



MUNICIPALITY AND INHABITANTS COOPERATION FOR WELL-BEING: SALASPILS DISTRICT CASE¹

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Abstract

Well-being is a good or satisfactory condition of existence, a state characterized by health, happiness, and prosperity. It is an ancient issue: all societies are trying to find the best possible solution for community well-being. The current research is devoted for clarification and update of opinions of different social and interest groups in Salaspils municipality (Latvia) to develop development plan of the municipality and involve society in preparation of decision making. The methodology of the research is worked out in Council of Europe and applied as pilot research in eight municipalities across Europe (in France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden and Latvia). Research methods used: scientific literature studies, statistical data analysis, focus group discussions. The research in Salaspils municipality was organized in 25 focus groups or so called homogenous groups. The main findings were updated and worked out well-being indicators and pilot actions to improve well-being of all people living in municipality and realize public involvement in decision making, all findings were discussed with representatives of homogenous groups.

Introduction

Promoting the wellbeing of individuals and communities is fundamental to the work of local government, and is a strong motivator for local councilors everywhere. It is a

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particularly opportune moment to explore the role of local government in promoting wellbeing. The recession continues to impact on individuals and on communities, creating the need to bolster the wellbeing and resilience of local populations. Local government today is facing up to the challenge of unprecedented cuts in expenditure and services, and more than ever must demonstrate cost effectiveness and the economic and social value of its services. Looking at outcomes from a wellbeing perspective helps us to demonstrate the value of local government.

Research results in many countries and practical experience of municipalities have recognized that local government is a key player in creating the conditions for material wellbeing. It does this through increasing employment opportunities, regenerating the physical environment and strengthening the local economy. Research results have proved the importance of psycho-social well-being in local populations, so that all residents can reach their potential and live a good life.

This paper calls for new ways of thinking and working in local government. The current research is devoted for clarification and update of opinions of different social and interest groups in Salaspils municipality (Latvia) to develop development plan of the municipality and involve society in preparation of decision making. The methodology of the research is worked out in Council of Europe and applied as pilot research in eight municipalities across Europe (in France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden and Latvia). Research methods used: scientific literature studies, statistical data analysis, focus group discussions. The research in Salaspils municipality was organized in 25 focus groups or so called homogenous groups. The main findings were updated and worked out well-being indicators and pilot actions to improve well-being of all people living in municipality and realize public involvement in decision making, all findings were discussed with representatives of homogenous groups.

Theoretical Background

Historically, discussions of well-being have been situated within, and based on, various religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions. Among these, Aristotle's discussion of the "good life" as a life of "virtue" has proved to be particularly important especially as it was adopted by the Catholic Church and transmitted to Western civilization. Over the last 100 years, well-being became more and more closely associated with economic performance. In particular, growth in income came to be accepted as a proxy for increasing well-being. In part as a reaction to this "Economic Theory of Well-Being" [17], two broader approaches to well-being were put forward. Needs Theory, developed by Maslow, Max-Neef, Gough, and others [19], described a range of human needs relevant to well-being, some but not all of which are related to income. Capabilities & Functionings, developed by Sen, Nussbaum, and others [18] have stressed how one functions – what one manages to be and do - compared to one's range of capabilities, rather than simply the income one has to spend. The elements provide a framework broad enough to accommodate all of these theoretical approaches, but simple enough to be useful in the organization of diverse discussions of well-being.

In asking the public about wellbeing, it becomes clear that people tend to have a good understanding of its various dimensions. Typically they mention practical considerations (such as health and financial issues) [3] and subjective feelings and emotions (such as a sense of



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happiness and hope for the future) [1]. They also have positioned their own well-being according to their personal experience of family relationships, friendships and community [4].

But because 'wellbeing' is a term that can be used to mean many different things, there is a risk that it will end up losing its meaning altogether. In view of this it is worth recalling the various existing policy definitions of wellbeing to inform how we should define and improve it in a local government context. They share some key characteristics:

1. Wellbeing is about how people experience their own lives, so for example, people must feel able to achieve things or feel they have a sense of purpose to have wellbeing.
2. Wellbeing is more than the absence of problems or illness. This requires a shift in focus from what can go wrong in people's lives to what makes them go well.
3. Wellbeing is about the personal and the social, so improving the wellbeing of local populations needs to involve a strengthening of local social connections, support networks and the sense of belonging that make up the social fabric of communities.
4. Wellbeing is more than happiness. The aim of local government, therefore, should not be to set out to make people happy, but to create the conditions that enable citizens and communities to do well in life, to flourish [9].

