Citizens as community experts: The benefits of a neighborhood leadership program

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Abstract

Referring to citizen leadership and expertise in participatory processes at community level, research emphasizes the necessary balance between inclusiveness and knowledgeability. Both conditions provide efficiency and legitimacy for policy making, so as to avoid governance based either on elites, or on mass democracy. Scholars propose the inclusion of "expert citizens" as mediators between scientific and lay knowledge. In a practical manner, this is to be achieved by the formation of community leaders, able to address the needs and improve the quality of life for residents. A neighborhood leadership program develops capacities in human relations, public speaking, conflict resolution, rebuilding of trust and acting inside a network, as well as practical skills related to grant writing, fundraising or completing a community project. To what extent is the implementation of a professional training program able to provide sustainable solutions in the field of community development? The study addresses this research question by means of a review, synthesis and analysis of previous literature. Its empirical section approaches three particular case studies, from the United States and Canada. Results show that the initiative of training citizens to become community leaders has positive effects at an individual and collective level - it fosters personal development, mutual understanding and social cohesion, contributing to an ongoing educational process.

Keywords: Expert citizens, Leadership, Neighborhood, Participation, Training

Introduction

Research referring to citizen participation in the decision-making processes, public deliberation and community development has mostly focused on methods for implementing different forms of consultation and collaboration between residents and (political and administrative) local authorities. It has taken mini-publics into account, citizen assemblies, forums, neighborhood development organizations and other means of participation, studying the procedures and effects of such deliberative and/or participatory mechanisms. Less scientific work has been invested in studying educational programs for citizens at the community level and the subsequent concept of "expert citizen" – which we will be focusing on in this article. On the other hand, most of the research on citizen expertise and neighborhood leadership has been performed taking into consideration specific programs implemented in Western communities. The issue should be developed in further research, with focus on areas like Eastern Europe, for instance, where only marginal references to this subject are to be found. We will attempt an argumentative synthesis of this subject, with the goal of finding out if neighborhood leadership programs can have long-term and sustainable positive effects inside a community.

We used the literature review as a research method in this article: Basically, the author looks for arguments on a particular topic in previous studies and, by analyzing, interpreting and putting them in a context, attempts a critical synthesis of what had been discovered. The goals are to provide the reader with a substantial, summarized view on the main ideas outlined in previous research, to identify gaps in the literature and generate new theoretical arguments. Scholars have divided the method of literature review in different categories: for instance, the critical review (with the author moving beyond descriptions and pursuing conceptual innovation), the meta-analysis (combining results of quantitative studies), the qualitative, narrative, systematic (comprehensive search and synthesis, identification of uncertainties and recommendations for future research directions), and the state-of-the-art review (Grant and Booth, 2009). We have performed a literature review with a systhematic and

comprehensive character: We started from a more general conceptualization, resumed and organized the main identified elements and moved towards a unitary argumentation.

The paper`s structure looks as follows: The first section presents the benefits of citizen participation and the second one questions its utility, in the absence of efficiency. The third section focuses on the concepts of knowledgeability and citizen expertise and proposes a categorization of these elements. The fourth section presents some details of neighborhood leadership programs - components, ways of implementation and effects. The analysis in the fifth section and the following discussion and conclusions paragraphs seek to answer our research question - by summarizing the results and explaining what can be learned from this study - as well as to present the main implications for future research.

Why is participation important?

There are many definitions of citizen participation in the literature. Generally, it is considered "the active involvement of individuals in changing problematic conditions in communities and influencing policies and programs that affect the quality of their lives" (Ohmer, 2007, p. 109). Its benefits have been extensively studied, but we find it important to summarize some of the findings with respect to this vital democratic component. When people get involved in local politics, they are able to influence policies designed and implemented by administrators and the elected ones. Democracy turns from a representative, to a direct, participatory process, where beneficiaries claim the right to deliberate, to state an opinion and intervene in policy-making and -delivery. Public officials usually initiate citizens' assemblies; "on the other side, political leaders could have good reason to avoid them" (Macq and Jacquet, 2020, p. 3; see also Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, 2019): The autonomy of political leaders can be restricted by citizen involvement and their legitimacy deriving from election is challenged when decisions are being shared (Macq and Jacqet, 2020, p. 4; Vandamme et al., 2018). Then again, there are benefits for politicians, too, when they decide to collaborate with

inhabitants in a certain area – mainly in terms of image and legitimacy of decisions. We will not focus in this article on reasons for which politicians choose to build participatory mechanisms, but direct our attention towards the participatory process, on one side, and to the citizen, to the beneficiary and the manner in which she or he can efficiently engage in the community and contribute to its development, on the other.

