

THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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In 2019, the Faculty for Social Wellbeing collaborated with the Local Council of Msida to engage in a community-based research project. This project, titled 'Empowering Communities through Networking: A Participatory Action Research Approach', aimed to identify the strengths and weaknesses that exist within the community, in order to recommend redirection of existing resources that may fill any gaps present. The experience of being a part of this project highlighted the importance of involving research participants as co-researchers in the process of generating knowledge about a particular community.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'COMMUNITY'?

Prior to discussing community development, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the term 'community'. There has been a significant amount of debate regarding the definition of community by scholars involved in this area. In a theoretical paper on the topic of community development, Bhattacharyya (2004) draws upon Durkheim's idea of solidarity as "a shared identity (derived from place, ideology, or interest) and a code for conduct or norms" as well as the notion of social capital, which encapsulates the "networks, trust, and mutual obligations enabling people to take collective measures to address shared problems" (Putnam, 1995). Viewing community from this lens leads to a definition in which:

Understanding community as solidarity (shared identity and norms) serves to define the concept in a distinctive and intrinsic manner, making it possible to distinguish a community from all other types of social relations. We can say that any social configuration that possesses shared identity and norms is a community. The term is thus freed of the incidental baggage of territoriality, ethnicity or level of industrialization of the economy. (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 12)

WHY DO WE NEED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

Community development has been defined as an endeavour which has the aim of building agency and solidarity amongst members of a particular community, whilst being guided by principles of the needs felt by such members, the notion of self-help, and participation. Community development can encompass any activity - whether this refers to economic development, safeguarding minority rights, or caring for the environment, culture, or elderly population - which seeks to promote "the fostering of social relations that are increasingly characterized by solidarity and agency" (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 14). Hence, adopting a participatory action research approach to community development is a fitting methodological decision since, according to Baum et al. (2006) this approach prioritises the active involvement of people forming part of the community in the research process.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue that the economic growth of a society has become less relevant when it comes to improving quality of life, whilst it is increasingly important to look into how the members of a community relate to one another. This assertion becomes particularly pertinent when one considers the evidence about the detrimental effects on quality of life which accompany deficits in social relations. Indeed, recent findings from the national study into the prevalence of loneliness in the Maltese population have shown that more than a third of Maltese people experience at least a moderate degree of loneliness (Clark et al., 2019).

The value of community development has become increasingly important given the social changes brought about by modernisation. Although modern advancements of industrialisation in society have ushered in numerous benefits, such as improvements in literacy, longer life expectancies, and greater job opportunities, they have also been accompanied by a destruction of the solidarity that exists in communities. This erosion of solidarity has been attributed to the “commodification of life” which is an inherent aspect of industrial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 16).

THE MSIDA COMMUNITY: A PILOT PROJECT

For the purposes of our research project, the central town of Msida in Malta was chosen as a community whose members could collaborate on a pilot project for potential adoption by other communities or towns across the Maltese Islands, whilst bearing in mind that different communities may experience variations from one town or area to another. This town was selected for two primary reasons. Firstly, Msida is a geographical hub due to its central location, which means that the community has experienced significant sociodemographic changes in recent years, as have the individuals who reside in it. Such changes were believed to have resulted in the need for community development which could enhance the understanding of the present needs which exist in the community. Secondly, Msida was selected due to the fact that it is the location which the University forms a part of, and therefore engaging in collaborative research would be more manageable from a practical standpoint.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS AS A DESTINATION

Similar to the common saying that “happiness is about the journey, not the destination”, it became apparent throughout the data collection process that the very act of engaging in discussion with community members and community leaders was, in and of itself, conducive to a positive form of development within the community. Through setting up interviews and focus groups, as researchers we were able to facilitate the sharing of ideas and fostering connections amongst individuals who reside and work in Msida.

The key findings which emerged from our study included the identification of several strengths that were present in the community, as well as potential issues in need of being addressed. For example, the local council’s initiatives were identified as a strength, however these were particularly successful when they focused on events that were tailored to meet the particular needs of certain groups within the community, such as providing assistance to vulnerable youths or families. On the other hand, issues of accessibility and the impact of the physical environment on individuals were raised as potential barriers to civic participation.

Ultimately, this project enabled members of a particular community to engage with one another and take time to collectively reflect upon how their community could improve. Whilst a number of practical recommendations were put forth by the research team regarding possible strategies to overcome any issues identified, the process of engaging in an open discussion may very well have had equally beneficial effects on promoting community development, at par with the researchers’ recommendations.

References:

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