



**Doctoral School of  
Business  
Administration**

## **THESIS SYNOPSIS**

**Gabriella Katalin Kiss**

**Evaluation of Public Participation Processes in Environmental Decision-  
making**

Evaluation of Referenda and Public Hearings on Waste Management

Ph.D. dissertation

**Supervisor:**

**György Pataki, PhD**

Associate Professor

Budapest, 2013

**Department of Environmental Economics and Technology**

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## **Background of research and research questions**

Why did I choose the research topic of participation in waste management processes? On the one hand, I dealt with public participation in my previous researches in the case of Pest county regional landfill. While analysing this case study, several unanswered questions arose, e.g. if the referendum is indeed an appropriate and effective means of public participation in waste management decision-making.

On the other hand, it also highlighted (Szántó 2008, Szirmai 1996, Lányi-Persányi 1993) that the main reasons for environmental conflicts in Hungary are the conflicts related with the waste management installation. Public participation is one of the most important tools for conflict prevention and management.

Third, the statistical data reflects that the last ten years have brought significant changes in the waste management infrastructure. The waste disposal system is changing, so instead of the 2667 depositions described in 1999 (Phare KvVM, 2008) there are 72, operating in accordance with the legal requirements of establishment (Köztisztasági Egyesülés, 2010). As a result of accession to the European Union legislation on waste was built in the 2000s.

In addition, to meet the conditions negotiated during the accession, the incoming pre-accession (ISPA) and Cohesion Funds provided significant resources to the development of waste management infrastructure. Not only landfill modernization and recultivation of closed landfills are the most prominent goals of waste management, but the application of recycling also came to the focus. The introduction of selective waste collection, the reduction of the proportion of biodegradable organic waste also meant huge steps. There are social impacts of these changes also, such as the applied public participation tools which were used while installing the facilities which, I suppose, were affected by the obligations by the EU funds.

Reference to this issue can be found in the literature (Szirmai et al, 2005).

Why I chose the public hearing and the referendum as the subject of the analysis

As I present in detail in my thesis, both instruments are full of contradictions in the literature. In Hungary, however, these two devices are used most commonly. In case of the public hearing the lack of in-depth analysis is also pointed out by other authors (Webler-Renn, 1995 and Stern-Fineberg, 1996). The referendum was focused on because, as it is stressed by Szántó (2008, p.90) "the rate of decisions related to waste management issues decided by

referendum is extremely high."

What is the purpose of the analysis?

The purpose of the analysis was the evaluation of the chosen instruments of the two Hungarian waste management decision-making practices. The aim is to explore whether

- how effective the public hearing and the referendum are in public participation according to the social participants
- they have an impact on the results of those decisions,
- how much the participants are satisfied with the result of the choices and the quality of the process itself.

Some experience is shown about the effectiveness in the literature. In the case of public hearings the formulation of public opposition may divert the decision makers toward the negative decision (Rosener, 1981, Chess-Purcell, 1999). Hungarian experience also shows that the protest cancelled the installation in 40% of the cases (Szántó, 2008). However, the literary experience is minor, and a thorough investigation of this issue seems to be justified.

In the international literature, as I previously demonstrated, the viewpoints occur in the evaluation of participation processes which evaluate effectiveness based on the opinions of the participants (Tuler-Webler, 1999, Webler et al., 2001) These studies are based on the insight that a participatory process can only be successful if they are evaluated by the participants. But others brought to attention of (Rowe et al., 2004) that in case of examining the effectiveness of a participatory tool the opinions of the investors cannot be ignored.

In Hungary, research has never focused on the extent to which the involved people, especially the local residents were satisfied with the public participation process and how they evaluated the processes afterwards. The international literature shows deficiencies in depth analysis of the public hearings, and the participants' evaluation of these devices has not been addressed previously.

In the analysis of public hearings held in connection with the waste management facilities based on what I previously presented, the following questions to be answered:

- What was the ratio of participation?
- What was the composition of the participants?
- What interest groups are present to be observed?
- How informed was the public?
- How did the public's knowledge change during the examined period?

