

GROWTH MACHINES OR STRATEGIC ACTION FIELDS? WRITING DEVELOPMENT STRA- TEGIES IN NORTH-WESTERN TRANSYLVANIAN SETTLEMENTS AS A PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

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Abstract

Small Romanian towns and villages have been hit during post-communist transformations by massive loss of human and economic resources due to the vanishing of their industrial economies of reliance. My paper deals with holdbacks to the necessary planning and completion of actions dedicated to stopping the decline and ignition of durable development in such instances using the institutionalist framework of strategic action fields. Firstly, I argue that urban development coalitions can be framed as collective action; secondly, I look at several necessary ingredients of it that can explain the (non)emergence or the lack of effectiveness of development coalitions in small Romanian localities. On the basis of non-systematic personal observations from several North-Western Transylvanian small urban settlements and villages as well I discuss the main obstacles impeding the success of local development coalitions: local myths and the culture of powerlessness, deprived human resources, the actions of anti-development coalitions and defective leadership. Finally I propose that the exit from the vicious circle of anti-development conditions could start from considering the town as a community of practice in which learning should have a great role.

Keywords: local development coalitions, urban growth machines, strategic action fields, collective action.

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1. City development. Theoretical premises

The strategies of sustainable urban development have become a major focus of urban policies in the last decades, both in the USA and in the EU. Therefore, one of the priority axes within The Regional Operational Program, drawn accordingly to the principles of the European Union's Cohesion Policy, aims at writing and implementing local development plans for urban areas in our country. Attracting investments for urban regeneration and city functions enforcement have thus become major targets, through the diversification of attraction points of the city, i.e. by strengthening its commercial and entertainment capabilities (Chelcea, 2008; Petrescu, 2008).

The small urban localities, *i.e.* those towns with a population of less than 20,000 inhabitants situated in the influence zone of big and important cities, were those that have undergone significant economic and social transformations during the post-communist period. As the industrial economies which sustained them have disappeared and as they had to face the serious urban infrastructural problems inherited from communism, small Romanian towns had to face massive human and material resource losses (Dan and Dan, 2003; Stănculescu and Berevoescu, 2004; Ștefănescu and Bălțătescu, 2010; Chișea, 2010).

Studies concerning the conditions and mechanisms that enable or not urban regeneration and restructuring, have emerged due to dramatic differences between cities' capabilities of drawing up and implementing development plans and solving practical development issues. As development programs aim at overcoming underdevelopment or decline, turning these weaknesses into excuses for elites' passivity when dealing with economic and social degradation is clearly unacceptable.

The next pages will focus on this theme, understanding the elaboration of coherent development vision in Romanian contemporary towns through the lens of the neo-institutional paradigm. As such, urban development planning is referred to here as strategic action fields (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011) while the analysis is also inspired by political economy (the city is considered a growth machine (Molotch, 1976) whose dynamics is put in motion by urban government regimes (Stone, 1993)), and the theories of collective action, with a focus on models of social movements. By analyzing the places of debate of cities' priorities, I will try to indicate the way in which theories of social movements and collective actions can also help us understand why urban communities respond differently to similar developmental problems. I will then identify a series of problems in communities' internal dynamics, especially local elites' structure and functions, as well as certain local cultural elements that have a negative impact on the formation and functioning of efficient local development coalitions. Empirically, I based my study upon my experience in providing expert advice in several townships and communes in North-Western Transylvania. Although based on observations made in rural and urban settings, most of the inferences and statements within this paper are applicable primarily to the case of townships.

2. Local development planning as strategic action field

Sociological research focusing on urban evolution in the context of economic restructuring resulting from industrial decline, was mainly inspired by conceptions such as “the city as a growth machine” (Molotch, 1976) and “urban government regimes” (Stone, 1989). Both theories sustain that city development is closely linked to the emergence and functioning of local development coalitions. These coalitions consist of business networks and local government representatives who make formal or informal arrangements concerning local development (Petrescu, 2008). On the other hand, Western theories about urban poverty underlined the importance of community involvement in planning and implementing sustainable urban development policies (Small, 2002). No matter what form social participation takes, it highlights the important role of civic involvement in urban policies, which is often referred to as informal governance (Crenson, 1983).