Research results in many countries and practical experience of municipalities have recognized that local government is a key player in creating the conditions for material well-being. It does this through increasing employment opportunities, regenerating the physical environment and strengthening the local economy. But more recent evidence also highlights the importance of nurturing psycho-social well-being in local populations, so that all residents can reach their potential and live a good life [20].

Studies on the relationship between out-of-home placement and geographical factors have been studied by Andersen in 2010 [2] and there has been proved that they do not explain community-level variation in out-of-home placement rates. Data from Danish administrative registers which included all children living in Denmark between 2003 and 2005 was used to analyse whether community-level variations in placement rates are explained by municipal-level factors. The factors considered were: formal support, such as municipal expenditure on social policy; social support, such as municipal aid to volunteering organisations; social disorganisation factors, such as the local rates of unemployment and crime; and local political preferences. Four of the six indicators of municipal formal support analysed were found to be statistically significantly predictive. The number of preventive measures offered by a municipality, per-child spending on school and day care, and the number of students per class were all related to the risk of out-of-home placement. In addition two of the three indicators of social support were found to be negatively and statistically significantly related to the likelihood that a child will experience an out-of-home placement. The results suggested that the likelihood of placement diminishes as the level of municipal spending increases for cultural, sport, and leisure activities, as well as for the activities of local voluntary organisations. Social disorganisation in the municipality was estimated to be positively related to the risk of out-of-home placement. Andersen in his paper has proved, that political preference was not a statistically significant predictor of the risk of placement.

Satya Chakravarty [7] analysing inequality, polarization and poverty with special attention to distributional analysis, social exclusion and well-being has found that inequality,



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polarization and poverty is crucial for understanding the economic well-being of the population of a country. Conceptual and methodological advances and better data have provided better insights into these issues in recent years. Chakravarty has proved that since the well-being of a population depends on income and non-income indicators (including those provided by municipality), both unidimensional and multidimensional frameworks have to be taken into consideration.

Keller, Lehmann and Milligan [11] have studied in details effectiveness of corporate well-being programs by help of meta-analysis. Researchers have proved that health is a major component of well-being and quality of life is increasingly costly. In the respective research was examine the role of employers for promoting well-being and quality of life. Results of meta-analysis examinations evaluated the impact of fifty well-being programs, which addressed six health issues and use of seven marketing approaches. The analysis indicated that well-being programs and marketing approaches significantly improve employee health and depend on company size and employee gender. Results, based on sixty studies, showed that there is significant opportunity for efficient use of corporate health programs, including the municipality influence.

Matsubayashi and Ueda [16] have studied the government composition and human well-being and have proved that the composition of government is strongly related to the well-being of citizens, measured by the reported level of life satisfaction and suicide rates in industrial countries. The research conclusions were based on analysis, using survey data of 14 nations between 1980 and 2002. The results have indicated that the presence of left-leaning parties in government is associated with an increase the level of individual life satisfaction, unemployment rates and government welfare policies. The panel data analysis of 21 nations between 1980 and 2004 also showed that suicide rates decrease when a country experiences a shift to more left-leaning government. The increased presence of right-wing parties in government has a negligible effect on suicide rates.

Christakopoulou, Dawson and Gari (2007) identified [8] that policy makers need to have the information to understand fully specific areas and to establish comprehensive baselines against which future changes can be measured. If they are to identify appropriate interventions and target resources effectively, they need to have a clear picture of the community's strengths and weaknesses. Equally, a baseline that reflects the range of aspects that affect the community's situation and its prospects is a pre-requisite for tracking change and identifying impacts.

