Applications for official support – an innovative way to promote grassroots initiatives

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Abstract

Citizen participation and grassroots initiatives are increasingly important in today's restructuring societies. Bottom-up proposals often offer various benefits, but resource shortages frequently hold up implementation. However, while there are institutionalized support programs to fight problems coming from the lack of money, information, or human resources, endeavors to mitigate problems ensuing from the lack of hierarchical and relational powers are scarce. Driven by the observation that grassroots initiatives are very often ignored by local decision makers, a new support method to alleviate the dearth of power is proposed in this article. I claim that if recommendation letters from prestigious actors (ministries, scientific panels etc.) were available through applications for grassroots actors, then their valuable initiatives would have better chances to get through. The recognition from a respected body and the publicity of a follow-up report would motivate decision makers to consider the implementation of the initiatives selected for support. Moreover, greater grassroots efficiency and the enhanced transparency of support measures would come at a relatively low cost without any serious practical problems of implementation.

Key words: bottom-up proposal, application system, grassroots empowerment, civil participation, civic support.

Introduction

In democracies, directions of social change are supposed to be outcomes of collective deliberation processes. However, it is not easy, usually not even feasible, to consider everyone's opinion in planning, decision making, or the implementation of different projects of societal importance. To achieve optimal results at different levels of today's governance systems in representative democracies, the inclusion of civil actors committed to specific socially important objectives is deemed to be inevitable (e.g. Young, 2000). An active and capable civil society including strong grassroots associations can assist democracy among others by valuable ideas, local knowledge, uncompromised advocacy, and the provision of different services (Smith, 1997). To ensure meaningful participation of civil actors in shaping societal outcomes, citizens and their organizations need to be free to pursue their goals (provided they do not interfere with basic values of the society) and exert influence on their local environments. These needs are growing even bigger as traditional hierarchical political structures give way to networked forms of governance (Börzel, 1998) rendering traditional forms of political self-expression less appropriate to make a difference. The frequent calls for deliberative and participative democracy are reflecting deep concerns about a more equitable, better functioning, and more legitimate social system (e.g. Barber, 1984; Habermas, 1996; Alperovitz, 2004).

To come up to these expectations, most democratic societies try to empower civic actors. Grassroots movements, NGOs, and other individuals or groups committed to various objectives are, indeed, often in need of external support. They may lack any of the important resources that determine the success of their agenda: money, hierarchical and relational powers, information, or human resources may all be scarce (Fernandez, 2008). As the focus in

the present article will be on projects initiated by small NGOs, citizens, or groups of citizens, we will discuss methods that are intended to help these initiatives to gain strength.

In order to facilitate the most beneficial grassroots projects, there are standardized methods to help civic actors overcome certain types of resource shortages. Targeted project funding (Nichols, 2008) and capacity building programs (Mitchell et al., 2004) available through applications are frequently applied to improve financial and human resources, respectively. The dissemination of miscellaneous types of information applicable in civic activities can be a priority of various governmental and non-governmental institutions (Rahman, 2005). Different organizations may offer monetary and non-monetary grants to provide assistance in a range of fields from instruction to workspace provision to counseling. Inspired by the success of business incubators (Sherman, 1999), there are regions where combined services are offered for nascent community-based NGOs. Providing space and facilities, capacity-building, registration assistance, small subsidies, products promotion, information dissemination, or policy advice and training can all be important elements in coordinated incubation programs. Furthermore, incubators may also try to stimulate communication and cooperation among the NGOs, government agencies and communities to empower civil sector start-ups.

NGO incubators, however, are not very uncommon yet, and even these institutions may leave a specific resource shortage largely unaddressed. There are no generally applied means to ease problems related to the lack of hierarchical powers, to mitigate the legitimacy problems stemming from the characteristically low status of civil, grassroots actors. As we shall see in the following, such deficiencies significantly hinder the realization of valuable grassroots projects.

The plight of the grassroots initiator

The Student Environmental Organization at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics is a real grassroots group. They try to pursue sustainability goals at the university level by identifying environmental problems related to the university's practices and come up with economically viable solutions. However, even if their proposals are most carefully worked out and perfectly reasonable offering both environmental and financial benefits, they are often ignored. The operative managers of the university may be too busy to read through all grassroots proposals, their lack of personal interest in running sustainability projects may sideline such initiatives, or their personal distrust in green activists may lead to refusal. Nevertheless, without the involvement of these managers (and their signatures, for example, on the contracts between the university and the waste management company providing environmentally sound services) the initiatives with their multiple potential benefits are doomed to sink into oblivion.

