

Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis

Studia ad Didacticam Biologiae Pertinentia IV (2014)

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The Role of Associations of Municipalities in Non-formal Education

Introduction

The provisions of access to natural resources are implemented by a number of entities at all administrative levels, from the legislative and executive powers by the minister of the environment and consultative institutions and the ones advisory to the government (Kobielska 2003). Proper management of the natural environment and local activities, although implemented on a small scale, improves the state of the local environment. Municipalities play a key role in the socio-economic development of local communities seeking to act in accordance with sustainable development (Tuziak 2008).

Sustainable development is a fundamental objective of the European Union policy in the field of environmental protection and rational management of natural resources (Kiełczewski 2009; GUS 2013). The concept of sustainable development has gained the constitutional status in the Polish legislation (Article 5 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland). It was also included in the Environmental Protection Act of 27 April 2001. This concept assumes the adequately and consciously shaped relationship between economic development and care for natural resources and the health and quality of life of the people. The idea of sustainable development means all the environmental activities undertaken to reduce emissions of various toxic substances and environmental pollution. However, it is also about the use of Earth's resources, so that it will be sufficient for future generations (Dobrzański 2011).

The activities for sustainable development, especially those run by municipalities with the active participation of local governments and residents, have an impact on the growth of the local development indicators (National Human Development Report Poland 2012). Opportunities for local development are visible in the ongoing education and information campaigns. Innovative local development is a collaboration of educational institutions, local governments and enterprises (Tuziak 2008). The success of these activities depends largely on the legislative and socio-economic regulations provided to municipalities in national and EU law.

Transformations that occurred in Poland in the 1990s. helped local government to inscribe permanently in the public life (Sorys 2011). The act on community self-government (J. of L. 1990 No. 16 it. 95 as amended; Ofiarska 2000) authorized the creation of associations of municipalities. The process of applying for external project funding is easier for associated communities comparing to individual ones. It resulted in a substantial boost to the budget of each municipality belonging to such association. Research suggests that the overarching goal of the associations is to improve the state of the natural environment (Borys 2010). The appropriate use of financial resources in the communities implementing projects regarding environmental protection causes the improvement in life conditions for residents and that in turn has a direct positive impact on the environment (Local Data Bank; GUS, 2013). Funds are usually allocated to the development of infrastructure, promotion, information and education. Environmental programs developed by municipalities and statutes of community associations comprise non-formal education programs. Its purpose is to increase the environmental awareness of the local society and authorities.

Non-formal education for sustainable development

Education is not only the formation and education leading to acquire knowledge, but also culture, which is particularly important in the non-formal education (Boris, 2010). This applies especially to social activities regarding the idea of education for sustainable development, the essence of which was expressed in the European Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (2008). The idea of this kind of education is striving to achieve balance between the social and economic welfare and the environment and its resources.

The constitutions and municipal development strategies appear to have a local action of informal education on ongoing projects. The most common forms are information and education campaigns, accompanied by training, workshops and competitions. Promotional activities, design and distribution of information materials in form of leaflets, brochures and calendars dedicated to environmental protection, creation of educational paths and cooperation with local schools are activities that are often included in the projects. Municipalities and associations of municipalities may have a significant impact on the work of schools and programs implemented by them (Grodzińska-Jurczak et al. 2006).

Materials and methods

In Poland there are 223 associations of municipalities (as on 31st of March 2014), for which the priority is the implementation of tasks in order to improve the quality of the environment and to implement the principles of sustainable development. The purpose of these associations is the improvement of the environment and promoting sustainable socio-economic development of local

communities. A number of projects serve to implement this goal by municipalities. They are devoted to the improvement of water quality by water management and waste management, development of tourism and environmental education. The issue of renewable energy is also very popular among national and international projects.

3 observations and 4 in-depth interviews (Kaplowitz and Hoehn 2001) were carried out among the representatives of the two selected associations of municipalities of Malopolska and Podkarpace. Examples of the activities allow us to assess the involvement of local decision-makers in the implementation of projects to improve the quality of the environment and to identify changes in habits and awareness of local communities.

With the participation of employees of associations and local authorities, the education-information programs have been developed. They gained approval and were accepted for financing. The training materials and trainings of the youth and teachers (the so-called "home advisors") were prepared in the scope of the campaign. They covered environment protection, nature protection, renewable sources of energy and principles of communication with inhabitants. There were also trainings worked out for representatives of partner communities and association employees. The local schools from the area of 20 communes of the association took part in campaign, i.e. more than 80 students (from 24 schools) and 24 teachers and employees.