Social and structural benefits

Taking part in decision-making processes means an increased degree of deliberation and empowerment (Hong, 2015; Weeks, 2008; Fung, 2006). Three main directions have been stressed as potentially influencing social life, and especially the democratic system in the community, on a positive level, by means of participation. First, there is the *normative manner* in which involvement can make a difference: Building a frame for discussions and deliberations is, in itself, an advantage for the community; even if the process does not necessarily produce the desired outcomes, in the end, people will have a structured opportunity to express their opinions publicly (Humphreys, Masters and Sandbu, 2006; Sen, 1999). The norms will be there for future initiatives.

Secondly, participation can have positive effects on the *substantive level*. That is, results of the administrators´ and politicians´ activities are more likely to be endowed with reason, when the process involves citizens in its decisional phases (Humphreys, Masters and Sandbu, 2006). Deliberation brings substance along with it (Habermas, 1984): Discussing with arguments replaces authoritarian decisions with reasonable ones. Argumentation, substance and reason are supposed to produce legitimate results and provide justice and well-being. After all, information itself deriving from deliberative processes fosters community development (Stiglitz, 2002): The fact that citizens are informed about prospective decisions positively exerts an effect, on the substantive level of participation.

Last, but not least, there are *instrumental benefits* to be taken into consideration (Humphreys, Masters and Sandbu, 2006): Decisions obtained in a joint

manner and subsequent implemented policies are more likely to be accepted "because individuals have had a voice in shaping the changes" (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 168). So, even if the deliberative process does not create certain norms to be used by citizens in the future, and even if the outcomes are not as substantive as expected, the instrumental effect of reaching acceptability due to consultation makes the involvement mechanism profitable.

Participation has, finally, been found to promote citizenship values, foster accountability, provide legitimacy for the government process and improve trust in its actions, as well as contribute to better, more acceptable and consensually reached solutions in the community (Yang and Pandey, 2011, p. 880; see also King, Feltey, and Susel, 1998; Thomas, 1995; Barber, 1984).

Individual advantages

If engaging in decision-making at community level shows positive effects on the structure of policy-making, not to be neglected are its benefits from the point of view of the actor, or the beneficiary. To this extent, we can first mention the feeling of *self-efficacy*: People representing the interests of co-residents gain a sense of self-esteem, control over decisions, empowerment and mastery over the environment. They learn to understand the way services are delivered in the community and gain knowledge about how these policies can be improved; understand and implement the concept of lobby, develop and maintain contacts to administrators and politicians (Ohmer, 2007, p. 110; Itzhaky and York, 2000). These elements endow the citizen with the conviction that she had used her resources efficaciously and has had a word to say in the outcomes. Direct democracy thus proves to play "an educative and empowering role" for the one getting involved in the process (Callahan, 2007, p. 1180).

While self-efficacy refers to the individual`s judgment on her capabilities to act in community and neighborhood matters, *collective efficacy* speaks about the group, about its belief related to the capacity of intervening and solving residents` problems (Ohmer, 2007; Wandersman and Florin, 2000). Like in the previous case, but this time on the group level - as a result of participation,

people become confident in their collective ability to address issues in their area. An efficient relationship between active community members develops, after being involved in the learning process of public involvement. People communicate to one another and get to know each other; the resulting feeling of mutual trust gives birth to "shared expectations and behaviors" (Ohmer, 2007, p. 110; see also Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Along with closer ties and even friendship, these activities can lead to collective skills in terms of community problem solving (Ohmer, 2007, pp. 110-111). Finally, collective efficacy can be interpreted as the conviction of the group that, together, they have the power to obtain what residents want (Bandura, 2001). Resuming this important effect of participation: People get together and their common purposes lead to a trustful relationship; trust is a significant factor for sharing their expectations and behaviors; collective skills and knowledge in terms of approaching community matters are being developed; seeing the results of its actions, the group finally becomes aware of and strengthened by its efficacy.

