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Strategic Planning and Public Opinion Survey

Oto Hudec *, Nataša Urbančíková *

Summary: *Strategic Planning is a creative, practical planning process for community change. Community Strategic Planning produces a visionary statement of what the community wants to be 10 to 20 years in the future. There is no one ideal strategic planning process that has worked for all communities and community groups. Different communities have successfully used a variety of processes. The article describes methods important for evolvement of the situation analysis, particularly the method of representative public opinion survey that provides basis for SWOT analysis and formulation of the strategic goals. The method reflecting public's attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding community development is demonstrated on the example of two cities located in the Eastern part of the Slovak Republic - Košice and Spišská Nová Ves.*

Key words: *Community Strategic Planning, Community Needs Analysis, City and Place Marketing, Strategic Planning Methodology, Public Opinion Survey, Questionnaires design.*

1. Strategic planning background in the Slovak Republic

Several methods of marketing research and public opinion survey can be used to get valuable data on public values, visions, expectations, the involvement and engagement of citizens in local and community development, their awareness of community processes, etc. The article describes background in the field of community strategy planning in the Slovak Republic as a basis for understanding of the actual situation, basic features of the process's methodology and steps for the development of community strategy, and particularly methods important for evolvement of the situation analysis. Situation analysis should be strongly data and analysis based, drawing on all available statistical and other information on the area. The expected output is a detailed paper on economic, social and cultural situation.

The method of representative public opinion survey integrated in situation analysis provides basis for SWOT analysis and formulation of the strategic goals. Such a method is not frequently used as this is often demanding and costly, but it gives a real picture of the community opinions and reflects public's attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding community development. Representative sampling and questionnaire survey is particularly dependent on sample selection procedure and following consequences are demonstrated on the example of the City of Košice and Spišská Nová Ves located in the Eastern part of the Slovak Republic. The method of representative public opinion survey is especially useful for the medium size cities.

The problems of regional and local development are surely of great importance for post-communist countries. Those problems are influenced substantially by the transition from

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central planning to market system, and the reform caused voluntary administration of the economic development of regions in the last decade.

Following Sýkora (1999), centrally planned system of resources allocation was characterized by a hierarchically organised system of national, regional, and local planning. In the Eastern European countries the regional economic planning, spatial goals were managed by the national planning of the allocation of economic activities, labour force and housing. Naturally, regional and local plans were strongly determined by sectoral investment priorities using a top-down approach. The national economic planning focused on massive industrialization in the first decades after World War II. The allocation of investment to new industries usually reflected regional principle and new industrial plants were often established in backward rural areas according to central decision.

As the centrally organised economic planning was terminated, the responsibility for local development and physical planning was devoted to newly established municipal governments. A new system of local government, approved in the transition states of East Central Europe 1990, is already based on the separation of local government from the state administration. The level of centralisation and decentralisation is surely a crucial contextual factor, which determines the nature of local and regional planning and policy system. Newly developed system of local self-governing substantially devolved powers to regional and local governments, which became the basic units of government. They had at the beginning not enough power to protect their local and regional interests, what is gradually changing over the last decade.

The local government system created also the basic institutional framework for the operation of local and regional planning and policy. New legislation e.g. delegated rights and responsibilities to municipalities, such as the right to own property and exercise property rights, to collect special taxes and fees, to manage their financial resources and formulate and promote municipal development, establish legal entities and participate in businesses, using municipal development programs and physical plans. The main duties of municipal governments include the maintenance of the local road system and public areas, the public transport, water supply and sewage systems management, public order and safety, primary education and municipal housing policy, including provision of council housing.

As for regional level in Slovak Republic, new territorial division into eight regions has been implemented in 1996, without the establishment of governments or elected representations at the regional level. That time their governments remained rather strictly subordinated to the central government and only serve the state administration interests. Also, the central government has become overwhelmed by the transition reform at the national level and regional development was naturally not an important political issue.

The reform in public administration continued by introducing important acts in the years 2001- 2002. These acts provide a framework for the introducing regional governments having its Regional Council as the main decision body and chairperson/president as a key representative voted in two-round direct elections.