- How were the power relations shown in the communication?
- Did the opinion of the general public influence the final decision?
- Were there any events to inform the public in addition to the statutory requirements?
- What changing trends can be examined in the organizational practice of the period?

Another means of participation examined in this research study was the referendum. Total of 38 cases of local referendums were held between 1999 and 2012 in connection with waste management activities (based Szántó, 2008 and data on [valasztas.hu](http://valasztas.hu)). The item number is too small in these cases to be statistically analyzed, but the experience raised certain issues which I undertook to answer. These are:

- Did the participants feel they had real decision-making power in the referendum?
- Were the voters satisfied with the process?
- Did the electorate find it fair to attend?
- Did the community members increase their knowledge about waste management and waste problems?
- What is the reason that a large proportion of the examined referendums were invalid?
- Were the members of the community satisfied with the outcome of the decision?
- How did the result of the referendum influence the decision?

I chose qualitative research methods for my research because as I mentioned at the justification of my choice of subject, the analysis of public hearing is a hardly researched area in the literature. The known research results refer to the effect of community's opinion on the decisions (Rosener, 1981) and what can be told about the public hearing after comparing the used means of communication and the Habermas ideal speech conditions (Kemp, 1985). As an in-depth analysis of public hearings has barely been researched so far, so exploratory research is needed, which can be an appropriate means of qualitative methods. In addition, the available sources of information provide information that is difficult to make quantifiable. The obscurities that occurred during the research made it necessary to use a flexible method, which is also a feature of qualitative research (Héra-Ligeti, 2006).

I wish to answer the research questions by analysing one case by qualitative methods. The number of cases studied was one because this is the only referendum to during the time of the research in the waste management field. As previous research has not taken place on the subject, and the literature does not provide empirical evidence about the attitudes of the public, so the research is exploratory in nature. I followed the organisation process of the

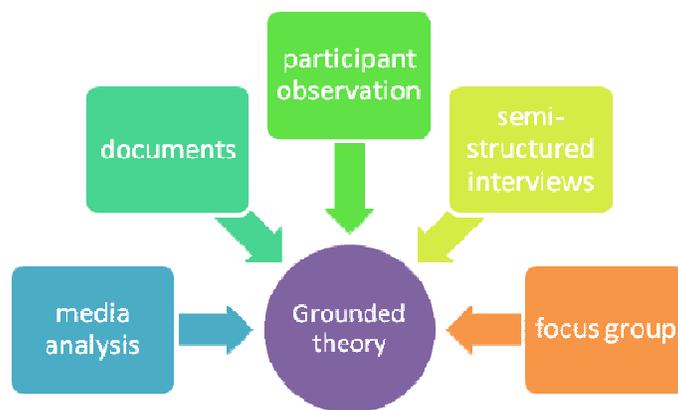
referendum and revealed a case study of public opinions, using multiple methods of data collection.

The research plan includes public hearings observation and analysis, and analysis of the referendum. In carrying out the research, however, it reasonably happened that the public hearing organised in connection with the referendum about the waste is also included in the research. Thus it became possible to analyse within one case study both the public hearings and the referendum as participatory tools.

Several public hearings were organized during the decision-making process, which dealt with the establishment of waste collection points and a referendum was held on the subject on public initiative. So in one case both tools could be examined (the referendum and the public hearing), and also the analysis of the referring documents and the participants' observation became possible. So unlike the original plan that I was going to study more than one case, I looked for the answers by a deep analysis of one case. This proved to be beneficial in several ways. I could observe the surrounding more thoroughly and I could make personal contacts with the locals. As I wanted to explore the perception of the two tools basically, I could examine the question from more than one aspect and I could perform deep analysis. I could implement the participating observation, the analysis of documents (press releases, reports), the interviews and the focus group study about the same area, so the research was supported and controlled by more than one tool.

The following data collection tools were used to the analysis:

**1. Figure Data collection used to the analysis**



A number of different qualitative research methods were used, which allowed me the versatility of the analysis and the corresponding depth of the analysis. Thus, the methods

complement each other and support the validity and reliability of research results. While analysing the data from the different sources, the conclusions and findings are easier to check and looked through.