Related to the previous effect is the *sense of community* - a shared feeling of belonging to the place they live in: On a collective level, people learn to acquire not only efficacy as a group when it comes to solving neighborhood matters, but a common set of values, derived from acting together. They identify with the neighborhood; the house or the apartment is not the only living element people relate to anymore and this expansion of their perspective diminishes pre-existing feelings of isolation. Residents also tend to further act collectively and involve in different types of organizations (Ohmer, 2007, p. 111; Wandersman and Florin, 2000). They develop a "commitment to be together" (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Individual interests are being transcended through common bonds and the group finds and develops its common goals; direct democracy and the subsequent sense of community thus become a source of social stability, acceptance and respect for the government`s actions and policies (Callahan, 2007, p. 1180; Pateman, 1970).

The benefits of public participation on the citizen as the recipient of public services finally appear as the result of her movement from the edge (a mere voter) to the middle of the deliberative and decisional process (actant).

By choosing to take a stand for and on behalf of her community and by witnessing concrete results of her actions, she develops an individual and a collective sense of efficacy. Together with the feeling of belonging to her neighborhood and becoming a part of a tied social structure, these beliefs potentially make her use the acquired skills and commit to further engagement.

Questioning citizen involvement: efficiency and knowledgeability

There are many scholars who question the necessity and positive outcomes of such a resource- and time-consuming process. Along the problem of inclusiveness (allowing as many and diverse categories of inhabitants to take part in decision-making), *knowledgeability* has been stressed as a measurable factor for the *efficiency* of deliberative mechanisms. It is not about normative, substantive or instrumental benefits of participation anymore, nor about advantages on individual and group level, with respect to efficacy and social cohesion. It is solely about the outcomes, about what the involvement itself may concretely result in for the community. Hong (2015, p. 4) speaks about efficiency as being verifiable "by the proportion of proposals that are approved and adopted by all three institutions involved (the committee of participating citizens, administration, and legislature)". When positive, satisfying outcomes are not reached by means of engaging citizens in policy-making and listening to their proposals, one can easily question the sense of the whole process.

Before reaching lack of lay knowledge, or expertise, as the main potential obstacle for efficiency to be studied in this article, let us shortly describe other factors which, according to the literature, stand in the way of "practical benefits" (Yang and Pandey, 2011, p. 880): that is, of proposals being accepted and put into practice. Scholars primarily mention two interacting situations, supposed to hinder deliberation and make it less efficient: On one hand, citizens are often considered too *selfish and passionate* for their goal - they can show a cynical attitude, lack of interest towards common issues and of willingness to commit their time for the public good (Callahan, 2007; see also Vigoda, 2002; Berman, 1997; Thomas, 1995; Fischer, 1993; Stivers, 1990). Then again, beneficiaries can rather look *passive, apathetic* and unwilling to

engage if the subject does not concern them directly (Callahan, 2007, p. 1180; see also Stivers, 1990). This apathy may be due to a traditional preference for staying aside and letting "their tactical deliberations" decide when to get involved one way or the other (Bang, 2005, pp. 15-16): If a proper occasion arises, they will become active; otherwise, the role of spectator or, at the most, voter, determines their political and civic behavior.

Besides selfishness and apathy, lack of knowledge about the *subjects being brought to discussion*, about *the community`s specific features* and about *procedures to be followed* when implementing direct democracy is, like mentioned before, a significant obstacle for efficiency. In general, deliberative procedures are being set up with a random selection of participants, who, usually, "lack any relevant substantive expertise beyond that acquired in the context of the panel's work" (Brown, 2006, p. 209). Under such circumstances, it seems clearly difficult to build an objective and rational dialogue - orientated towards the well-being of the community: Direct democracy becomes a rather idealistic perspective, than a realistic and plausible one (Callahan, 2007, p. 1180). The ones putting deliberative mechanisms into practice would remain with only two possible, but undesirable alternatives: to chose "the thoughtful but antidemocratic competence of elites", or "the superficialities of mass democracy" (Fishkin, 1991, p. 3). These superficialities are after all understandable - citizens are not involved in the government process; as beneficiaries of the services, they do not design public policies: Especially due to their different interests and occupations, lack of time, personal motivation and knowledge, they "cannot be expected to be responsible for every public sector decision" (Callahan, 2007, p. 1180).