Considering that participation is voluntary and that its most relevant outcome is usually a public good, although various private benefits are also aimed at, local development encourages coalitions of social movement entities that influence and modify local policies. Development coalitions were considered a collective action problem since 1993, when Stone (1993) showed that urban regimes – as means through which local actors mediate external pressures such as economic changes – overcome collective action issues and ensure participation in urban governance coalitions by offering selective incentives such as public contracts, jobs or different facilities to certain neighborhoods. The strategic action field theory (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011) seems to be quite effective in conceptualizing the social space of the locus of debating, developing and implementing local development programs. Unlike other neo-institutionalist models, the one proposed by Fligstein and McAdam (2011) has the advantage of explaining in a persuasive manner the dynamics of institutions by referring to permanent internal mechanisms of contention in addition to external influences that generate effects of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Therefore, we not only speak of development coalitions, but of a field of urban development which is an arena where more coalitions may compete within. On the other hand, while the elaboration process of the development plans is, according to DiMaggio’s terms, mandatory (given that the existence of the development plan is conditioning the financing of the development activities), the final form of the plan, including available necessary resources, depends on the somewhat competitive interaction between local coalitions; their dynamics can be thoroughly described using concepts of social movement theory.

Whether it is the general wellbeing or selfish profits that are aimed at, they depend on the development of locality, *i.e.* the amount of investments attracted. Massive public financing for urban regeneration, such as European funding of Integrated Urban Development Plans, dramatically reduces the economic risks that the actors of development coalitions have to manage. While a participative perspective upon local policies underlines the importance of local initiatives, the major part of such approaches

have been addressed from top to bottom in the past few years in Romania. These are examples of state and civil society synergy, as Evans puts it (1997), or examples of participative development that is sponsored or opportunistic. It is obvious then that a special attention should be given to the characteristics of local elite, its structure and the leadership resources that it can supply to the local development coalitions.

Given the sociological and economic context, it is highly difficult to transform post-socialist cities through participation (Kulcsár and Domokos, 2005). According to these authors, several conditions, such as high dependence on state financing, the bargaining power of international corporations and the inherent attraction that European funding has for the local elites, limit the possibility of groups of active citizens to form and act. Recent studies on the forms and intensity of civil participation in writing and implementing local policies in Romania generally show low intensity levels.

3. The dynamics of the local development field

There are numerous publications investigating the structure, organization and evolution of local development coalitions that we may use to better understand the functioning of the local development field in small towns in North-Western Transylvania. Then, I will investigate some aspects of structure and process which have an impact on the functioning of such coalitions, by applying specific concepts borrowed from the theory of strategic action fields and the theory of collective action: participation resources, social skills and culture¹.

3.1. Leaders, participants and spectators

In one of my previous papers (Hatos, 2009) relying on a large international research experience in the field of participation, I argued that a distinction between participants (as a category opposed to those that do not get involved) and leaders (people who have control over resources management and can assure the mobilization of participants) must be done, when analyzing levels of participation.

Concerning the mere participation in development coalitions, a popular explanation of political participation given by political science during the 1970s and the 1980s was the attribution of participation to peculiar resources, such as a social status. Yet, it did not explain the mechanisms that underlay the link between socio-economic status and participation, excepting the direct and straightforward effects of money and time. The theory was made more consistent later on by Brady, Verba and Schlozman (1995), by introducing the concept of civic competence, defined as the “capacity to communicate and to organize, which are essential to political action” (p. 273) and which can be assimilated with the concept of social skills, which is also related to Fligstein’s concept of institutional entrepreneurship (Fligstein, 1997). The lack of civic

1 To the reader acquainted with this field, these three elements make up the social capital of a community. Thus, the central argument of the paper is quite simple: development problem solving in small towns in North-Western Transylvania depends on their amount of social capital.

competence, of appropriate abilities and knowledge, which otherwise would enable an efficient contribution, may have a negative effect on development initiatives.

Besides social competence, citizen participation is dependent on the person's structural position which brings about resources such as time, health and money (Hatos, 2006). Not only the resources themselves are important for their mobility and success, but their distribution also plays a significant role. Olson's viewpoint is relevant in this matter (Olson, 1965, pp. 53-56): the heterogeneity of the group can positively influence the mobilization of the development coalition, at least because the smaller privileged group is easier to organize. Varughese and Ostrom (2001) showed that the outcome of organizing cooperative actions can depend on the type and intensity of group heterogeneity. Moreover, the effect certain types of inequality may have upon individual interests has high chances of being conditioned by the existence of previous cooperation and leadership experiences.