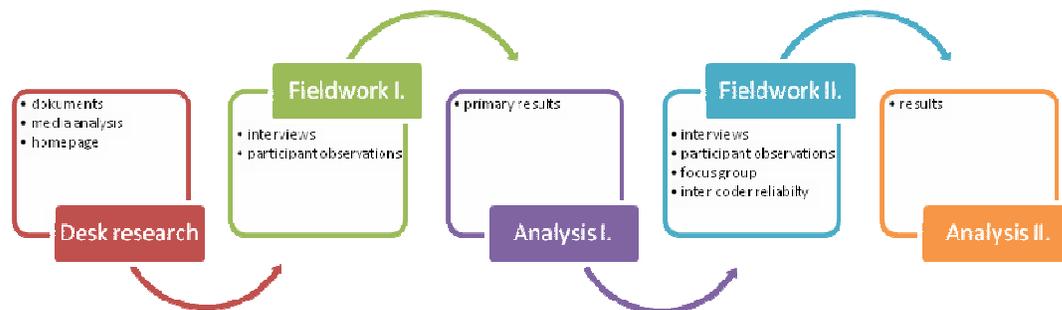
## The structure of empirical research

My research consisted of the following steps.

1. Defining the cases examined
2. Desk research: collection of related documents, media analysis
3. The first phase of fieldwork: carry out participant observation and semi-structured interviews
4. The primary analysis
5. Monitoring the primary analysis of the results, the extension of the sample with more interviews and the focus group
6. Final analysis, the definition of research results

The research phase of this process is illustrated in the following figure:

**2. Figure The structure of empirical research**



As can be seen from the diagram, I tried to have continuous feedback and flexible coordination of the results and harmonize the methods used in the research. I adapted the sample as the theory phases were building up.

The methods of qualitative research analysis

I analysed the data collected during the field work, the typed texts recorded during the interviews based on grounded theory.

Below, I introduce the substance of the theory briefly and continue with the review of the results. The main point of grounded theory is that it breaks down the text during the coding phase and builds up the theory from these smaller units. (Glaser - Strauss, 1967). The process is characterized by continuous comparison, control and feedback. The constant comparisons ensure that the built up theory is consistent and well-developed. Three phases can be distinguished in the process: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Strauss - Corbin, 1998).

I began the process of analysis with open coding phase. In doing so, I can determine the codes that represent the themes that appear in the text. During the open coding process, according to the theory's original approach (Glaser - Strauss, 1967), the researcher can only rely on the text and analyze the hidden content, ignoring the correlations revealed in literature. Approaches that are used later (Charmaz, 2006) are more permissive about letting in antecedents from literature and gives more space for the analyst subjectivity.

As semi-structured interviews were analysed, and these included specific issues, I did not rule out codes that were based on these antecedents (eg: competence), but mainly the words and expressions used in the text became the codes (eg: influenced them). The first step in the analysis is to create the text mosaics, which means to make chunks from the text. In some approaches it is called axial or selective coding (Strauss - Corbin, 1998), when strict reason correlation is required. Several approaches exist in literature about grounded theory (Kucsera, 2008). As for me, I chose the Charmaz (2006) approach because it gives more flexibility to the analyser.

As the first step I carried out the monitoring of the code system, comparing the different contents in the chunks. Based on these codes were merged, eliminated and renamed. For example, the "old" and "gypsy" codes, which were used during open coding, were eliminated and the rest were arranged under thematic codes, such as "gypsies on a public hearing" or "old people in a referendum." I started to organize the codes and build a hierarchy during this phase. The groups can be called categories. These names were abstractions, originated from the analytic interpretation of the content and not from the vocabulary of the interviews, eg: concerning waste "deficiencies in facilities of infrastructure." The classification process resulted in five main categories, which expressed the theory's main point involving the whole text file. These were named: decision, democracy, participatory tools, waste and the story.

The main categories cover all coded text, are independent from each other and reflect the message (Tuler-Webler, 1999).