Research has identified several patterns, or roles of the administrator and the citizen, which are to be found in reality (Callahan, 2007, pp. 1186-1187): For instance, there is a non-democratic ruler-subject relationship, where the passive beneficiary stands under an authoritarian system; secondly, the citizen votes and the administrator implements; thirdly, an ideal collaboration takes place, with co-production roles on both sides; and then, the citizen acts as client, accepting the authority`s expertise and providing an input only when

she is being asked to participate (Roberts, 2004). This last model is considered a traditional form of public administration and, perhaps, the most spread in democratic societies. It is based on the presumption that the beneficiary does not possess (again) a necessary knowledge and expertise for becoming a constant part of the decision-making process: Therefore, she accepts the acts of her representatives and places herself in a waiting position to intervene.

Towards the expert citizen

The fact that, usually, inhabitants do not possess the necessary skills and expertise to be active and become efficient in their neighborhood should not stand in the way of designing participatory procedures. Implementers should have other choices at their disposal, besides focusing on the antidemocratic elites or attempting to build a participatory scheme on superficiality. Generally, citizens show a low level of trust in politicians because the difficuly of tasks performed by political leaders is not perceived at its true value (Macq and Jacquet, 2020, pp. 10). Skills developed by citizens can lead to a more trustful relationship between the two sides and, consequently, to more efficient outcomes. However, this trust has to expand to the community level: Inhabitants may see their representatives at some point as too close to the (sometimes negatively appreciated) government and regard them with distrust for this reason; community leaders are thus in danger of losing their legitimacy (Gaventa, 2004, p. 18).

The attempt to develop skills and knowledge among citizens and to build an efficient community leadership system thus appears complicated: First, it refers to *technical expertise* people may acquire in order to address the debated issues on a competent level. If people are ignorant about specific issues brought into discussion, they need the information from technical experts "for becoming aware of them in the first place"; the decision has to be based on a certain "expert consensus" - otherwise, it will be directed rather unilaterally and, consequently, prove less efficient from an instrumental perspective (Brown, 2006, p. 214). A solution to this problem are the "«expert citizens», who can facilitate and mediate between expert knowledge and lay

people" (Takao, 2016, p. 1). They are more informed and have the capacity to foster an (even technical) dialogue between lay people and specialized ones. For instance, the so called "budget schools" (Yang and Callahan, 2007), already set up in several communities, are a means of providing citizens with specialized knowledge.

Second, there is *the knowledge about the community´s* features. The expert citizen occupies a strategic mediating position and facilitates the legitimacy of the process only when her technical preparedness is doubled by place-based knowledge (Takao, 2016, p. 2). She has to be well informed about the characteristics of the neighborhood and of its inhabitants, in order to avoid lack of trust from inside and address the issues not on a general scale, but with reference to the particular character of her living area.

Third, knowledge about the *procedures of deliberative democracy* is a very important factor. Participants in different forms of consultation and deliberation mechanisms - such as an assembly, a forum, a mini-public or a long-term participatory system - interact with political leaders and public officials, with organizers and mediators, as well as with fellow citizens. This practical involvement in the community offers them the chance to learn not only "about the discussed topic, but also about the functioning of the political system in itself" (Macq and Jacquet, 2020, p. 10). The way expertise is being produced and used by the public authority serves itself as a learning object for citizens (Brown, 2006, p. 215). By sharing it, expertise becomes „more democratic": The experience of taking part in a decision-making process and of learning about its particular structure and methods becomes a "school of democracy" and contributes to a higher degree of information among citizens (Hong, 2015, pp. 22-23; see also Wampler, 2007). This happens, for instance, in the so-called neighborhood development organizations, where residents join to "fix problems or maintain the neighborhood's strengths" (Crubaugh, 2020, p. 4; see also Crubaugh, 2018; Sharkey et al., 2017). A particular model has recently been introduced in the literature - the "smart citizen": The concept is not identical to the expert citizen and not to be understood outside the smart city discourse, but is, nevertheless, related to "expertise and participation in policy-making exercises" (Shelton and Lodato, 2019, p. 14).

If one pursues efficiency for participation, providing citizens a priori with knowledge - based on the three components we have proposed (technical skills, information about the community and deliberative procedures) - becomes crucial. And this training process can be performed by means of a *community leadership program*. Such an initiative can contribute to the development of direct democracy on a more general scale:

> We can build trust, respect for different viewpoints and institutional capacity in our neighborhoods and communities. As this capital grows and spreads through communication, collaboration, and networks, the civic capacity of society grows, participation becomes more knowledgeable, and government more responsive (Callahan, 2007, p. 1192).

What we will do in the following is an attempt to identify and describe several community/neighborhood leadership programs, focus on the way they have been developed and implemented, as well as on their concrete effects.

