

Constructing a Social Development Network within a Rural Municipal Government in Portugal

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Abstract

In Portugal, an experimental Social Development Network (SDN) programme has been promoted at the national level by the Social Development Institute (SDI). The major operational objective of the SDN is to construct advisory councils and local commissions to increase local participation. The advisory council is represented by local development stakeholders from governmental and non-governmental institutions. These stakeholders define the actions to be taken for the social development agenda in the municipal government. The paper depicts the achievements and inadequacies of this network. In general, the case-study evaluation determines if the network strengthens the social action process in a rural area faced by social constraints, for example, poverty, aging and low educational levels.

Key words: *advisory councils; participation; empowerment; decision-making; and governance*

Introduction

The Social Development Institute (SDI), a national Portuguese organization, has promoted the idea of the Social Development Network (SDN) and social action process at the local governmental municipalities at two levels. With their financial support, an evaluation has been carried out by the authors. The external evaluators using methods such as observation, interviews and questionnaires assessed the performance and composition of a two tiered network.

The paper will address governance, participation, empowerment, social planning and capacity building. Briefly, the paper will analyse the strengths and weaknesses of a local social development network. The case-study evaluation will identify and portray key value domains in development, in order to assess the performance of the network.

Good Governance

Leftwich (1994) has defined good governance by using the following concepts; systemic, political and administrative. These concepts would be attributed to a multi-level

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governance and citizen participation. The mobilization of the community and their participation to develop action plans that foster partnerships with government represent an attempt to promote development (Lawrence, 2004).

At the administrative level, a capacity to be efficient, independent, accountable and open public service has been identified by Leftwich, (1994), as characteristics of good governance. An ideal administrative governance would be the participation of a self-organized group at the multi-government levels. Good governance should attempt to promote participation and a social action process at the local community. In some degree, this can be related to empowerment of the community members to learn to participate in the decision making process. In some situations, the empowerment of the local actors requires non-formal educational programs (Gajanayake and Gajanajake, 1993). Accordingly, bad governance could be defined at the administrative domain, when the patterns of decision-making are not decentralized or the local community does not participate in the governing process.

The Municipality: Macedo de Cavaleiros

The municipality is located in a poor, rural, mountainous and predominately agricultural area with wet winters and dry, hot summers. In Macedo de Cavaleiros, the SDN consists of the council and five inter-township commissions constituted as a social network and a platform to plan and co-ordinate social action process. The municipal government has two levels of organization, the advisory council and the five inter-township commissions at the local communities. The non-material social network project involved the organization of the local human resources without contributing to the material or financial aspects for development. It financed, for example, dislocations, training of stakeholders and the evaluation.

The advisory council is made up of local development stakeholders and actors from governmental and non-governmental institutions. The membership represents the organizations within the municipal area, such as parents associations, secondary schools, higher educational institute, government employment and training centre, hospital and health care agencies, social services, continuing education, development associations, township commissions, regional agricultural directorate, social and municipal government entities. These stakeholders, represented by both men and women, help determine the actions to be taken for the social development agenda in the municipal government as equal partners.

The five inter-township commissions are made up of all 38 male township commissioners. The commissions (lowest governmental level) have been established in parallel with the advisory council. There is an on-going process to identify additional members for these local commissions. The creation of these commissions at this level shows the preoccupation of the SDI to the local identity and the specific dynamics of each community. The commissioners are the political representatives of the township, but unfortunately, these actors are not representative of the local population according to their social characteristics and attributes.

Purposes, Methods and Challenges for the Evaluation

In general, the case-study evaluation will determine if the two-tiered network strengthens the social action process in a rural area dominated by the agricultural sector and faced by social constraints, for example, poverty, aging and low educational levels.

The authors, using participant observation, interviews and questionnaires assessed the performance and composition of the advisory council and the local commissions as it relates to participation, social planning, learning and capacity building. The range of evidence, often qualitative, was utilized to construct a representation of the SDN and the social action process. The evaluators participated in meetings at both levels (advisory council and commissions) of the network, interviewed and held discussions with the SDN facilitators on an on-going basis and analysed over 50 questionnaires from the members of the network.