The most important laws relating to the process reform of public administration and strategic planning (in particular the Act No. 416/2002 Coll. on the Transmission of Certain Competencies of State Administration Authorities to Municipalities and Higher Territorial Unit, the Act No. 302/2001 Coll. on Self-Government of Higher Territorial Units and the Act

No. 503/2001 Coll. in Support of Regional Development.), that have shifted a certain part of rights and duties to the self-governments, including regional development and planning.

The Act No. 503/2001 includes the basic principles of economic and social cohesion of the European Union, i.e. the programming, partnership, concentration and complementarity principles. The self-governing regions prepare programmes of economic and social development of the corresponding regions likewise the cities and municipalities prepare city/municipality (local) programmes of economic and social development.

A coherent regional development programme is necessarily being based upon and reflects the shared priorities of local development strategies which bring together the various rural and urban community needs of a given area into a unified whole. Although, the reality is often opposite in the current transition period, as in the most cases the regional plans keep an advance municipality programmes.

Granted independence to municipalities and regions has led also to the shift toward strategic planning and local economic development promotion. Municipalities thus have rights to regulate, coordinate the development process and environmental protection at the local territory. At present, general land use plans are the most common planning documents and many local governments, urban and suburban in particular, have organised the preparation of new land use plans recently. At the same time a new challenge of preparation of local and regional strategic plans is a novelty that significantly influences the life of municipalities and regions.

The negative residuum of central planning contributes to weakly developed strategic planning skills, structures and knowledge notably at municipality level in Slovak Republic, as there is a large number of very small, administratively autonomous but economically hardly viable settlements. To protect their development, local authorities and/or their local/regional development agencies need access to adequate expertise, experience, and capability. The majority of municipalities still do not have a clear, realistic, performable strategy for their economic and social development what may often result in inappropriate decisions, inadequate investments and inconsistent local policy. According to Čapková (2001b), less than half of the investigated cities (34) had elaborated and approved a long-term planning document in 2001. Kling and Pilát (2003) argue: “ This situation is mainly due to an unsystematic process of municipal staff education and training. For municipalities to elaborate and apply viable strategic plans, their staff must have certain knowledge and be capable of strategic thinking. More emphasis must be put on the proper definition of strategic issues and procedures.”

The conditions have been changed in 2004. After entering the EU in May 2004, Slovakia is eligible for the union's structural and cohesive funds, which replace the terminating pre-accession funds. Applicants from Slovakia are eligible to submit first projects for the structural funds from January 2004. As so called “Programme of economic development and social development of a municipality” is in some cases a mandatory document for structural funds project proposals, an extensive but often shallow and unprofessional work is being done just for the purposes of having required document. Although, some positive examples can be observed, usually dependent on personal initiative and good orientation of a mayor, being the main and determining factor in current Slovak conditions of local development.

A realistic assessment of the current state of municipalities, cities and regions shows that problems have been cumulated for a number of decades. Even if the efforts of local people to influence local development and realise their democratic rights is marginal, that, however, is

not a reason for further postponing the implementation of the necessary changes. And gradual partnership building by the strategic planning process might be a helpful tool also for the mentioned purposes.

2. Local Community Needs Assessment Methods.

According to good practice, local economic development should always begin with the formulation of a strategy or plan that explores the opportunities and challenges for the area and identifies priorities, actors and methods of intervention. All the relevant partners should build up shared vision for the future of the locality. Local development strategy is a critical component of any community's planning process.

Hence, strategic planning is here considered as a systematic decision-making process that focuses attention on important issues, and on how to resolve them. In that sense, strategic planning provides a general framework for action: a way to determine priorities, make reasonable choices and allocate limited resources (e.g., time, money, skills) to achieve agreed objectives.

A local development (LD) strategic planning process typically consists of five basic steps:

Step 1: Organising the Effort

Step 2: Doing the Local Assessment

Step 3: Creating the LD Strategy

Step 4: Implementing the LD Strategy

Step 5: Reviewing the LD Strategy

Slovak Republic has introduced legal and institutional framework to promote the creation of regional and local development plans, which are intended to reflect a coherent, self-government-level perspective of the most pressing development needs of any particular locality. Local authorities' interest in managing development of their community is growing. Unfortunately, as above, to date the process has had a wide variety of disparate results, and a number of documents are often being developed and designed to satisfy the particular priorities of specific national and European pre-accession and structural funds. As a result, development plans presently do not often reflect a holistic community perspective of priority development needs, but rather activities, which can be financed from external sources. It means that the current process tends to position local communities only as beneficiaries and not real actors of their development.