Opposing a naive-consensual vision upon development coalitions, development specialists have found that class or social inequality may generate the mobilization of certain movements that are competing, which makes the outcome of development initiatives uncertain. Cernea (1989 *apud* Varughese and Ostrom, 2001) showed that class heterogeneity may have a negative effect on the efforts to organize resource management in rural areas, whereas many conflicts that need resolution arise in the process of making and implementing rules and regulations. These may derive not only from diverging interests, but also from specific visions about the structure of relations, authority, rule interpretation, trust and reciprocity. Apparently, heterogeneity has a significant impact if there is a conflict around the distribution of resources important for community. The perception of a conflict of interests is a necessary ingredient in blocking collective action. Therefore, if there is a high heterogeneity of real or perceived interests, there are chances that may form real coalitions against development and which can block development coalitions to be organized.

On the other hand, neo-institutionalism consistently underlines the important role of institutional entrepreneurs in creating or transforming institutions (Fliegstein, 1997; Levy and Scully, 2007). Institutional entrepreneurship is the activity of those persons that have the capacity to mobilize resources in order to set up institutions according to their interest. Collective action studies have long ago remarked the importance of a minority that has significant resources and interests for collective action (Oliver, Marwell and Teixeira, 1985; Olson, 1965). The importance of such a minority and of the capacity to organize has also been often empirically confirmed. Some studies regarding the factors that generate development signaled the crucial role that the capacity for qualified autonomous action, the capacity of leadership, experience in leadership and the level of education have (Krishna, 2001).

3.2. Culture

The initiation of a development plan is a stage of the institutionalization process which is a process of appropriation of a cultural matrix, as it is the result of undertaking a normative model. The language and methodology used in development plans are

most often undertaken uncritically and non-reflexively, which produces institutions and documents that are highly similar in a process of institutional convergence that DiMaggio conceptualized as coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

The dynamics of strategic action plans, such as competition for the imposition of a certain local development program, has relevant cultural inputs. Social capital theories have sufficiently insisted on the importance of norms and attitudes in shaping coalitions (Elster, 1989; Ostrom, 1998). A major operational contribution to the cultural analysis of collective action was brought about by the recent trends in studying movement frames within social movement research. Mobilization for collective action is entailed by the belief that the situation of the group is unfair, unpleasant and by itself it blames the system for its situation (McAdam, 1982). This is based on a certain vision of the world, certain ways of analyzing life situations through criteria such as correctness and causality. The set of “action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 614) were named *collective action frames*. Accordingly, similar conceptions that inhibit participation in collective action can be named *collective inaction frames*. Collective action frames originate in *master frames*, which are necessary to the general understanding of the situation of the individual or the community. Following this conception, Small proposes the concept of *neighborhood frames*, which is a set of categories (Small, 2002, p. 28), through which members of the neighborhood perceive it, assign certain meanings, qualities and a possibly mythical history to it. One who tries to understand community emulations in small towns should try to identify these instruments of significance building which can be called *myths*, as arbitrary collective beliefs.

4. The context of the data and methodology

I wrote this paper on the bases of various non-systematic observations and systematic data collection between 2006 and 2009, when I contributed as a consultant to writing local development plans in four small towns in Bihor County and social service plans in Sălaj County. As a consultant in the elaboration process of Integrated Urban Development Plans of these towns I had to collect robust data about the development problems they faced. Therefore, I organized surveys, focus groups with simple citizens and local elites, as well as individual interviews with various actors within these communities. Also, the experience supposed by development plan writing allowed me to meet numerous persons interested in priority setting and resource allocation for development. The main outcomes of my work were the Development Plans, financed by the European Union through the Regional Operational Program. On the other hand, while writing this paper I also used previous personal experience in the field of community development. The paper has both limits and advantages due to the fact that it is not a direct result of regular data gathering, but rather, the outcome of an ethnographic experience and an autobiographic reflection.

5. The place of politics

Politics have an essential role as they show the way to state resources, on which most small towns depend as a serious tax base is lacking. In 2000, as a study of IPP (Public Policy Institute) presented (Ghinea and Ciocan, 2000), 75-85% of local budgets of small Romanian towns were made up of funds from the central budget. Only big cities of over 100,000 inhabitants were lucky enough to depend on the central budget to a lesser extent. This dependence on state budget transfers remained constant in the past years, while County Councils became more important in the redistribution process. Thus, those who control the local budget are the most important local actors. This situation explains bitter political fighting in small settlements, both in urban or rural areas, as well as the imposing positions of the winners. Hence, the actor with the highest chances of initiating and promoting development is the mayor; he will also have a great influence upon the destiny of such programs (Haruța and Radu, 2011). All the important decisions regarding development will be influenced by the mayor.