One problem with the grounded theory methodology approach is, which our attentions are called to, the fact that the encoding breaks the text flow (Coffey et al, 1996). Therefore, since the theory of building construction allows building a coherent and well established theory, however, the procedure breaks the links within the text. I tried to preserve these cross-correlations by using the interview summaries.

A grounded theory is not just a method of analysis, but it's also affects the sample descriptions, since the analysis process, the theorizing and the data collection process are interactive steps, and they are based on a constant comparison. Therefore, the development of theory and the data collection phases are parallel and are also followed by each other during the research.

## **Method**

In this research the use of grounded theory is supported by many reasons. These are the following points:

- The context and the object cannot be separated
- The questions can be researched by only qualitative research tools
- The subject of the research is well-defined
- To ensure reliability the use of multiple sources of information is required (documents, participant observation, interviews, focus groups), which can be dealt with by grounded theory
- Several research questions were possible to answer. Originally, I visited the place because of the referendum, but the public hearings on the subject helped me to answer several of my research questions
- The research questions essentially imply exploratory research. Previous experience is not found in the literature or cases differ significantly in space and time from the current research on the topic. Participatory Experience in Western Europe and America in particular are difficult to be related to the characteristics of the Hungarian society.
- Some of the grounded theory-based research is considered an important precedent. The evaluation and the comparison to of their results are entirely justified
- The goal is to explore the data thoroughly and deeply and to reach deeper layers of the topic
- The main questions of the research are the in-depth dimensions of the referendum. on major

issues of the research. Since my basic approach is based on the evaluation of the opinion of the residents, I want to be independent from my theoretical knowledge and build an evaluation based on empiric knowledge. The best method for this is grounded theory.

- It is a very interesting experience and the starting point of the choice of method that the fairness and competence, which are main criteria in the literature, are not or hardly mentioned in the Hungarian case. Therefore, as the notions formulated in the survey questions, based on literature did not appear in the citizens' evaluation, I considered it important to apply grounded theory, as it is assumed that different values may appear in the empiric data than in literature.

### **Reliability and validity**

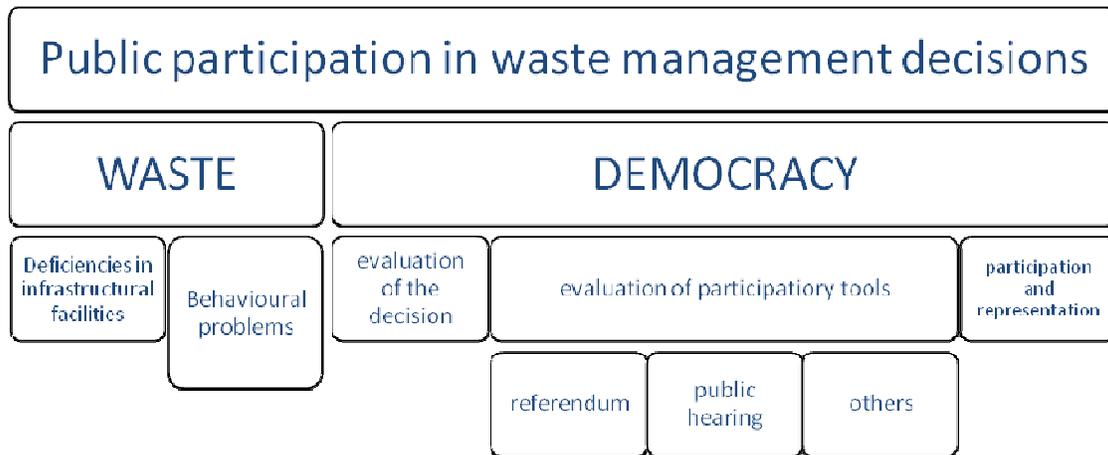
The developed theory, which was based on a semi-structured interview texts, was later completed by focus group interviews and the results of further interviews.

To ensure reliability, a fellow researcher also completed the coding with the coding system I set up, after the open coding phase, when the codes had already been developed. The interview that he encoded was 92 % the same as my coding. This way I tested the intercoder reliability. For the conceptual / design / structural validity (construct validity) multiple sources of information were used (documents, participant observation, interviews, focus group). Data obtained from a variety of sources can be checked and compared.