Grassroots actors frequently face similar problems in several different fields. Proposals of individuals and local NGOs can fail to make a difference in the village or city councils; employees can be unsuccessful in changing their organizations even if they have brilliant ideas. They simply lack the authority to make decisions: the systems they want to change are governed by higher level decision makers whose consent is needed for certain changes. Consequently, the success of grassroots projects is often dependent on the support of certain individuals or decision making bodies.

Decision makers, on the other hand, are often not very receptive to low level initiatives. There are several possible theoretical explanations for this ignorance. Taking a new institutionalist approach, I try to understand whether the observed behavior can be attributed to expedience, the sheer fact that the members of given institutions can not conceive of alternative ways of acting, or moral causes (Powell, 2007).

First, looking at an institution in isolation, it can be rational to ignore low level initiatives. Busy decision makers who receive numerous requests from different people to use their powers and authority in different ways may not have enough time to thoroughly consider and evaluate each and every request. Although there are positive examples that modern information-communication tools can facilitate interactions between citizens and decision makers (Shulman, 2003), participatory policy making (Joldersma, 1997) still faces the challenge of selecting valuable comments and initiatives (Shulman et. al, 2003). Hopefully, the selection process will become easier as digital technologies reshape the interface between citizens and public sector decision makers (West, 2007). Nevertheless, time shortage remains an issue of importance, one that needs to be addressed.

A second potential reason for uncooperative behavior is that administration members can not conceive of alternative ways of acting. Middle managers (councilors, committee members, etc.) may stick to hierarchical approaches either because their institution operates in a rigid, exclusively regulative way, or due to contextual reasons. Like rational ignorance, the former option can still be understood in the frameworks of rational choice theory. However, decision makers are rarely forced in an institutional way to ignore beneficial initiatives. More often, sociological and cognitive factors are at play. Here we cross the boundaries of rational choice institutionalism to obtain a more complete explanation of how preferences are formed (Koelble, 1995). Arguably, the institutional and cultural context is decisive. Apart from financial and functional uncertainties, behavioral change holds important social and psychological risks (Schiffman, Kanuk, and Das, 2006): What will others think if I cooperate with grassroots activists? Won't they laugh at me? Our self-appreciation and perceptions about the time used in the cooperation also largely depend on contextual factors. Today, officials usually think they know what to do and what not to do. They often regard external inputs as intrusions into their duties, especially if these inputs are aimed at changes that could already have been made by the decision makers themselves. They may have negative feelings about such project proposals, because they perceive them as implicit critiques of their work. The fact that the critiques are brought up by powerless actors makes it easy to play them down. Negative attitudes thus easily translate into reluctance causing further delays in project implementation.

Third, personal stances or feelings about the contents or the initiators of a project can also make officials balk at certain plans. If, for example, a given decision maker considers green activists aggressive nuisances, then not much room is left for a rational debate about a potential sustainability project. If there are no institutionalized forums where ideas or initiatives can be shared, decision makers do not necessarily feel moral obligation to consider unsolicited inputs.

Accordingly, the question arises whether it would be possible to reduce the power deficit of grassroots actors and alleviate the problems hampering the realization of their useful projects without giving too much power to the initiators themselves? We are looking for new solutions to fight problems associated with rational ignorance, to give legitimate support to beneficial proposals, and to change the normative environment in which individual decisions are made.

An innovative way to promote grassroots projects

When searching for appropriate solutions to boost grassroots initiatives, existing methods can serve as examples. The suggested method to alleviate the problems outlined above is based on an analogy between financial and power-related hindrances of grassroots' success. As it will be obvious in the next paragraphs, the proposed support method would resemble existing techniques in many ways.

Application opportunities announced to help project financing are designed to financially support the most beneficial initiatives. Similarly, it would be possible to support selected projects from a hierarchical point of view and ease the lack of powers and authority by a similar procedure. A well respected body (a ministry, a council, a scientific panel, etc.) would invite the applications for official support. Applicants would be required to submit detailed project descriptions, demonstrate feasibility, and point out problems rooted in the hierarchical structure hampering the implementation. The organizing bodies would choose the best candidates: similarly to the case of traditional applications, the expertise of the judging panel and the rigorous selection process could help valuable projects gain support. The chosen projects would receive official support from the organizing committee, e.g. in the form of a public letter of recommendation. As these recommendations would only pertain to projects, initiators themselves would not gain undue powers. Apart from publicly announcing their support for certain projects, organizing bodies would later help successful applicants to publish a follow-up report about their project demonstrating the achieved results, or showing how the official support failed to make a difference.