Hart (2003) uses the term “illuminative evaluation” to describe some aspects of case-study evaluation. The challenge for the evaluators was to analyze and describe the qualitative evidence in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in the process. These interpretations can also illuminate mechanisms to improve the social action process. The interpretations will arise from the observations at meetings, discussions, the interviews and questionnaires. The following definition of illuminative evaluation is presented, “to make key behaviors or attitudes in a given context visible for contemplation. The aim is to enlighten policy makers or practitioners to the dynamics of behaviors in comparable situations in order that those behaviors can be understood and attended to in a more appropriate way” (Hart, 2003:46).

Development Values for the Social Action Process

Lawrence (2004), NORAD (1989), Kindervatter (1979) and Vachon (1993) identified some values associated to development such as justice, sustainability, participation and social interaction. The SDI target group are the poor, marginalized and excluded social groups. The SDI promotes equal opportunities for all members of the community through the formation of the SDN to resolve local problems and break down the barriers that these excluded groups encounter, while promoting dialogue with them. The SDN has been operationalized with the advisory council and local level township commissions, created to assist these groups in the social action process.

Has the operationalization of the network guaranteed the sustainability of the social action process or the organization and mobilization of the target group? Is sustainability linked to developing capacities for self-reliance for the marginalized populations? Do the marginalized groups contribute ideas and perspectives to the developmental activities? Does the project share information about the activities and the programme with stakeholders, the community and specifically the target groups? The paper will assess aspects of sustainability for this project from the observations and data.

Is participation a method or an objective in the SDN social action process? The paper will address these issues concerning the stakeholders. The assessment also needs to consider how the social action activities are associated to the needs and priorities of target

groups. The evaluation will identify the cooperative or conflictual relationships with the target population as well. These relationships will be contrasted at the two levels (council and commissions).

What are the implications for the social action process when the target groups plays a passive role as it relates to the implemented activities by the council and commissions? Pretty and Voduchê (1997) established that the lack of sustainability of many development projects was associated to passive participation by the target group. How do the stakeholders view the participation of the target groups in the process?

Does the leadership have the necessary trust to allow for a experiential learning? Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1999) identify a social perspective to learning that favors social interaction, sharing and learning by doing. Is there a common view of trust as it relates to the participation of the target groups in the social action process? More importantly, do the stakeholders have different perspectives about a democratic, dynamic and active involvement of the target groups? The questions presented in this section will be discussed in the upcoming section involving the analysis, interpretations and judgments of the qualitative evidence.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of the SDN and Social Action Process: Analysis and Interpretation

This section will depict the achievements and weaknesses of this network and the perceptions and attitudes of the stakeholders concerning the social action process. In addition, the section will be organized around the concepts such as justice, participation, sustainability, social interaction; and related questions linked to the philosophy and vision of the SDI. For each of the concepts related to the value domain, the network will be described and defined at the two levels of operationalability. The interpretation of strengths and weaknesses in the social action process will be analysed at the advisory council level and the five inter-township commissions. The response to the questions will be used as guidelines or suggestions for an “illuminative evaluation”. Finally, the location of the questions in only one of the value domains, does not necessarily imply exclusiveness to other domains, but for this analysis, interpretation and judgment, the questions will be treated as inclusive.

Justice Value Domain

Do the marginalized populations contribute ideas and perspectives to the activities? The social systems or groups struck by poverty and social exclusion deserve to be integrated into the development process, allowed equal opportunities and given greater access to the resources available. The SDN needs to promote dialogue with these groups and change the political culture to include them in the network. The evidence points out that these groups have not contributed ideas and perspectives to the activities established by the social action process. However, the stakeholders at the advisory council level, such as social services and other municipal entities are quite aware of the situation of the target groups. The stakeholders at the advisory council level have identified at

least the felt and unfelt needs of these excluded groups. As yet, the stakeholders at the inter-township commissions have not promoted any type of dialogue with these groups.

