

Participation in Community Development – a Challenge for Both Politicians and Inhabitants

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

A Healthy City focusing sustainable welfare development including social inclusion and urban governance has a potential for urban planning and public health work as well as for multidisciplinary research.

Prerequisites for citizens to lead a healthy life in a healthy city are a multiple challenge that has to be tackled with a broad set of policy measures. The local government is an important agent for implementing healthy cities. Alliances with both private and voluntary actors are necessary. The civil society plays a key role for the community participation.

In the Partnership for Sustainable Welfare development four Swedish cities aims to increase the level of community participation in four selected neighbourhoods. Thus the local government ambition is in one way clear it is of great interest to investigate the prerequisites for local community participation.

The aim is to analyse different aspects of citizen participation such as possibilities and limitations, political responsiveness to citizen initiative and strategies used in the local arena to strengthen participation.

Methods

A qualitative study of policies and perspectives in local government and neighbourhoods in the four partnership cities has been undertaken.

During 2005 twenty nine semi-structured interviews with politicians, civil-servants and local key persons were conducted.

Results

Increased participation in political issues is most likely to occur when it concerns the daily life of the individuals. Participation is also dependent on an improved dialogue between politicians and citizens during the pre-decision planning. It is of great importance to discuss democracy and rights and obligations for both politicians and inhabitants. Even though the need for participation is evident the results shows a clear

distinction between direct and representative democracy. A limitation for participation is the long distance between initiative and implementation.

Conclusions

An increased level of participation is a great methodological challenge where it might take some time for politicians and inhabitants to meet in a creative dialogue.

Key Words: community participation, local government, sustainable welfare development