Presumably, university leaders would not ignore a student proposal about more sustainable waste management practices, if it was supplemented with a recommendation letter from the Ministry of Environment. Similarly, local governmental bodies would more likely consider NGO proposals recommended by a creditable public sector or business organization. On the one hand, such recommendations could be appropriate to draw the attention of decision makers to the selected projects, viz. to alleviate the problem of rational ignorance. The judging panel would partly take over the task of project evaluation from the local officials. In addition, the application process could discourage the submission of less elaborate proposals and thus spare time for decision makers. On the other hand, the reputation of the recommending committee and the further publicity (be it either positive or negative) would mitigate the socio-cognitive causes of ignorance. If decision makers realized the significance of a proposal and the possibility of its implementation, they would be motivated to act in favor of the project even if they perceived the implicit critique of their work or if they personally did not really like the initiators. Many of the sociological and psychological risks associated to the unconventional partnership would be eliminated. An institutionalized solution would make alternative ways of acting conceivable. Still, without the follow up report, negative feelings could often overcome objective considerations. Therefore, the publicity of the issue would be used as a further motivation for compliance: no one likes to be negatively exposed in the media, especially if the follow up project assessments are accessible to prestigious and influential members of the society or a wide audience.

Obviously, to gain support from powerful actors is not just a hypothetical solution but it is an already existing way of lobbying for different goals. The formal procedure and the standardization proposed here could reduce corruption and open up new support opportunities for weak actors who are currently unable to reach the appropriate hierarchical levels when lobbying for their initiatives. Supporting bodies could also benefit by receiving elaborated project ideas instead of informal requests they receive today.

Moreover, the greater grassroots efficiency and the enhanced transparency would come at a relatively low cost. Only the evaluation of the applications and the publication of the follow up reports would require resources.

Practical aspects

When contemplating the announcement of applications for official support, a couple of questions arise, most of them related to the differences between the existing application based support methods and the central idea of the present paper.
Firstly, while in traditional applications applicants have to elucidate how the received money would advance their projects; here they would have to point out the significance of the recommendation letter. One potential deficiency of the proposed solution is if applicants submit their initiatives before they approach the local officials. This may result in unnecessary paperwork on the organizers' side. However, it is not very likely that applicants compile detailed project descriptions before trying to go the easier way and discuss their plans with the local decision makers. Still, as in the case of any other support methods, incomplete applications may be submitted and not fully worthwhile projects may get supported. Fortunately, due to the low costs of the process, these problems are much less severe than in the case of already existing solutions. Unlike money that may be spent on anything if reporting obligations are somehow circumvented, a letter of recommendation does not have a market value unless it is used for the project purposes.

Secondly, when considering grassroots support programs, it is important to investigate whether or not they create opportunities for astroturfing (McNutt and Boland, 2007). In contrast to other forms of grassroots activism, this application system does not create opportunities for formal political, advertising, or public relations campaigns to pursue their own goals while making the impression of being spontaneous grassroots behavior. Here, decisions are not based on popular support; panelists evaluate the benefits and feasibility of initiatives, the only factors that count from a societal point of view.

Thirdly, it may be asked whether the suggested practice would constitute sufficient motivation for officials in charge to seriously consider the proposals. To achieve maximal impact, it is important to get letters of support from highly-placed individuals. As for the follow up report, the place of publication has to be carefully chosen according to the target audience, which may vary with the issues. There are several stakeholders who may be interested in the assessment report. If expertise is necessary to understand the proposal or its significance, then the organizing body itself can be the primary audience. As local decision makers are often dependent, in one way or another, on the opinions of ministries or other recognized bodies, this may help supported projects get through. If the initiative is easy to understand and there is sufficient public interest in the field, then the local community; in case of yet broader relevance, a given sector or an even larger segment of the society can be targeted. As decision makers are usually more or less sensitive to the public opinion, their aspiration to maintain or shape a positive image can help valuable initiatives. Accordingly, applied to the example of sustainability initiatives at a university, follow up reports may be published in newsletters of the ministry, university papers, tertiary education communications, local newspapers, or other printed or electronic media. In case of a local NGO's proposal to a village council, the village newspaper and the regional media could cover the story. Generally, applicants could make suggestions about potential places for publication. Organizing bodies would either accept these suggestions, or choose other means to publish the follow up report.

Apart from concrete questions related to the realization of the envisioned application system, there are concerns about the expected perceptions regarding the establishment of the new support method. While potential grantees would most likely welcome the new mechanism, local decision makers and possible providers of support may have reservations about the idea. Those who could be expected to conduct such application processes and issue the letters of recommendation may say that they are already too busy and lack the necessary

resources to take on this new task. However, the same could have been said about the announcement of traditional applications except for the fact that no money is handed out after this process. If we try to strengthen a more inclusive democracy, the method proposed here can be a cost-effective element in the portfolio of solutions. More fervent opposition may come from decision makers or institutions being worried about their sovereignty. These fears are partly justified: if street-level actors get assistance from their influential counterparts, powers of the local decision makers may be curbed. Albeit the ultimate decision making authority would not be taken away from them, existing hierarchies and the power of publicity could be used to break their reluctance. Though, this opportunity to spur the implementation of socially conducive projects is deemed to be a manifestation of public control, which is desirable in well-functioning democracies.