Boulding and Wampler [6] have stated that they are certain that participatory governance is made to enhance governance, citizens' empowerment, and the quality of democracy, creating a virtuous cycle to improve the well-being of the poor. However, there is limited empirical evidence for this relationship. Research has be done using drawing from an original database of Brazil's 220 largest cities, they assess whether the adoption of a participatory budgeting (PB) program is associated with changes in social spending or changes in several indicators of well-being. We find that PB municipalities spend a slightly higher share of their budget on health and education programs, but there is little evidence that this shift in budget priorities affects measurable outcomes.

Lien and Pettersen (Norway) in their research specified [14] that although it is difficult for local governments to give support for social welfare recipients top political priority, there



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are huge variations in the support recipients actually receive among Norwegian municipalities. However, local governments representing different political party ideologies may prefer to support different dimensions of generosity. Some municipalities could have a liberal attitude to eligibility rules but be strict on time limits and the amount of money provided. Others may be generous regarding time limits or amounts received once one is accepted as a welfare client. Data from the mid 1990s indicate the variation in support is related to different generosity dimensions for different party groups. While the total number of clients seems unrelated to politics and basically correlates with local social problems, the duration and amount of support are related to the political composition of the municipality assembly. Devoid of any large variation [14], both time limits and the amount of support increase in accordance with socialist leanings, and the total budget used for social welfare support also increases with the proportion of women in the municipality assembly.

The researches of well-being would help science, politicians, people and others answer to questions about differences in level of living standards among the world, about satisfaction or disaffection (even if level of living is the same from economical point of view), about migration, about political instruments that should be used etc. So it is going to be comprehensive assessment but still science needs to control it and make it realistic and possible to evaluate [10].

Baldersheim and Lawrence [5] in their research have analysed territorial choice: the politics of boundaries and borders and their influence on different life sides including municipality inhabitants well-being.

Kelly [12] in evaluation of school choice and student well-being have examined opportunity and capability in education – different sides of school choice, benefits and loses indicated better understanding of education markets and factors influencing of school choice on student well-being.

Martos and Kopp [15] have evaluated life goals influence on well-being and especially in detail studied - does the financial status matter on feeling of well-being. The results were used from a representative Hungarian sample and has proved the importance of intrinsic life goals (e.g. personal growth and relationships) influence on positive association with indicators of well-being, whereas an orientation toward extrinsic life goals (e.g. wealth and appearance) indicated connection with decreased positive functioning. Research results of a nationally representative cross-sectional sample of 4,841 Hungarian adults, has proved that after controlling for several sociodemographic variables intrinsic goal importance was in a positive relationship with subjective well-being and meaning in life, whereas the contribution of extrinsic life goals was weak to subjective well-being and negative to meaning in life. Moreover, no moderation effects were found by Martos and Kopp (2011) for indices of financial status, indicating that the relationship between life goals and well-being is the same for poorer and for richer respondents.

Krueger and his colleagues [13], by measuring the subjective well-being of people belonging to different nations have studied in detail the time use and well-being and came to conclusion on subjective well-being.

People in municipalities are different and municipality management need to take into account that inhabitants have different priorities and attitudes towards municipality management activities and to make the best decisions it is important to study inhabitants opinion and involve society in decision making.



Research Methodology

Salaspils Municipality is one of the eight project's partners in EU URBACT II program project "TOGETHER for territories of co-responsibility". The Municipality started active participation in this project in 2009; it was first experience when such significant part of society gets involved into large scale questionnaire and society involvement activities. The project "TOGETHER" aims at developing social inclusion and well-being for all. Its main hypothesis is that social inclusion and well-being for all may be difficult to achieve without strong cooperation between public authorities, citizens and private actors, in a co-responsibility approach. It facilitates exchanges of experience on the principle of co-responsibility and builds participatory methods based on well-being indicators. It also implements strategies and Local Action Plans through Local Support Groups established in each participating city [15; 16].

In order to improve the well-being of all and to avoid situations of exclusion, these project's partners use a methodology called *SPIRAL*, based on building indicators of well-being with the help of the citizens themselves and preparing and launching a Co-responsibility Action Plan from these indicators, drawing on the coordination of the Local Support Group. This methodology initially proposed by the Council of Europe within the framework of its Strategy of Social Cohesion is an on-going process of improvement to facilitate its application in different contexts [11].