Also, maintaining skills and experience in-house is especially difficult for small rural local authorities that are generally less able to attract and retain skilled staff associated with development initiatives. In such cases, local authorities need to consider engaging external expertise, but the offer of expertise bodies is still underdeveloped and offering more lobbying than real professional expertise and/or facilitative work.

The paper is focused on the analytical part, i.e. the step 2 of the LD strategic planning process, as such kind of assessment is often underestimated or only secondary data are being used. The analytical boundaries of the assessment do not necessarily need to be limited by an administrative jurisdiction such as a municipality, but rather defined by the relationships in a broader geographic area. Quantitative and qualitative knowledge of the sources are to be used to identify and forecast strategic directions for the local development. By analysis of the data several tools including a SWOT analysis ("strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats"),

PEST/STEP analysis ("Political, Economical Social and Technological" environment and external trends analysis), benchmarking and economic indicators can be used.

A community needs assessment process is an excellent mean of involvement of the public into problem solving and local goals developing. There is a well-known tendency for people to resist change. This is caused particularly because they have inadequate information, or because they have not been involved in making decisions. From that point of view, community needs assessment can be viewed as a mean of involvement of citizen to strategic planning process. They do not only observe the current situation, but they feel to have an impact in the outcome what supports the power of local democracy. A community needs assessment process can help local leaders to learn public opinion about community goals and priorities and build an increased citizen support for local government decisions.

Data collection and analysis methods as random sampling, structured data collection, statistical data analysis are generally associated with quantitative research, producing results that are easy to summarize, compare, and generalise. Another methods are typically associated with qualitative research relying on less structured protocols, iterative interviews; respondents may be interviewed several times to follow up on a particular issue, their findings cannot be generalised to any specific population.

In acquiring information, two basic approaches can be identified - primary data collection and secondary data collection. The result of an assessment process is as good as the technique or combination of techniques used. Different techniques of gathering data are appropriate for different needs, so that a combination of several techniques brings a better snapshot than only one of the methods.

In between the two extremes, there are a number of possible evaluation methodologies combining different aspects (sample design, research protocol, data collection and data analysis) of the quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Combining several different approaches a better picture can be enriched but the design of the process as well as interpretation or explanation of outcomes requires very skilled professionals, otherwise misleading conclusions can be made.

➤ **Primary data collection techniques** of either quantitative or qualitative character are developed to gain data directly from a client or target population. Such techniques include:

- 1) General survey of the population (if the population is small)
- 2) Survey of a sample of the population (if the population is large)
- 3) Survey of key informants (A brief interview or survey administered to community residents identified as "key informants" is conducted)
- 4) Observations of both types where the observer is "known" or "unknown", as well as those where the observer participates or doesn't participate.
- 5) Community case studies.
- 6) Group processes to generate data including focus groups, nominal group process, Delphi technique, brainstorming, round tables, hearing, group discussion taking place at a series of public meetings, etc.

- 7) Alternative techniques for involving citizens in generating data or examining community information as e-democracy, teledemocracy, needs assessment week, competitions, etc.

➤ **Secondary Data Collection Techniques - data from once collected sources.**

The assessment must also identify public, private and non-governmental resources, to collect and analyse existing or critical new quantitative and qualitative information. At that stage it is a good chance to consider and establish data management systems for future use in monitoring and evaluation. Secondary data sources include

- 1) General, public sources at both national and regional level (census of housing and population - conducted in most of the countries every 10 years; vital statistics, demographics, social conditions, a number of social and economic indicators, unemployment figures, inflation indicators, etc.)
- 2) Alternative, unusual, easily accessible community data sources (tourist maps, topographic and orthographic maps and projections, newspapers, films, post cards, old prints, etc.)

The use of secondary data has at the first sight apparent difficulties associated with the tendency of being overwhelmed by the abundance of information existing on community. Obviously, a clear understanding of what kind of picture is to be created is appropriate. Secondary sources of data typically provide information on

- population size, growth/decline, processes and composition,
- social behaviour and well-being of people, such as crime rates, poverty status, family stability, and morbidity/mortality rates,
- situation of various community sectors, such as housing, employment, health, and local government.