5.1. The importance of political conflict and anti-development coalitions

The great importance of politics often makes the outcomes of development initiatives to be uncertain, as they depend not so much on public interest as on games of power within a community. Conflicts are ubiquitous, which influences the elaboration of development plans and confirms the premises of the model of strategic action fields (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011), according to which competitive interaction between traditional power operators (incumbents) and their contestants (challengers) generate the change in any institutional field. The political arena is a typical case of strategic action field and it is actually a means through which local political competition for resources becomes institutionalized.

Since any positive result, including local development, can be used to achieve political goals, or even worse, it can lead to fulfilling selfish goals, it is understandable that the local opposition will most likely try to block attempts of local government to promote investments and to improve local conditions. The probability of such a chain of events evidently depends on the structure of the local elite, on the interests of different groups, on their balance and on their capacity of negotiating the distribution of benefits, so that sabotage by those with the smallest share could be avoided.

Therefore, it is not true that community development is beneficial for all dwellers. Almost always there are substantial categories of actors that draw benefits upon others' unhappiness. They act like real opportunist predators, which form coalitions and act most often with a remarkable efficiency, when inhabitants seem to overcome the dependence on them.

We can outline a number of benefits of underdevelopment for these coalitions, their members and the people they represent. Many employers from poor towns with high unemployment rates have great interest that the situation stays the same. On the other hand, some economic and administrative activities exist due to social problems. Employers from certain social services or people who are involved in the

distribution of benefits can similarly perceive local development as a threat to their positions. Obviously, such situations are aggravated by geographical isolation of the town, which increases the cost of escaping from it for those who suffer from the consequences of such situations.

There are examples of local industries that sabotaged the realization of industrial parks, anguished that the diversification of local jobs will increase wages. Powerful tenants can undermine rural development projects, as they are interested in maintaining the dependence of the inhabitants on onerous contracts of association.

In the meanwhile, development leads to the reconfiguration of social stratification, which is not necessarily wanted by community leaders. Community development may have distributive effects, which are not necessarily beneficial for the elite's status in the community; thus, members of the elite are often opposed to development programs that they feel they cannot control.

A related example is the one of Roma communities, whose insulation from the larger communities is made permanent even by some of themselves who are more interested in preserving their status quo, considered to be unacceptable only on a declarative level. For example, not all men find interest in women's integration in the labor market, as this would reduce their (women's) dependence on the resources men provide, therefore negatively affecting male position. A day care center that employed Roma women, which I visited some time ago in Bacău, had problems due to the fierce opposition of husbands to working women; in some cases, violence was also used to prevent women from exiting their total ward.

Underground economies thrive on poverty, underdevelopment, incapability and administrative corruption; some even find moral justification for it blaming the lack of alternatives. Mass stealing of wood, taking place especially in the poor areas of Bistrița-Năsăud or Maramureș, or criminal economies in some Roma communities may find their excuses, but they also create strong networks and incentives to prevent development initiatives.

All these interests that are more or less visible justify the opposition to development programs and the alliance of specific groups can lead to the formation of genuine, yet bizarre, anti-development coalition.

5.2. Institutional entrepreneurship

The mobilization of human resources for initiating a development program actually means to create and convey the vision of development, to coordinate and monitor actions and often assumption of responsibilities which are disproportionate to those of other members of the community. Leadership involves personal qualities, especially social skills (Fligstein, 1997), as well as an informal recognition by the community, *i.e.* legitimacy. In the towns where I worked at development strategy writing, I found two types of shortages of institutional entrepreneurship which is necessary for development: either a shortage of leaders or an orientation of the leaders towards local negative or zero-sum strategies.

Human resource scarcity may lead to difficulties in finding a leader. In such a context, leadership may be hard to find. The obvious situation is in local public administration, where popular vote does not necessarily deliver a management skills certificate.

A solution to these problems is anything but easy to find. On the long term, leaders must be formed through human resource policies within the development strategy of the town. However, such policies should be based on the consensus of the community regarding several principles and clear development directions. On short term, during crises, leadership tasks may be distributed through simple mechanisms for delegating authority – this implies the existence of appropriate persons or, in certain cases, outsourcing to agencies or companies specialized in this sort of activity.