Does the project share information about the activities and the programme with stakeholders, the community and specifically the target group? The facilitators of the SDN have put considerable efforts in sharing information within the advisory council but, to a lesser extent, the inter-township commissions. The communication is very weak or non-existent at both the general community and with the specific target groups.

Are there cooperative or conflictual relationships with the target population by the advisory council and commissions? We have found no evidence in the interviews, questionnaires or observations with the advisory council members of a conflictual relationship with the target group. On the other hand, the comments by the stakeholders at the inter-township commissions have been perplexing. They have expressed negative comments concerning the involvement of local actors in the process. The perplexity lies in the fact that these commissioners consider the target groups as potential volunteer labour instead of equal partners for the local commission. They consider useless any efforts to stimulate local participation or have a negative view about the possibility of involving members of the community in the process. They appear to be concerned with their power in the decision making process.

Participation Value Domain

Is participation a method or an objective in the SDN social action process? In the case of the target population, it is clear that participation is an objective in the SDN social action process. The evidence at the advisory council level is quite encouraging. It demonstrates that the stakeholders carried out assigned tasks to complete the social development plan, open dialogue occurred with all members to perform the situational analysis, the meetings had an interactive exchange of ideas, there was participation in decision-making, shared leadership evolved and interactive learning was achieved. However, at the inter-township commission meetings, the commission members were more dependent on the change agents (facilitators) and could be defined as less participatory and dynamic. At both levels, some form of participation has been established, however, maintenance considerations need to be addressed for the SDN. The maintenance aspects are the implementation of a selection committee, expansion of leadership roles and implementing a process to rotate the stakeholders. These aspects would establish an administrative capacity and organizational culture within the SDN.

Are the social action activities associated to the needs and priorities of target group? The SDN has identified the needs and priorities of the target group. The strategy adopted to assist the target group has been one of responding to their needs through services and programmes. The decision-making and control of the assistance to the target group lies at the municipal governmental entity. The identification of needs and priorities has not been decentralized from the municipal governmental level.

What are the implications for the social action process when the target group plays a passive role as it relates to the implemented activities by the council and commissions? The advisory council initiated the social action process for the target group and not with

them. The inter-township commissions have at this time not initiated a social action process for the marginalized groups in their locality. It is clear that activities initiated at the advisory level will have positive consequences for the social groups struck by poverty and social exclusion. The passive role by the target group will need to be considered for the potential future of this process. The council stakeholders have worked well in advancing the development agenda through the activities completed, but strengthening the process at the inter-township commissions might permit more active participation of the local communities and target groups.

Sustainability Value Domain

Has the operationalization of the network guaranteed the sustainability of the social action process? It has not guaranteed the sustainability of the social action process. It has created synergies and partnerships with the governmental and non-governmental organizations. This legitimation can serve as the stepping stone for long term development change. It has created dialogue within and between the entities found in the municipal government area. The decision-making process has been expanded to the council stakeholders within the network. The network has strengthened the potential for participatory development.

Has the operationalization of the network guaranteed the organization and mobilization of the target population? At either level of the SDN, the operational implementation does not imply the mobilization of the target population in the social action process. Beal and Hobbs (1964) have identified legitimation as a form of sanction, justification and "license to act". In reality, the SDN has legitimated the social action process, in order to analyse the situation, delineate the relevant social systems to be involved and thus complete the necessary activities for the target group. There has not been a bottom up process or mobilization or empowerment of the target population. Gayanayake and Gayanayake (1993) have developed a strategy using non-formal educational programs to assist change agents to empower the community members to be critical partners in the development process. This strategy of community empowerment has not been operationalized by the network.

Is sustainability linked to developing capacities for self-reliance in the marginalized populations? According to Pretty and Voduchê (1997), project sustainability is associated to active participation and self-reliance of the target groups and in this case the marginalized populations. The social groups emerged in poverty need to participate by taking an independent initiative in the SDN process. Presently, sustainability is related to the external organizational structure. In order to be self-mobilized, the excluded social groups will need to develop capacities to interact with external and local institutions for resources and technical advice, while retaining control over how resources are used. This type of collective action and self-reliant activities will strengthen the sustainability of the SDN.