The main goals of the campaign were:

- to increase environmental awareness of local society and administrative knowledge of officials regarding environmental protection (Gorlach et al., 2008) by conducting trainings for representatives of partner communities and employees of the associations, teachers and the youth (the so-called "home advisors") - in scope of environment protection, nature protection, renewable sources of energy and principles of communication with inhabitants,
- to encourage the selective waste collection in communities,
- to promote renewable energy and the benefits they bring among the residents of municipalities and information on currently ongoing projects,
- to acknowledge opinion of inhabitants on municipal waste management and renewable sources of energy. The opinion was checked with the use of the survey questionnaire constructed for this purpose,
- to familiarize children with the principles of caring of the environment, promote sustainable behaviour.

The surveys were conducted by trained "home advisors", students of local schools. Students involved in the campaign conducted the surveys of over two thousand respondents among whom women were in majority.

The campaign was accompanied by the information on the project in the form of postcards at schools and offices of the community and local press and TV. The ecological effect of this action is the improvement of knowledge among children,

youth and adults in the area of environmental protection regarding municipal waste management and the opportunities offered by renewable energy.

Summary

Introduction of different solutions, including principles of sustained development, and their success depend mainly on the degree of involvement of the institutions and local societies (Mazur-Wierzbicka 2005; Nowak 2012) as well as the level of knowledge by interacting entities, representatives of local authorities, residents, entrepreneurs and experts (Gorlach et al. 2008).

After the analysis of the qualitative studies it can be concluded that the involvement of the policy makers in the implementation of projects to improve the quality of the natural environment contributes to the change of attitudes, habits and awareness of local communities.

According to respondents of the interviews, projects financed from external sources affect local economic development and support the implementation of educational activities. Financial resources from both domestic and foreign funds are the major factor facilitating the activities of local authorities (Gorlach et al., 2008). The selection of methods to conduct educational activities should depend primarily on the local governments, which have the best knowledge about the specifics of the area. In most cases, these activities are organized on a small scale and are focused on specific issue. They have visible, positive effects on the changes in the environmental awareness of local communities, thereby improving the natural environment.

A comprehensive socio-economic assessment and ecological effects lead to proper use of the allocated funds and the investment plan (Hong et al., 2014). Such actions were made by the contractors of the project and already on this stage one may speak about success. These are the examples of regional development based on economic, social and environmental factors with good technical infrastructure consistent with the principles of sustained development and its environmental dimension (Nowak 2012).

The presented results of the conducted survey tests are an example of a well-organized and conducted campaign. The campaign prepared with the co-participation of employees of the associations, community coordinators and surveyors that are playing the role of "home advisors" is another good example of actions taken for the condition of natural environment.

Local authorities should develop new methods, new information and education technologies in dealing with the inhabitants so that the commitment of Poles could bring its intended positive effect. This is of particular importance in the case of young people, who can be reached via the Internet. Consulting decisions of local authorities with residents on important issues affecting the natural environment presents the highest level of involvement of residents in public affairs (Olech and Sobiesiak-Penszko 2013).

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Abstract

All activities conducted by municipalities towards the sustainable development are important for environment protection – that is one of key factors of the concept of sustainable development. Therefore, developing programs and methods regarding environment protection for local communities is essential. Those programs should both provide principles of sustainable development and implement guidelines for local authorities. They should consist of educational information and suggestions of activities that may be taken by local authorities in order to engage inhabitants into the environment protection and increase their environmental awareness. This ultimately results in shifting the opinions and changing the attitudes in the community.

This paper presents the results of the qualitative research (participant observation and interviews) conducted among representatives of the selected municipalities located in the provinces of Malopolska and Podkarpacie. The involvement of the governing body in the implementation of projects to improve the state of natural environment is extensive. It also requires much effort from teachers and students of local schools. In most cases, the main objective of those projects is to achieve quality standards consistent with the EU regulations taking into account the National Environmental Policy.

According to the respondents of the interviews, projects financed from external sources directly affect development of local economy and support the implementation of educational activities. Actions in form of informal education conducted by municipalities contribute to a change in the attitude, habits and awareness of local communities and thus lead to the improvement of the quality of the natural environment. In most cases, these activities are concerned about particular field.

Key words: non-formal education, municipality, sustainable development

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