsible for the success of the overall project (Bos-Ciussi, Augier, Rosner, 2008).

The methodological approach for participative planning/evaluation, is able to promote active citizenship and social inclusion in the processes of preservation and enhancement of environmental issues (Patton , 2010).

5. Conclusion

The basic framework of this paper is the *empowerment evaluation (*Fetterman, 2000) referred to a "constructivist" matrix. The empowerment evaluation aims to support and promote local actors in a process of awareness and self-determination. This approach helps communities to internalize the principles and evaluation practices, making evaluation an integral part of the design work and planning of educational-participatory interventions.

The empowerment evaluation has a clear educational purpose: it aims to develop evaluation practices for citizens involved in a social contract. These evaluation practices are seen as tools for the recruitment of a conscious attitude about the problems to be addressed, the objectives to be defined, the solutions to be tracked (Palumbo, Torrigiani, 2009). With the shift of paradigm in the planning/evaluation processes, the focus has been moved both to the learning process and to the motivational, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies implemented by people in order to learn.

The first results of this works were disclosed at 6th WEEC Congress (Brisbane, 2012). Actually, the AR process is ongoing, but there are several consequences of this shift of focus from the educational research to the evaluation process that express a first conclusion to this work:

- It's not enough to verify the results obtained but it's necessary to go beyond in order to understand if people have attained some competencies (learning to evaluate);

- It decreases the meaning of evaluation like control and it increases the ability to use the evaluation process in a diagnostic way in order to activate emotional - motivational, cognitive and meta-cognitive aspects of the learning process;
- The evaluation allows to acquire therefore all those useful information "to regulate" progressively the interventions making them in conformity with the needs of the specific situation;
- The evaluation allows to put actions that are pertinent into effect: suitable to the necessities of the context; efficient, that are coherent with the defined objectives; effective, that are such to produce the desired effects.

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