Sample survey is a unique statistical method to collect information from a wide range of community residents concerning issues and community needs via their responses to specific questions included in an interview schedule or questionnaire. That it is the only needs assessment method - with exception of speaking to every member of the community (population) - having potential of representing all people in the community. If a sample survey is well designed and implemented, the results can be generalised to a larger population.

Questions are asked to a (randomly selected) sample of the community's population and the responses generate either numeric (quantitative) or written (qualitative) information about the topics under examination. It is rather practical to request both quantitative and qualitative information in the same survey, providing support and context for understanding the survey's findings. An advantage of survey techniques is an efficient way of collecting information from a large number of respondents. Random sampling can be used to determine validity, reliability, and statistical significance. It can be used to study attitudes, values, beliefs, and past behaviours, what is a focus of community needs assessment.

The most commonly used survey methods are face-to-face interviews, mail questionnaires, personal in-home survey, internet or e-mail online questionnaires and telephone interviews. While each approach is somewhat different, the format is similar. Survey design provides

high flexibility in the types of questions to be asked, ranging from structured yes-no-undecided responses to unstructured, open-ended responses.

There may be opposition to the use of surveys as some people may not be interested in participating in surveys being polled too many times or they are afraid to talk to interviewers, etc. Training and experience in the construction of survey instruments, questionnaire design, theory of sampling techniques, practical application and data analysis is necessary for this approach.

3. Public Opinion Surveying.

Only the basic features of public opinion surveying related to community needs assessment and sample selection will be described. Sample survey is a unique statistical method to collect information from a wide range of community residents concerning issues and community needs via their responses to specific questions included in an interview schedule or questionnaire. The results of the survey are sensitive to method used, and to assure statistical validity, random samples must be carefully selected.

Selecting the sample is the substantial part of the surveying process that can be done in many ways. Random assignment refers to a technical selection process in which each person in the community (population) has the same (or a known) opportunity to be selected as a survey respondent. In a survey of the general population sample must accurately reflect community. Accuracy is important because otherwise it is impossible to generalise from sample to the entire community. Through random assignment the sample, ergo survey's findings, are representative of the whole community.

Quota sampling can be regarded as a form of stratification, although formal stratified sampling has major statistical advantages. Quota sampling is based on defining the distribution of characteristics required in the sample, and selecting respondents until a 'quota' has been filled. Hence, dividing the population into groups, and interviewing a fixed number in each group designs a quota sample. Complex quotas can also be developed so that several characteristics are used simultaneously. In community needs assessment the following characteristics influencing substantially answers should be taken into account:

- Sex
- Marital status
- Age
- Location (home, work, public place)
- Social/economic class
- Education
- Nationality/ethnicity
- Religion

External information, existing data such as census data, is necessary to specify the size of the sample and the size of each segment of the population. The next step is to compute quotas for each segment of the population that are proportional to the size of each segment. Too many characteristics can bring complications for distribution of quotas according to each characteristic and their number should be considered carefully.

Selecting appropriate survey instruments depends on several factors as

- technical acceptability (reliability, validity, freedom from bias, etc.),
- feasibility (cost, duration, personnel needs, etc.),
- ethic (protection of human rights, privacy, legality, etc.).

Improper procedures for obtaining persons from the target population to become members of the sample population may cause a selection bias, what means that participants are not representative of the population of all possible participants. On the example of community opinion surveys in two Slovak cities a selection bias and consecutive problematic conclusions are illustrated.

4. Different Methods of Sample Selection.

In the years 2002-2003 The Institute of Regional and Community Development of the Technical University of Košice carried out community opinion surveys in the City of Košice. According to feasibility factor (cost, duration), almost the same questionnaire designed by the Institute has been used by the City Spišská Nová Ves, but sample selection was different.

Košice is the second largest city in Slovakia and industrial centre with population 250 000. The City of Košice is divided into 4 districts and 22 City Wards. City wards of the city are also municipalities having their own self-governing bodies and manage their own budgets. Spišská Nová Ves is a district seat of 35,000 inhabitants, located in the Košice self-government region.

The sampling in Košice was realised on the sample of 600 inhabitants above age 15, the survey is representative and stratified according sex, age, education and area (city ward) using quota sampling face-to-face method (in home). All the interviewers were experienced in survey and interview conducting. The result of the opinion survey is being consecutively used as a part of the local assessment for the further analysis.

