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Participatory planning and local economic development: a case study of Northeast Halkidiki

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been an increasing interest in public participation in decision-making processes, due to a whole range of factors, but mainly because society is showing an ever increasing mistrust in governments. Furthermore, through public participation, citizens are given the opportunity to provide information regarding the physical and biological properties of a region, which may not have been detected by the experts involved in developmental policy decisions, but could prove substantial for planning purposes. This situation is further aggravated when, on the one hand, decisions related to economic growth need to be taken which involve mortgaging the environment, sometimes with an irreversible effect and, on the other hand, when such investments can provide thousands of jobs in a country currently experiencing the fifth year of the recession. The relevant research was carried out in Northeast Halkidiki using a structured questionnaire, in order to examine the views of the local residents on issues pertaining to the economic growth of the area and its impact on the environment. The research results show that the residents wish for local development to focus on tourism and livestock farming and hold governmental bodies responsible for the downgrading of the environment. Finally, another interesting viewpoint considers that growth should primarily be based on mining activities; its supporters draw information from the TV and from discussions with their family environment and friends.

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1. Introduction

Environmental protection requires the participation of stakeholders in decision-making processes [1]. Any democratic state should take care to create the necessary structures that will facilitate the involvement of stakeholders in environmental decisions, since such participation will on the one hand commit citizens to implement the decisions taken and, on the other hand, will create a relationship of trust between the citizens and the state. During the last 30 years, thanks to public participation, not only have decisions been taken that uphold the interests and values of society, but progress has also been made in dispute resolution and in training the public about the environment [2].

It is the duty of the state to create opportunities for citizens to have access to employment and a satisfactory quality of life, with respect for the environment and the sustainable management of natural resources. As regards employment, it is necessary to have participatory planning with the stakeholders and accordingly adapt employment policies, both on a regional and local level. This will result in promoting local forms of employment, depending on the characteristics of each area, by linking it to local production units and the local labour market. In this way, a dynamic relationship is formulated that continuously shifts depending on the labour supply and demand, which is affected by the national and global productive environment.

Participatory processes must be designed in a way that makes citizens realize that their input can have an effect. This can be achieved by creating a relationship of trust and mutual understanding [3, 4]. Moreover, citizens feel discouraged when they are asked to participate, after having witnessed other processes where they have had no impact on the final decision. A determinant for effective participation is education, since it makes citizens feel self-confident and aware, and helps them channel their efforts towards a specific goal, instead of remaining impassive and simply expressing complaints about problems that concern them [5]. The participation of a well-informed, aware public increases the capacity of citizens and local communities to address current and future environmental problems. Furthermore, it helps safeguard democracy [6].

Citizens are more easily mobilised when administrative decisions are going to change their way of life to a great extent, e.g. the construction of a landfill site, a mining plant etc. Mining industries are subject to intense pressure and control, mainly by local residents, the local authorities and environmental organisations, due to concerns regarding the environmental impact of their activities [7]. Disputes among stakeholders have been observed at all operating levels of a mining unit, both prior to the issuance of an operating license, and also during its operation. The goal of mining plant managers is to ensure the latter continues unhindered. Therefore, in order to curb any reactions, a full integration of ecological, social and economic principles must be ensured, that will signify a step in the direction of sustainable development, and represent a commitment to corporate responsibility [8, 9]. Research has shown that mining companies have caused the most serious and often irreversible damage to the natural environment, compared to other industrial activities [10]. Some of the most common environmental problems related to the mining sector are the various industrial accidents which downgrade the health and safety of local communities. Due to the increased pressure by society, mining companies have developed innovative programmes pertaining to corporate social responsibility and the sustainability of their activities. For example, mining companies are some of the first to independently publish environmental reports and also to adopt voluntary codes of behaviour in the field of environmental management [11, 12]. Corporate Social Responsibility is growing rapidly, and exerts pressure on businesses and the industry to be socially responsible and actively contribute to sustainable development [13].

According to Skanavis [14] the most common participatory methods used are public hearings, citizen advisory committees, citizen panels and public surveys. Public hearings take place when decisions have already been taken, citizen advisory committees and citizen panels are affected by prejudice regarding their composition and the social status of the speakers, while public surveys are limited to a specific point in time. It is also important to examine the factor of citizen accessibility to all the above-mentioned mechanisms. Thus, citizens appear more willing to take part, when they know that they really do have a chance to influence management decisions and processes. This specific research involves a participatory method for decision making and was carried out in December 2012 to March 2013. During this period, a large-scale conflict was taking place in the research area, regarding local development. The aim of this research is to examine the factors linked to development and the citizens' participation in the relevant decision-making processes. More specifically, it attempts to define the interaction between the factors

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