### **Results**

The following topics areas appeared in the developed theory. One large group is the problems and possible solutions of waste management. The second group is collectively called democracy, but democracy was mentioned only once by an interviewee during the research. Public participation in waste management decisions, however, fell into these two categories based on the collected opinions. They presented in the figure below.

**Figure 3. Determining elements in participation in waste management decisions in the analysis**



The most dominant category was the evaluation of participatory instruments within the topic of democracy, including the referendums, public hearings and others such as personal contacts. The participants' opinions were also involved in the topic of representative and participatory democracy, but they were not named in any case.

The third key theme was the evaluation of the decision, the acceptance of the decision; the compromise and the affect of the participatory instruments on the decision were discussed in detail. The results of some of the most important topics are presented in the followings.

### **Waste management**

Problems associated with waste can be put into two groups: lack of infrastructure (transport frequency, containers, collection of special waste is not solved) and behavioural problems (illegal discharge, behaviour of gypsies). Infrastructure would improve by installing waste collection points the in most interviewees' opinion. Behaviour could improve by the educational role of the waste collection points. Educational role is attributed more to the waste management than the participation process itself, ie petitions, campaigns, public hearings and votes all together. So the waste management thinking is best learnt by the developing practice and can be acquired empirically. The impact of the participatory process on knowledge about waste is hardly appreciated, the formulation and recognition of the problem were concrete results.

So the answer to my research questions, what the affect of participation on knowledge about waste was and whether it level increased, the following response emerged. Locals do not expect increase in the level of knowledge from the participation process but they relate

learning to managing the waste collection points and expect learning from practice and they attach some educational role to the facilities. On the other hand, people used the words education / re-education in the context of learning, which is not an active learning process, but a process conducted by an external actor. In this case, the educator may be the council and the mayor. The effect of the participatory process (petition/ referendum) on the learning process was not acknowledged at all. The general opinion was that although they talked more about it but the interest faded as the process ended.

Several waste management problems were associated with Roma people (Illegal disposal, improper use of containers), but as they do not participate in the processes in the facilities, the participatory instruments are not applicable to solve these problem, as the ones who are involved the most are not part of the process. So from they are excluded from receiving information and expressing their opinions as well.

### **Fairness and the disadvantaged groups**

One of the important results of this research is that two socially disadvantaged groups emerged in the examined case studies; the elderly and the gypsy group. It is typical for both groups that they are left out from the public participation processes decision making processes to varying degrees and their opinions do not appear. So fairness could be well examined in these groups' participation in the processes.

It is interesting that while neither of the disadvantaged groups takes part in the public hearing, they took part in the referendum, although the exact numbers are not known. The aspects of fairness prevail more on the referendum than the public hearings. And the personal contact, which is one of the most important ways to express opinion, cannot be said to be fair at all. Roma people are completely out of its reach.

Although both groups are almost entirely left out from the forms of communication (public hearings, personal communication), they are represented in the referendum in huge numbers. That raises the question of giving voting right to groups that have not got the right amount of information (Fiorino, 1990).

### **Evaluation of the public hearing**

Although several interviews raised the possibility of expressing opinions at a public hearing and communication as well, in all conversations (interviews and focus groups), the opinions were that most people do not speak at a public hearing, they do not express their opinions.

The reason was said to be that people do not like to speak in public, in front of more than 50 people, not even in a small settlement. According to the participants the opinions heard at a public hearing are not the opinion of the majority, but the views of some opinion leaders. They all emphasised the communication functions of public hearings, this is the how they get informed about the affairs of the village and this is the official communication forum with the municipality and the representatives. Debate was an emphasised momentum in the interview texts. Although many consider the debate important, there is not a designated forum where it can take place, maybe at the local pub or shop. Public hearings are not characterized as a forum for debate; they rather called it an "endless debate". In the participants' opinion, the major fault or shortcoming of public hearing us the lack of interest.

Participation ratio of the disadvantaged groups (Roma people and the elderly) is very low on the public hearings, so the fairness criteria are not respected.