Do the stakeholders have different perspectives about a democratic, dynamic and active involvement of the target groups? At the advisory council level, there are positive opinions about the importance of increasing the role of the target group over the long

term. It is recognized by the stakeholders at this level that the social action process is dynamic and represents democratic ideals. The majority believe that a non-formal educational program will strengthen the capabilities of the target group. In contrast, a majority of the members or stakeholders at the inter-township commissions have a more pessimistic perspective concerning the involvement of the target groups, as already stressed.

Social Interaction Value Domain

Does the leadership have the necessary trust to allow for a experiential learning (social interaction, sharing and learning by doing)? If one analyses this at the two levels of the SDN, a clear contrast exists between the social environment and capabilities of the stakeholders in the advisory council and the inter-township commissions. We clearly see partnerships and synergies between the entities that the stakeholders represent at the advisory council. The meetings, questionnaires and interviews demonstrate an increase sharing and social interaction by the members. Key members are involved in tasks and it is assumed learning by doing. The stakeholders have identified aspects of trust which has benefited and strengthened the partnership. In contrast, the inter-township commissions have been less oriented to the task. It appears that the commissions have been attributed a less important role by the organizational process. In any case, more effort and time has been devoted to the creation and animation of the advisory council.

Was there a common view of trust as it relates to the participation of the target group in the social action process? At one interactive meeting of the members of the advisory council, it was suggested that the target group should be made aware of the SDN project. Interestingly, there was concern by some of the stakeholders that a negative reaction by the general public would happen, in the event, that a more open and broader public communication was implemented. It was believed that the target group would interpret the project as a material one instead of a non-material project. The community expectations would ultimately distort the process.

Concluding Considerations for a Continuing Process

The advisory council and inter-township commissions were established within the same time period. However, the entities or representatives of the advisory council (higher level) within the municipality have been involved in information sharing, ongoing learning, negotiation and consultation during much of the process. The commissions (lower level) which are to represent the local populations within the municipal area have not been as dynamic and lack representativity of the social characteristics within these local populations.

In this respect, there needs to be more intense work with the inter-township commissions and a greater preoccupation to be more representative of the local community. This appears to be the weakest link in the network. The mechanisms that could be used to alter this situation might include: non-formal educational programmes and organized debates about advisory councils and networks, the social action process, participation,

citizenship, conflict management, social responsibility, among other themes, with potential stakeholders, the general community and the target population.

The SDN activities need to be more visible and transparent, not only among the stakeholders, but the general population in the municipal area, particularly the target group. The visibility of the SDN must be strengthened for the benefit of the social systems or groups struck by poverty and social exclusion. They need to be aware of the initiatives and directed activities on their behalf. In case of the excluded social groups, the traditional community informational networks needs to be used as well as more individual based contacts by social services and change agents.

In addition, the sustainability of the SDN depends on establishing a culture of continuous participation through a rotational membership process. The SDN must continually identify, select and invite additional and alternative stakeholders to participate at all levels. This can be done by establishing a selection committee to identify potential members. This process guarantees new membership, while experienced and older members teach the new members the social action process.

The SDN must begin to plan and implement non-formal educational activities to steadily increase the target group responsibility and control for future development activities. The mechanisms can be group learning processes such as focus group interviews, workshops, animation and demonstrations. In addition, non-formal educational programming can assist the stakeholders, community and excluded groups to become more active and acquire capacities to be decision-makers in the development activities of the municipal government (Cristóvão and Koehnen, 2003).

In closing, the evaluation process should be considered as a means to illuminate both the strengths and weaknesses of SDN in a rural municipality in Portugal, in order, to change the situation. The active participation of the stakeholders at the advisory council certainly shows the advantages for local partnerships in the development process. These participatory activities in comparison to the traditional decision-making process at municipalities are still, unfortunately, innovative. Policy makers must attend to these changes and continue to promote consensus building and open communication in order to sustain and expand local and/or multi-level participation. In addition, good governance at the local administrative level needs to build on the past successes so that the patterns of decision making include in the future both the excluded and self-organized groups.

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