On the other hand, some community network structures can influence the type of person who becomes the leader of the community. The anti-development coalitions mentioned earlier may impose in key positions agents that are capable of preventing positive initiatives of improving the community's quality of life or people who mean well but are practically unable to contribute effectively to community development. In such conditions, the adoption of development policies cannot be institutionalized, except in two situations: either due to outspoken contentious actions (these are possible in political competition, for example, or in the arena of civic conflict), either through coalition with anti-development leaders that would allow the dilution of the project aimed at improving community development.

The lack of suitable human resources for institutionalizing a development plan is not only evident through the absence of leadership or the pushing forward institutional entrepreneurs by anti-growth coalitions. Development entails plans, projects, implementation and reporting. Qualified administrative staff is the guarantee of a proper development of these stages. My experience in the region, especially with the local administrations of villages and towns, proved that there are enormous differences between the municipalities I came across with concerning the quality of human resources.

Since 2003 I had discovered a commune in Sălaj county that had a special office for managing and attracting external funding, which had more fresh university graduates working in “urban” conditions. I do not believe that it had been a surprise for anyone that the village had an extraordinary success in solving infrastructure problems and in building local and regional identity, by relying on external funding on a scale which was merely a dream for other settlements.

When it comes to hiring specialist in the administration of small towns, there is a sudden, almost reflex reaction from everyone to “no one stays here” meaning that human resources tend to escape such places. Specialists try to find arguments: living conditions, as well as social and professional prospects in rural areas or small towns are not as attractive as those offered in big cities. Indeed, the problem of human resource in administration is largely overlapping with that of human resources in general in such localities. The lack of jobs needing qualified personnel, poor education and

health care significantly affect the decision to stay or leave the village. In any case the scarcity of public administration specialists in localities with limited resources is one of the main obstacles to their growth.

5.3. Cooperation frameworks in urban communities: *the culture of powerlessness and other inhibiting myths*

We can speak of a set of beliefs that tend to be reproduced by some local practices which inhibit investment intentions in the community beyond the effects of the structural conditions of the community. More specifically, the effect of negative structural elements is augmented or inhibited by some sub-frames commonly I have called local myths. In my field observations I identified three such cultural components that have negative effects on the perspectives of collective action: negative myths, the culture of powerlessness and the lack of a development vision.

Negative myths, *i.e.* ready-made truths about things that negatively affect the development potential of the area, may be the result of prejudice or stereotypes, or they might have been formed under the influence of opinion agents, such as the media, professionals and so on, whose competence is not valued too critically; negative myths can also be statements with an axiomatic value which derive from unverified indirect experiences. A relevant example is the unanimous belief of the inhabitants of a small town that the completion of the highway that passes nearby their locality will have a positive effect on its development prospects. The down-side, that is the fact that potential tourist influxes may simply pass by the town as other locations in Transylvania become more attractive or more accessible, is seldom mentioned in inhabitants' conversations. Another example of myth is the one of the well-known prejudices concerning the character and the skills of certain types of people. Of this sort are, in the area of reference, the beliefs that Roma people lack motivational resources and would offer no perspective to any development projects devoted to them. Moreover, discussions with various actors from the region unveiled plenty of prejudices that Romanians have about Hungarians and vice versa. The persistence of these myths is particularly harmful for development, as their resilience in the collective representation system blocks resource evaluation and action alternatives.

A connected problem is the widespread feeling of futility of any development initiatives, of development itself or any improvement. This can be associated with the psychological concept of acquired powerlessness. From a psychological point of view, the syndrome called culture of powerlessness reflects a sense of weak collective efficacy, as a result of constant collective negative experiences (Bandura, 1998). Such a collective action frame accounts for the dead-end perception of undesirable situations; any attempt to solve the problem seems useless, while common justifications for refusing involvement are likely to show symptoms of acquired powerlessness. The idea of inability to do anything is often a myth; its removal is the objective of the measures related to the empowerment of local resources. Such a conclusion emphasizes the fact that development programs are real personal development opportunities for the people and genuine instances of informal education.

On the other hand, a community may have some unexpected development resources, beginning simply from the mere recognition of the importance of having a development vision to its expression in a more or less detailed form. A development vision which is shared by the majority of local actors is important because it represents a joint project, which can enable the mobilization of local resources in order to achieve its operational goals.