The research questions included how the power relations of the public hearings emerge. The answer came by analyzing the reports. The main feature of the reports of public hearings is that they are not word by word transcripts but the summaries written by person who is in charge of them. These include details of the mayor's conference, but only briefly summarize public opinion, often even the speakers' names are left out. I think this reflects the fact that the village leadership does not consider the dispute and its contents important, so their effect on the decision is negligible. The effect of the public hearing on the decision does not seem to be determining, based on the results.

### **Evaluation of the referendum**

Based on the opinion of the participants it can be stated that the issue of the waste collection points was not considered important or a big enough problem not even by the people who are involved to organise a referendum. On the other hand, it was determining opinion the advantages of organising a referendum played a major role in selecting this instrument. During the evaluation it occurred that the official process of the referendum has a great affect on the decision.

The interviewees used the following expressions in connection with the referendum:

"credible", "official", "secret", "reflects the opinion of the majority," "fair," "gives a realistic picture", "causes conflicts." Among the typical characteristics were problem that yes-no answers are too brief, this phenomenon is well-known from the literature (Fiorino, 1990). Its advantages were emphasised by the several people.

According to this perspective a referendum was necessary, because could lead to a decision between the two opposing opinions. by this the interviewees have expressed that they thought they had to choose between the two extremes, ie between the total rejection of the initiators (NO) and the Office's YES, so the matter of collection points is simplified to a "yes-no" decision. It is clear that the referendum is not suitable for developing or finding a compromise. Those who could not decide between the two extremes may not have participated in the vote.

The individual interests' category in the referendum became such a generic term, which reflected the fact that the referendum was a personal matter for the initiators. This category has the largest presence in the referendum category concerning the number of both the codes and the references. The emergence of self-interest was the richest subject of the referendum characterization. Terms used by the participants, not only reflect the personal nature of the initiative, but almost set it as a fight against the landfill.

Another important factor of emerging self-interest is, which was also mentioned by several people, that people were convinced, "influenced" by the initiators. In addition, many acknowledged that the information the petition collectors gave played a major role, and those who do not attend the public hearings, got informed of the collection points from them. This also draws attention to the shortcomings of providing official information.

They all recognized that the relatively high ratio of participation was due to the initiators' work. A personal contact was said to be a very effective way to involve people in the process and to encourage them to take part in the referendum. Very different opinions have emerged to explain the absences. First, they explained it by the lack of interest in, secondly by the fact that there were people who could not decide what to vote for. Board members and the mayor are clearly considered the supporters of the establishment to have been absent.

It is a very controversial question whether the participants consider the referendum as an opportunity (decision and opinion forming). The statements connected to this show that people do not see it as a real decision making but only a way of expressing their opinions.

The participation process could start and be successful; because the process was managed by a leading personality, who had their personal commitment and motivated people by personal encouragement. This opinion was stressed in connection with the referendum as well. It was pointed out about democracy in general that people do not want to participate and decide on their own, only if they are encouraged personally. For this a personally interested and

motivated person or a group is necessary. Residents will only move out from their lack of interest when they have personal interest or somebody who they trust encourages them to do so. It was a very interesting experience in the focus groups that the participants mentioned that the most important characteristic of the referendum is its impact on the life of the community. On the one hand they emphasized the negative aspects that the referendum caused and generated conflicts between groups. On the other hand, as a positive side they highlighted that it brought the community together and invigorated public life. The advantages of the referendum were very difficult for them to collect, first they could not find such. Instead of decision making, the opinion sharing appeared. However, these results match my previous research experience as well (Kiss, 2006). In previous referendums about waste the most important results of the referendum and the following conflict was the boost in community life.

### **The evaluation of the decision**

According to the participants the referendum affects the decision, but it only shapes it and the public's will is not dominant. This is also manifested in the referendum as they considered the referendum as a form to express their opinions not an opportunity to make a decision. The decision-makers and the public are on the same opinion about this.

Apparently there is a very close relationship among the four factors: who made the decision in the participants' opinion; what they think the effect of the referendum was on the decision; how much they think it is a compromise; and all these define the acceptance of the perception of the decision.