Neighborhood leadership programs

The first case to be described here is a workshop held back in the 70-s in the American town of St. Louis. The training was set up by a non-profit organization, with the help of a community development specialist from a local university. Details are being depicted by Sam Ritchie (1975), who refers to a leadership training program with a total duration of 54 hours, addressed predominantly to low-income inhabitants. The objectives are expressed at an individual and collective level: People would become more aware of themselves; identify, learn to approach and follow goals in the community; learn about specific individual involvement methods and distinguish between personal and public concerns. They should become able to obtain information and resources needed for community problem solving. New partnerships formed between inhabitants would contribute to an increased level of cohesion inside the community (Ritchie, 1975, p. 66).

The 150 participants were divided in groups and met several times in the course of two years, in three hours evening sessions held weekly. The workshop had three phases: Focus on getting acquainted with the plan of the training and with the characteristics of the area, as well as getting to know each other; concrete training sessions with specialists informing about leadership, and small group exercises - to identify and pursue specific objectives; acquisition of methods for getting informed, formulating recommendations and initiating a certain activity (Ritchie, 1975, pp. 63-64). A financial stipend covering expenses during all sessions was provided by the organizers - an investment in the ones choosing to participate and recognition of their efforts. The two-year series of training ended with a graduation ceremony and each person received a certificate for her presence. More than one third engaged in a different neighborhood activity after the workshop and almost 30 graduates chose to continue a type of formal education. No constraint to follow voluntary involvement in the future had been expressed by the organizers (Ritchie, 1975).

The second model comes from a city in Southern California. Ayon and Lee (2009) describe the initiative - a six-month training, organized for several groups of inhabitants, between 1992 and 2003, with the goal of providing them with skills and knowledge for contributing to the empowerment of their communities (Ayon and Lee, 2009, p. 977). A specialized agency, social workers and alumni were there to facilitate the program. The groups took part in biweekly two hour training sessions. Besides specific information provided to residents for becoming neighborhood leaders, activities such as conferences, discovery days, trainings for developing interpersonal relationships and weekend retreats were set up by the organizers. To this final extent, members of the groups took part in team buildings and learned about "human relations and conflict resolution content" (Ayon and Lee, 2009, p. 977). Above all, the program entitled "Building strong communities" had a practical part, in which participants received the task of writing a financial application for a specific initiative - related to environment, health or safety. Projects were revised and funded, with a following implementation and with presenting the results during a graduation ceremony or a meeting of the

local council. Several capacities are being developed among leaders under these circumstances - mobilizing inhabitants, building trust and mutual understanding, overcoming possible conflicts. Some participants confessed they had learned to solve problems in a diplomatic manner, in contrast to the aggressive style they had been used to. Most of them continued to be involved in the neighborhoods (Ayon and Lee, 2009).

The third case refers to a long-term program in Canada, involving residents from Toronto`s Regent Park area in activities meant to develop leadership skills (Brail and Kumar, 2017). They were trained in approaching community issues, dealing with budgets, manage volunteers and interact with professionals. Residents became acquainted with research and advocacy; their abilities and further engagement were meant to contribute to a higher degree of cohesion in that particular neighborhood (Brail and Kumar, 2017, p. 1).

"Leaders matter profoundly"

We saw the advantages that a neighborhood leadership program can bring with itself in terms of providing knowledge/expertise for the citizen, and in building capacities and identities for a leader. The *expert citizen*, endowed with specialized knowledge on technical issues, on her community and on democratic procedures - as well as on leadership issues (such as communicational skills, conflict resolution, relational patterns) - facilitates between lay people and experts, negotiates and builds a dialogue with individuals or groups she otherwise placed in an opposite and antagonistic position: She comes to perceive herself as an autonomous part of the political system, rather than its supporter or opponent from outside (Bang, 2005, pp. 27-28).

A *leader* also becomes able to influence decisions in further deliberations she is being involved in. Research showed that "leaders matter profoundly" for the outcomes of a deliberative process (Humphreys, Masters and Sandbu, 2006, p. 604). For a number of reasons - related to persuasion and leading discussions to certain directions, the authority provided by participants to the leader`s information and her mission of reporting results - the leader was found to exert a considerable influence for what the deliberation is to produce

(Humphreys, Masters and Sandbu, 2006, pp. 611-612). Other researchers refer to this "lay authority" conferred to the citizen involved in deliberations as a capacity to make contributions based on knowledge, experience and emotions - actually, to increase the level of technical expertise and moral arguments in the process; they do not see this authority as a means to act on behalf of the others (Brown, 2006, p. 209, 217; see also Hardin, 1997, p. 105).