The main participant in well-being evaluation is population in municipality that is represented by Local Support group which is formed by leaders of different NGOs, interest and religious groups. Method is very well in some point of views:

- People that represent the population of municipality participate all the time until Local Action plan is made on the base of well-being indicators;
- People not only answer to questions that is made before but they can nominate by themselves new indicators that are important in well-being in municipality;
- Population is fully representative because of homogenous groups who participate in making well-being indicators [12].

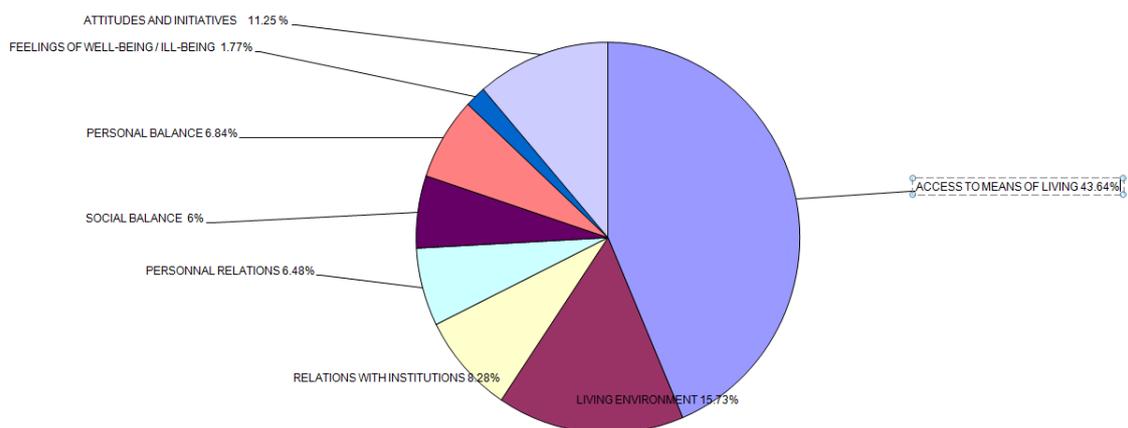


Figure 1. Indicators Synthesis in Salaspils (all groups) in 2011, %

Source: Results of Salaspils 25 homogenous groups – results gained from 3 meetings September, 2010 until May 2011 (from 2867 answers)



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After scientific literature studies about well-being theory and practice and statistical data analysis about the municipality, its population, social and economical situations next step of *SPIRAL* method is to collect well-being indicators through homogeneous groups representing various segments of the population. The summarized results are available in Figure 1.

Then is co-validation of classified indicators, afterwards Local Support group establishes pilot actions (projects) in areas that people consider as a priority.

The main developer of project in Salaspils municipality is the Development department of Council of Salaspils Municipality, while the University of Latvia provides technical, scientific and methodological support. Pattern of such co-operation has been developed also in many other countries and the results were surprisingly good. The experts from university ensured that all data were collected, analyzed and presented.

Main Results of Research

The most important part after forming well-being indicators was to choose possible actions that could improve the existing situation in different areas in the Municipality. This step would be focused in this paper.

After presentation and validation of indicators each of homogeneous group was asked to write down activities which particular group will realize. Then all responses were read off to groups and they had to collectively choose 2 activities for this year and 2 activities for next year which they agree to put into effect. Afterwards groups were asked to write down activities that municipality should put into effect. After reading off all activities and discussions each group had to choose priorities that the municipality should do this year and next year.

After summarization of all possible actions from homogeneous groups three main groups were created:

1. Actions that could be realized in context of *Urbact II* project;
2. Actions that could be included in Development Program 2012-2018 of Salaspils Municipality;
3. Actions that could be easily implemented (outside the *URBACT II* project).

It was extremely important to take into account as much as possible inhabitants' proposals/ suggestions otherwise they would lose trust in Council of Municipality. Each of possible action was discussed to find how to realize it and how realistic and sustainable it is.

The main principle to realize pilot action within the *Urbact* project was statement that pilot action should promote coordination between municipality of Salaspils, NGOs and population to prepare reasonable proposals for joint activities and problem solution.