To find the appropriate field of application for the suggested practice, it is useful to compare it with alternative solution possibilities. Three comparison categories are considered: NGO incubation programs, fellowships, and reliance on the support of social movements. These options resemble the proposed solution in that they can also serve as a means to legitimize grassroots projects, which is the primary motivation behind the core idea of this paper.

The few existing NGO incubators (like the Federation of Non-Governmental Organisations Centrum Szpitalna in Poland, the Sakhikamva NGO Incubator Trust in South Africa, or the Amity NGO Incubator in China) enhance the legitimacy of grassroots activism by connecting community based organizations to stakeholders of their projects. While networking can be very useful, it is usually not a targeted approach to promote concrete initiatives. More generally, incubators provide a wide range of important services to strengthen nascent community based NGOs, but their goals are much more comprehensive than the ones discussed in this essay. It is important to note that in-between solutions can also be feasible: one possibility, for example, is to offer financial support to recommended projects. Such combinations can improve the chances of financially more demanding initiatives. However, the trade-off between the scope of assistance and the costs of the support program is obvious.

In a similar vein, most fellowships that facilitate social entrepreneurship (like the Ashoka Fellowship) offer combined assistance (stipends, trainings, networking): they can be deemed as incubators for personal projects. From a legitimacy point of view, it is noteworthy that in some cases the renowned name of the supporting organization can help to gain legitimacy. However, the effectiveness of these 'brands' strongly depends on the local context. Arguably, many officials are more susceptible to messages from the hierarchy they personally know. Clearly, in many ways official support for a project is much less than a fellowship, but it may give more legitimacy to a concrete proposal than any of the available fellowships.

Perhaps the only existing grassroots method whose primary aim is to create legitimacy for a project is positioning the initiative as a part of a social movement and/or relying on celebrities. These techniques can make a difference when an organization tries to garner public support for an initiative (like Bono's charity campaigns). However, it can be difficult and expensive to accurately measure and demonstrate public support in order to convince officials. Neither is it easy to use celebrities in a campaign. Moreover, these techniques do not necessarily work with decision makers. Grassroots attempts to reshape existing decision making structures can backfire if decision makers perceive an intrusion into their responsibilities.

In summary, the method proposed in this paper has its niche of application. If individuals or grassroots organizations have beneficial initiatives that are economically advantageous, and they have to convince middle managers in a hierarchical system, then

official recommendation letters can work. Social and cognitive factors discussed earlier in a new institutionalist framework help us to understand how co-management is facilitated by such an institutional innovation (Sandström, 2009).

Conclusions

In the present article I briefly outlined an innovative way to promote grassroots initiatives. Today, when basic power structures undergo massive changes that further alienate citizens from public affairs, it is increasingly important to let people have their say. Participatory democracy and the revival of regional politics, two cornerstones of the way out from the currently unfolding crisis of representative democracy (Castells, 2004) are inconceivable without the inclusion of grassroots actors. To achieve collective success in communities, the ambitions of engaged community members committed to constructive objectives have to be recognized and patronized.

However, bottom-up efforts are often impeded by insufficient resources. Since money, powers, human resources, and information are all crucial for a successful project, it is simply stunning that no institutionalized methods are applied to reduce the dearth of powers while we go so far to reduce other shortages. The proposed way of filling this gap is not a panacea. Nothing guarantees that initiatives with official support will eventually be successful. However, the odds will be better. The sheer fact of higher level acknowledgement can pave the way for local support and the publicity given by the follow up report a few months after the decisions can also boost chances.

Clearly, there are substantial details to determine the success of the suggested method. The application procedure has to be sufficiently simple so that people without professional skills can participate, but submitted application materials need to aptly summarize the envisioned projects. The whole process has to be transparent to promote equality and reduce corruption. More generally, most questions related to traditional application systems can be asked. Fortunately, there are very simple answers to some of the most serious concerns, because no money or costly resources would be given to winners. We wouldn't have to worry, for example, about the severe bias in panel decisions based on mutual financial interests or the fraudulent use of the assets received in the application.

Supposedly, the suggested method would help grassroots projects gain legitimacy and galvanize support of powerful actors in the right positions to assist the most beneficial initiatives without high costs for anybody. All in all, only one question remains: how come that this straightforward idea has not been implemented yet?

About the Author

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