The lay community manager

Going further with the analysis and looking at potential deeper and extended benefits of a training program: Does the citizen expert / neighborhood leader, for instance, have the capacity to become a manager, too? There are differences between leadership and management, mostly related to organization and task accomplishment: The leader becomes a manager when she develops her relationship in a more instrumental, than affective manner, and focuses on developing and implementing strategies by identifying and mobilizing the resources (Pigg, 1999, pp. 209-210). If the successful graduate expands her education - in terms of building strategies, identifying needs and methods to address them, developing a work program and an implementing team, looking for resources, accomplishing a certain task and evaluating it - this means we can speak about a potential lay community manager, capable to create and implement public policies. This person will not lead and manage an organization in the traditional sense; her organization will be *the community*. She will exert her capacities, influence and authority in the local network, contributing to the decision-making process in an efficient manner. Even if the *citizen manager* is a concept or a position more difficult to imagine, an initiative like the ones described earlier has the potential to bring lay people close to organizational and developmental skills necessary for "managing" their communities. In the end, it does not prepare citizens neither to lead, nor to manage formal organizations. But, as part of a community development process, it can contribute, like Pigg (1999, pp. 198-199) puts it, to the capacity of residents "to create, maintain and enhance generalized structures".

To this extent, of expanding citizen expertise, Piirainen and Viitanen (2010), for instance, speak about an education intervention program set up in Finland, for developing *community experts*, rather than individual ones. Such a program contributes to the extension of individual expertise, by means of a "lifelong learning through work" (Piirainen and Viitanen, 2010, p. 581, 583; see also Bereiter, 2002; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993). So, if we were to go beyond building individual expertise and leadership capacities, there are models of programs focusing on long-term learning activities and pursuing community development, by means of a more integrated, lay managerial vision - certainly deserving further attention.

Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the implications of a neighborhood leadership program at an individual and collective level. It started from the demonstration of the fact that citizen participation in itself has long-term benefits - with respect to substantive, instrumental and normative outcomes, but also for the beneficiary in a more direct manner: It improves the sense of community, as well as the personal and collective feelings of efficacy. The article described the idea of neighborhood leadership training - as a means of developing citizen experts through a specialized program. These initiatives mean much more than preparing or educating individuals and offering them the chance to gain knowledge and skills in specific fields. It is a complex process, involving, first, the acquisition of information with respect to technical issues, characteristics of the community and the procedures to be followed in deliberative and advocacy mechanisms. Then, it can refer to a process of learning to become a leader: approaching relations in a diplomatic manner, communicating and interacting with others professionally, addressing and solving conflicts, learning about matters of representation. Finally, the accent during or following such a program can be set on an expansion of the accumulated expertise, moving from the idea of citizen leadership, to the one of lay community management.

From a theoretical point of view, this article enriches the existing literature by means of an extensive review, interpretation and synthesis of previous studies. Our results show that, subsequent to taking part in a neighborhood leadership program, citizens feel more powerful and aware of their capacities to communicate properly and intervene in the process of decision-making. Workshops, formal sessions, informal meetings and team buildings contribute to an increased level of group cohesion (to be potentially extended at the community level). The fact that many people decide to continue their voluntary activities and engage in formal education demonstrates a *sustainable* effect of such an initiative.

We have referred to examples in the Western world, but there are certainly good practices in newer democracies, which deserve to be analyzed and brought forward. For instance, researchers can look at countries in Eastern Europe - where the traditional adversity and lack of trust between politicians and citizens (due, in part, to the remaining effects from the decades of communist rule) may be overcome by such educational interventions. The article`s limitations derive partially from this fact - that focus has been solely set on Western examples of practical work. On the other hand, we did not perform a personal research in the field, which could have contributed to a more specific and meaningful image upon the subject.

In terms of practical implications: Municipalities, non-governmental organizations or groups of citizens - willing to develop a neighborhood leadership program and looking for concrete information - can benefit from details in this article. For us, the main lesson is that an intervention of the form described earlier is a win-win process: Politicians may give up on a piece of power, but gain in terms of the image. Citizens may give up on a slice of spare time, but learn to solve problems independently and develop trustful relationships. Collaboration between "traditional adversaries" brings sustainable benefits, for themselves and for the community.

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