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Citizen Participation in the Context of Rural Local Welfare Systems

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***Abstract* – In this paper we focus on citizen participation in the field of welfare services. More specifically, we concentrate on the role of citizens and civic organisations as part of the local welfare systems in Finnish rural areas.**

INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, the challenges related to the provision of welfare services have been increasing in Finland. This is partly because of demographic and economic changes, but also because on its own, the provider-centric welfare state turned out to be incapable of meeting all the needs which arose or to afford all of the services which are consequently needed. A solution to the problem has been sought based on administrative reforms, including the centralization of local government administration, the renewal of service structures, as well as the privatization of services to independent market players. At the same time, demands that citizens and their communities should be more actively engaged in the provision of their own welfare have become stronger (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2015; Haavisto 2011).

The identified problems and their solutions have strongly affected the lives of people living in the rural areas of Finland. To secure their basic welfare services also in the long term as well as to improve the quality of the life in rural areas the inhabitants of several villages have taken an active role in the production of services and other activities creating welfare. In-line with the work of Andreotti, Mingione and Polizzi (2012), we refer to these dynamic arrangements of mixing public and non-public actors and resources by the concept of local welfare systems (LWS). LWS challenge traditional centralized thinking and highlight the role of sectorial collaboration and the understanding of specific local socio-economic and cultural conditions.

Here, we approach the function of LWS in Finnish rural areas from the perspective of citizen participation and community orientation. Our research question is - What is the role of citizen participation in the context of rural local welfare systems?

METHODS

The research method used here is participatory action research (PAR) which combines research and development (see e.g. Winter & Munn-Giddings 2001). The data has been collected between 2012-2014 from local discussion forums organized in the northern and eastern parts of Finland, and by interviewing the key actors of local municipalities and actors of civic society. The data collected was analysed using theory-oriented content analysis, guided by the three dimensions of citizen participation in services which have been identified by Matthies, Kattilakoski and Rantamäki (2011a, 2011b).

RESULTS

The first of these dimensions, named “the democratic governance of services” focuses on the interaction between the local residents and those with decision making power in public services. Representative democracy guarantees a certain degree of influence, but in addition to this, people wish to have a direct dialogical connection with the political decision makers and the municipal authorities. Key to this dialogue is the need to hear and be heard. Due to centralization developments, especially, the administrative and decision-making levels have become further distanced from the rural areas which they address. In the villages, there is a fear that in time decisions will be made without any understanding of the specific characteristics of rural areas. To avoid this, different models of participatory democracy have been introduced. One example of this are the regular local discussion forums which are cooperatively organized by the villagers and local municipal authorities. The basic idea of these forums is to share information and knowledge. A central concept is not only to address the question of citizens’ possibilities to influence activities and decisions, but also the possibility of improving the public organization in terms of the quality and effectiveness of services, by way of tapping practices based on the knowledge of local inhabitants as well as by taking into consideration the local resources that support and supply the provision of public resources (see also Fung 2007).

Secondly, in the more specific context of professional social and health services, citizen participation emerges in the form of user-oriented working methods. This approach sees the service users as active subjects throughout the whole service process, beginning from the evaluation of needs and proceeding

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to the provision of services and the assessment of whole process. In recent years, municipalities in Finland have invested in the development of web-based feedback channels through which clients may give feedback concerning the services they receive. From the perspective of rural LWS, in addition to individual experiences, more information concerning local circumstances that influence the daily lives of clients is required. The gatherings of different groups like local pensioners or mother and child clubs offer service practitioners excellent opportunities to meet the local residents and discuss the issues they find important, thus deepening their professional understanding. Also, in some areas specific service users have been used as evaluators and groups have been established.

The third of the dimensions is the participation of citizen as co-producers in the direct provision of services. The development of community-based services as well as multi-service centres aims to secure local services by combining different human and financial resources, as well as welcoming the contributions of professionals and voluntary actors in different societal sectors. Community-based provision of services is also a way to create employment opportunities for local people by joining together different smaller tasks. A good example of this are the home help services organized by local village associations. In the field of welfare services, it is also important to notice the input of different third sector organizations in the field of preventative activities, especially in the form of various leisure activities like sport clubs and neighbourhood help. These not only improve the welfare of individuals, but also strengthen the sense of community as noted by Putnam (2000) in his theory of social capital.

CONCLUSIONS

The participation of citizens and civic organizations has an essential role as part of the local welfare system in rural areas. In general, this is understood as a cause of political trends which highlight the responsibilities of the citizens, instead of that of the public. In the addition to this, in the rural areas of Finland it is also a question of the tradition of civic action. The combination of these two issues has on one hand forced and on the other motivated rural communities to take a wider responsibility for their own welfare. In this sense, rural areas may act as forerunners on a way towards a new place-based welfare culture and a more comprehensive understanding of the society in general.

As Andreotti, Mingione and Polizzi (2012) have stated, the advantages of an LWS approach to the field of welfare may be crystallized in three arguments, in that it is more effective, more participative and more sustainable. A mix of centralized and place-based service design and delivery will both improve the quality of services, and offer ways to realise a more efficient use of various resources. Moreover, the involvement of citizens at the different levels of service provision offers opportunities for implementation of democratic citizenship. In the long run, this improves both economic and qualitative efficacy as well as the practices of participatory democracy which are steps towards a more sustainable society in general. This however requires that all of the stakeholders involved in the operation of LWS share common goals. This will take shape only in a constant process of regular communication and cooperation.

At its best, LWS will promote the participation of citizens and strengthen the sense of community. This results in a better targeting of services, and through the co-operation of different actors ends in increasing the utility of resources. Thus, the recognition of the local dimension of welfare has a notable impact on society as a whole. However, this requires that a new wider concept of welfare is adopted as a guiding principle in the organization of services.

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