At the same time, the same questionnaire has been published in the local Košice newspaper Večer (evening paper). The readers who filled the questionnaires were entered into a draw for 5 prizes. The latter group has been considered as a control group for the former representative sample. Also, it served as a test whether the readers considered as older in average, with a closer association to city have different attitudes in comparison to respondents of the representative sample.

The respondents were asked about their opinions, attitudes, and rate of satisfaction from the following categories of questions:

- Housing
- Quality of life
- Standard of living
- Local Government services
- Sources of Information about the City
- Transport
- Employment
- Business & Economic Development
- Shopping Opportunities

- Community/Recreational Facilities
- Education
- Day Care
- Environment
- Healthcare
- Crime and Safety
- Older Persons Services
- Genius loci and development of the city
- Vision of the city

As expected, the Večer readers were generally older (23 % of pensioners and only 4% of students), having higher education especially in social sciences (20% of the whole sample), i.e. the sample is far from being representative. According to sex, the Večer sample was biased only moderately (54% of men and 46 % of women). There was a question, what kind of bias in answers will be caused by selection bias.

It can be concluded that the main bias is caused by the age difference. The Večer respondents consider the city much less safe in comparison to representative sample, and have different vision of the city.

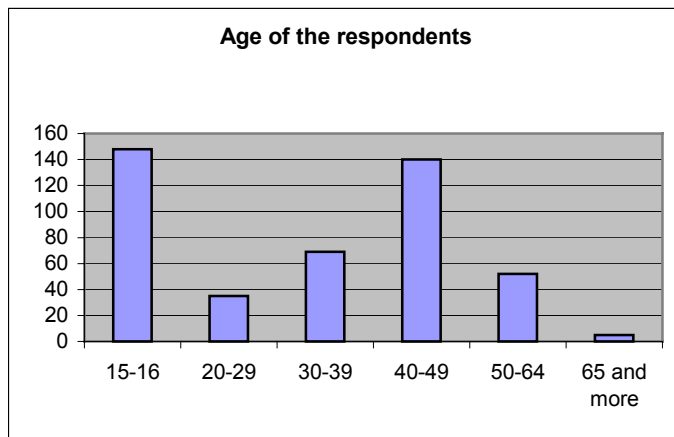
The representative sample prefers the vision of the city as an “industrial centre and important transport junction” at the first place and “centre of business, services and tourism” at the second place. The Večer readers have the opposite order at first two places, but the highest percentage of respondents indicates at the first place the preference of vision of Košice as “a Safe city with quality of living conditions and environment” (the respondents have ranked seven possible visions of the city).

A study conducted in a rural Florida community revealed that reliable data could be collected with the use of a local newspaper (Taylor, Summerhill et al., 1986). According to the article, there was no difference between a probabilistic sample of respondents to the mail survey and a convenience sample of respondents the newspaper survey on 80 percent of the items tested. There was only a difference in the two groups’ responses concerning certain demographic and subject matter variables.

The results gained in Košice are in that light contradictory to the conclusion in the above article, stating “Using the newspapers also involves much less labour than does using a mail survey, and the cost is less, even free in some newspapers. The newspaper may be a very creditable resource to use when collecting data.”

The Košice experience shows that newspaper sample may be biased and far from representative results.

In the city of Spišská Nová Ves, because of lack of time and finance, the sample was created in a very simple way. The students of secondary schools were given to answer questions in the questionnaire and to ask their parents or adult relatives to do the same. The number of questionnaires was 448 in two weeks. Females formed 64 % and males only 36 % of the sample. Information about the age distribution is presented in the following chart. It is clear that such a sampling, although easy and quickly done, can hardly be a basis for arguing and qualified as a community needs assessment.



5. Conclusions.

This article has attempted to provide information on the situation and prospects in the field of local and regional strategic planning in the Slovak Republic with a focus on community needs assessment problems. Public opinion survey is presented as an important tool for gathering primary data from community members.

It is concluded that the extensive discussion of each method's purpose, procedures, advantages and disadvantages, have to serve as a guide in the selection of an appropriate technique for the collection of firsthand information on local needs. For an assessment of the "current situation", the role of selection procedure is highlighted as crucial to fulfil representativeness of the sampling process. Inappropriate selection methods lead to bias degrading the results of the survey.

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