But how does a community, especially its elite, come to be lacking perspective upon the development direction or the future of the locality? The lack of development vision is merely the effect of assimilating a negative development perspective. Such local pessimism is just another face of the culture of powerlessness. Demographic decline, massive youth migration, poverty and the worsening of living conditions, including local material infrastructure, they all create a cluster of problems, often perceived as vicious circles that seems difficult to exit. As previously mentioned, such a situation claims the outsourcing of development programs, as local human resources and leadership are precarious.

6. Discussions

Field observations made during my work concerning urban development, which were previously presented, indicated the relevance of the strategic action fields paradigm in understanding the emergence and dynamics of development coalitions from small settlements in Transylvania. By applying the ways of reflecting and the institutionalist terminology of strategic action fields, I have established many advantages and contributions of the paradigm for understanding the community development. First, development planning can be considered as an institutionalization process, in which the model of development through programs elaborated by experts through consultations with stakeholders is undertaken within a specific dynamic of coercive isomorphism. The role of funding conditioned by the elaboration and adoption of a development plan or strategy cannot be underestimated in any case. Adopting the strategic action fields model has nonetheless the advantage of including competition and opposition in the explanation of the process of institutionalization of development programs. Development plans are actually the result of strategic and competitive interactions between local coalitions. Insisting on the idea of strategic interactions, it should be noted that local interest groups do not necessarily have converging interests, and in some cases antagonism must be recognized. Depending on the context, it becomes inevitable for anti-development coalition to emerge; their target is often the preservation of a status quo that is characterized by situations of suboptimal equilibrium or, on the other hand, by the annulment of the efforts of those trying to overcome the suboptimal state.

Along with the recognition of the importance of anti-development coalitions, the observation of efforts to institutionalize urban development programs in small towns from North-Western Transylvania allowed highlighting other important aspects which have corresponding notions, within the institutionalist discourse on institutional

change: institutional entrepreneurship and culture. Both are essential factors for the mobilization of resources for the action of coalitions involved in the game within the strategic action fields.

The creation of a development coalition depends on many contextual factors, out of which the structure of opportunities of the community and its composition are important for this study. Furthermore, our observations confirmed that efforts to mobilize resources for participation in development coalitions are affected by the perception of low levels of collective efficacy, or what we called the culture of powerlessness, as well as certain negative myths, which are constituent elements of local collective action frames with high potentials of inhibiting development coalitions.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

All empiric evidence indicates the fact that in post-socialist localities, as in most urban communities from advanced countries, development is the result of the actions and initiatives of the local elite and their relationships with two major external actors: the state and potential private investors. In the past years, it has become a rule to implement the local development vision through development plans and strategies. I hereby assumed that the writing of development plans is the result of an institutionalization process, in which the first stimulus is most often represented by the amounts of money, provided as grants, by European programs for example, that are conditioned by the presentation of a development plan. The institutionalization of development plans of these towns occurs within strategic action fields populated with coalitions that are formed through collective action of various categories of actors of the local elite.

Urban development publications underline the importance of approaching problems and solutions. From this point of view, exiting a situation of decline and deprivation is a matter of management or administrative capacity. The conceptualization of the development planning and implementation as a process of institutionalization turns the focus on the social process of local initiatives and highlights the numerous difficulties and inherent uncertainties that such an approach may encounter.

The concrete model of the institutionalization of development plans that is suggested in this paper, points in short, to a model of emergence and strategic interactions of development coalitions as processes of collective action. The data presented show that the mobilization of such collective actions depends on the adherence to a certain vision of development, an energetic and competent elite and a positive perception of possibilities and prospects of the community. The development coalition must overcome diverging interests in its actions, dissolve possible competition with anti-development coalitions and overcome a critical threshold of participation through steady mobilization efforts.

Local culture, *i.e.* the system of beliefs and representations relating to the interests, opportunities and local capacity, may sabotage the ability to mobilize resources, as I pointed out. My experience shows that a history of negative experiences may favor

the creation of a culture of powerlessness particularly resistant to efforts of change, especially if it is augmented by negative myths and/or a lack of development vision. The great importance of psycho-sociological and cultural aspects to the success of development efforts suggests that a development coalition is not just a debate and decision-making forum or an advocacy tool, but a genuine tool of community education towards the activation and implementation of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). According to the French scholar “communities of practice are groups of people who have common problems or interests that are accomplished or learnt through constant interaction” (Wenger, 1998, p. 8). From this point of view, overcoming participation issues and the improvement of the capacity to mobilize and harmonize the structure of interests within the community depend on its ability to learn and to change.

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