Another important result of the research is that the residents had no real decision-making power related to the referendum in their opinion.

- First, the residents themselves consider the referendum only as a form of expressing opinion, and they do not feel the need to take full responsibility for the decision, they only want to influence it by expressing their opinions.
- The decision makers considered the residents' opinions important, but only a formal, participatory form which has legally guaranteed consequences could ensure to make the change their decision.
- It was a vote about a decision that had been made earlier, so people couldn't choose from real alternatives, but total refusal or the realization. There was not any appropriate forum to discuss the alternatives.

- Although the referendum was invalid, but the impact of the decision was admitted by the majority of the participants. A compromise about the decision arose, but there is no clear consensus on this, but there is no doubt that the solution is between the two poles of referendum.
- As the referendum had an impact on the decision, almost all of the participants (citizens and decision makers also) admitted the acceptance of the decision.

Although the referendum did not mean a real decision-making power for residents but it proved to be influential on the decision, as everybody acknowledged that the referendum affected the decision.

### ***Summary***

The two most important criteria for the evaluation of participatory processes were fairness and competence as it was outlined in the literature review (Webler, 1995).

Competence, which is gaining necessary the knowledge and having the ability to make a decision, did not appear in the analysed case study. The participants did not mention the need for competence for the decision-making. In fact, the topic was not mentioned in the process of talking. Only one of the participants expressed their opinions about competence. This only opinion reflected that he did not even think that the question was relevant.

One important outcome of the research is that, in contrast to the literature, in the examined case study the subject of competence did not emerge at all as an aspect of the evaluation of participatory processes.

But fairness, which is the 2nd meta-criterion of the Webler (1995) theory, is an important component of the case. The equity aspects influenced the participation of the disadvantaged groups, which proved to be outstanding in the analysis. The different participatory instruments show different participation of the disadvantaged groups. It is clear that the referendum ensures equal participation for both disadvantaged groups (elderly and gypsies). It seems that these groups did not participate in the public hearings (although opinions are biased) although it is questioned by observation in the case of the gypsy group. The personal touch which is the most effective and is very important for the participants was the least fair, because the gypsy and other groups are also completely ignored. In case of the referendum, fairness that is “that everybody can participate” is important, an aspect that is expected by participant and which is satisfied by the referendum.

The emergence of power positions in the public hearing is similar to those in the literature. The arguments in the debate and the residents' opinion does not become part of the decision making process, they do not have a substantive forum. This is shown in the reports of the public hearings. Uses of words like "education", "totalitarian democracy" in interviews strengthen this paternalistic approach.

The most striking feature of the studied cases was the initiators' personal interest. The emergence of personal interests determined the evaluation process of the referendum. The most important aspect in the participants' point of view was the personal nature of the initiative.

The infrastructural deficiencies and behavioural problems were brought to our attentions among the waste problems. Interesting conclusion is that the proposed facilities were said to be the almost the only solution, the only other alternative was the penalty. Both solutions encounter significant resistance, as demonstrated by the vote as well. However, I see a much more important development of social dialogue on these issues. The residents' ignorance and a lack of infrastructure together are the problems and related social conflicts can increase them further. (Petts, 2001).

One of the most important lessons for me is that the participants appreciated the participatory instruments essentially less than it is shown in the literature (Arstein, 1969). When evaluating the Hungarian experiences we equalled the levels of public hearing with the consultation, the referendum with the given power level in the participation ladder. During the analysis it appeared that the public emphasises that the public hearing has an informing and the referendum has an opinion expressing function. The participants did not really try to find an opportunity to take part in the decision making process, but rather to express their opinions. So the aimed at the information and consultation steps at the Arstein ladder. For me, this raises the question why they did not want to actually make a decision on the matter. Although several people said that the citizens should make a decision, the more important role was to share their opinions.

In my view, during the study of democracy we have not climbed the ladder high enough. We do not think it really important to have real decision-making opportunities concerning the issues that affect us. Perhaps we have not reached that level of democracy yet, when it is considered important we can make choices being well-informed and competent on environmental issues. And we still decide later, based on half information in such questions that are only in the bottom of priority in waste management.

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