After all discussions, there were formulated 7 different pilot actions where inhabitants of Salaspils and Council of Municipality would work together for well-being of all. These actions were divided in 2 groups:

1. Strengthening the informative links in Salaspils:
 - 1.1. Establishment of coordination centre for NGOs;
 - 1.2. Creating discussion forum or blog for all NGOs in Salaspils;
 - 1.3. Organization of wider distribution of local newspaper;
 - 1.4. Society information about science development in Salaspils;



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2. Public involvement activities:
 - 2.1. Organization of Salaspils City festival;
 - 2.2. Organization of Family day;
 - 2.3. Organization of International Day of Disabled Persons.

For every pilot action working group was created by *Urbact Local Support Group*. In every working group participated representatives of different NGOs and Council of Municipality who are usually responsible for actions like those. But it was stated that leader of working group must represent the NGOs or interest groups (not Municipality). In this way Municipality demonstrated in very considered way that opinion of inhabitants is very important to them and municipality is open to hear it and take it into account.

The working group is meeting at least once per two weeks to discuss the progress of activity. At the beginning the coordinator of the project had to communicate with each of member of working group to promote meetings and discussions, but after few meeting members were motivated enough to organize meeting by themselves and more often than it was planned before. Some of the groups were more active than others – it depends on the activity, on the leader of working group and other factors.

So far (the pilot actions were stated in June, 2011) the most active work group is working on society information about science development in Salaspils. It is quite surprisingly that in the begging the group was formed to inform society about environmental problems, but participants realized that they and Salaspils society in general do not know anything about 5 different research establishments that are located in Salaspils. That's why it is important to inform society about their activities and only afterwards to cooperate with them to address different environmental problems. Now working group has expanded – there are even several sub-groups who are working on concrete activities. As a result of those activities will be Science Week in Salaspils (in a future it could be even Science month). This action is fully supported by Council of Salaspils Municipality, because in Development program 2012-2018 of Salaspils Municipality strengthening of the concept “Salaspils – science city” has been put as a medium and long term priority. In addition to that this working group was also involved in preparing application for new project for further researches and practical solutions in cooperation possibilities between science, education and entrepreneurship in Salaspils Municipality.

Future Considerations

“TOGETHER” project ends in December 2012. There are scheduled activities until the end of the project that are financed and supported by the Lead Partner. But as it was found that this methodology works very well and shows real evidence that society involvement has been reached in significant level, it is stated from politicians that Municipality will use this model of involvement of Local Support Group in decision making and problem solving in municipality's work also after the project ensuring project's sustainability.

The main partner in decision making – Local Support Group – will regularly come together (around once a month/ two months) to discuss topical problems in Salaspils Municipality. During the meeting politicians and other responsible personnel will report about actualities in Municipality, listen to citizens' opinions and answer to their questions. The aim of Council of Salaspils Municipality is to ensure that all citizens of Salaspils would feel free to



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express their point of view about topical issues in Municipality and the most important – to take actions to solve the resulting situation in co-responsible manner. This also refers to the main target of the project “TOGETHER for territories of co-responsibility”.

In a future Council of Salaspils Municipality with experts from European Council will organize trainings for other municipalities in Latvia and abroad to share this experience and good practice in realizing *SPIRAL* methodology. As this was pioneer project in Latvia in using this methodology, in is expected that Salaspils case would promote using it across all country. Also it is planned after 5 years repeat the research using *SPIRAL* methodology to see in what areas/ fields has been made changes, if level of well-being of municipality has been increased.

Conclusions

The solutions that are needed for municipality development and society involvement cannot only be based on economic resources but should also take into account the citizens themselves for innovative solutions based on local needs. Academic research as well as practical research in Salaspils municipality has proved that great importance for decision making on municipality level has discussions in homogenous groups on understanding issues important for all in municipality. Discussions in homogenous or focus groups help to lead for preparation of joint plans for municipality development and society involvement and it makes need to think also about other interest and social groups in the municipality as well as develop decisions and make better links with the management of municipality.

The evaluation of well-being in society is not possible without asking people questions about their own opinions. So all around the world questionnaires are one of the most widely used method in social and also economical science to make estimations about society, level of living, institution work, purchasing power etc. Society involvement in preparation of real activity plans make the society be involved in decision making and be co-responsible for the best solutions for all municipality inhabitants.

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