



The Concept of Sustainable Development of Cities. Ethnological Notes

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ABSTRACT

The sustainable development concept has been detailed in several strategic documents which, among other things, point out that it is a complex issue and should be explored at the inter-disciplinary level. Examples of the current ethnological research of cities concerning transformations of post-socialist urban spaces in the context of civic initiatives and participative planning and participative budget demonstrate the possibilities of ethnology in applying the sustainable development principles in an urban environment.

KEY WORDS: sustainable development, urban research, culture, ethnology

The aim of this study is to highlight the concept of sustainable development of cities mainly in the context of Slovak towns and cities, present the basic strategies and documents and their application in urban practice, comment on some results of their implementation (particularly of Agenda 21) under projects executed in the recent years, and point out the possibilities for ethnology to enter this concept.

Sustainable development in documents

Sustainable development (SD) is a targeted, long-term, comprehensive and synergetic process influencing the different aspects of cultural, social, economic, environmental and institutional actions at all levels – from local through regional up to global – working towards a functional model of a certain community, satisfying people's biological, material, spiritual and social needs and interests in a quality manner. In this case, functional model means Slovak towns and cities, citizens, spaces and activities. From the methodological perspective – as the definition suggests – the first prerequisite for fulfilling the SD concept is a comprehensive character of the research of the living conditions of people in towns and cities from the environmental, economic, social and cultural points of view; the second prerequisite is, again, a comprehensive research of all levels – local, regional, global – and of all elements involved: the deciding and the implementing ones and the affected group of people, including active actors.

This topic has so far been dealt with mainly by experts studying environmental issues, researchers with a technical focus, and researchers who focus less on social and cultural issues. I would therefore like to note at the beginning that expert literature and projects have failed to fully satisfy the above-defined requirements for complexity. The protection of natural and cultural heritage which has met with increased attention seems to be an exception in this regard, forming a part of mainly environment-oriented research.

From the point of view of development, emphasis has been placed on ecologisation. At the first stage, ecologisation was related to the downsizing of production in heavy industry (POUŠ 2013:200) and with the cancellation of some ineffective types of production, which led to the reduction of the emission burden on the environment and had a positive effect within outer city zones. At present, sustainable development relates mainly to changes in attitudes towards the environment in general. The major manifestation of ecologisation included the exclusion of traffic from city centres and the building (or expansion) of pedestrian, rest and recreation zones. The maintenance of green areas in towns and cities also plays an important role, just like the recent shift of green areas and gardens to unusual parts of cities – into yards, onto roofs of buildings, etc. In post-socialist towns and cities, this also refers to a major use of spaces between residential blocks through the building of infrastructures, in particular children's playgrounds and other alternative forms (e.g. community gardens).

The sustainable development concept is also about the ways of ensuring economic growth, covering the needs of society by creating the conditions for welfare from the short-term, middle-term and, in particular, long-term perspective. The concept is based on the

prerequisite that development must meet current needs without threatening the possibilities of on-going growth for future generations (for example, by exhausting non-renewable resources without finding any alternatives, by destroying the eco-systems which are necessary for living, or by launching changes to natural conditions which largely complicate the possibilities of survival of people as biological species, etc.).

The research of sustainable development of cities should be based on some basic documents. In May 2001, the European Union adopted the *EU Strategy* for sustainable development.¹ The aim of the Strategy is to ensure a high level of environmental protection, social justice, cohesion, and economic prosperity; there should be many links between these key elements, such as the use of renewable energy resources and climate change, climate change and poverty, poverty and the use of environment-sensitive technology, procedures, etc.

In June 2006, the European Council adopted a new Sustainable Development Strategy 2005–2010, which brought changes to many areas. In order to revert the trends which threaten sustainable development, the strategy talks about the need to change the society in various fields – more responsible consumption, identification of new and more sustainable ways of enhancing economic growth, new alternative energy sources, smarter use of natural resources, more effective transport and a more inclusive global society.

The reviewed strategy identifies seven key calls, the last two of them being relevant also to ethnological research:

- *climate change and clean energy;*
 - *sustainable transport;*
 - *sustainable production and consumption;*
 - *threats to public health;*
 - *better management of natural resources;*
 - *social inclusion, demographic changes and migration;*
 - *fight against global poverty.*
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¹ The strategy acquired an external dimension in 2002 when the Commission adopted the global partnership for sustainable development and reiterated its commitments at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (August – September 2002).

Hence, the core of the concept is based on three aspects: environmental, economic and social.

Sustainable development also represents the way of approaching the planning and decision-making processes aimed to achieve a factual and permanent reduction of social and economic disparities, while ensuring environment protection.² In the social area, it is about ensuring life of sufficient quality for humanity as a whole, including present and future generations, which can be achieved, for example, by supporting sustainable existence, anti-discrimination activities and social security for all, as well as fight against poverty through increasing employment. The social issues relating to sustainable development include education and citizens' behaviour, health condition, the principles of good governance and equality of opportunities. The social dimension is important also because sustainable development can only be achieved by people who feel that they have a fair share in wealth and safety and also in co-decision-making. The basic prerequisite is not profit for individuals, but the ensuring of and participation at fair growth for all in society. The social dimension of sustainable development therefore includes support of the civil society, its involvement in the tackling of various kinds of problems and participation in decision-making processes at different levels. This can be considered the leitmotiv of tasks in the social area.

The National Strategy for Sustainable Development for Slovakia was prepared in 2001. The National Strategy for Sustainable Development³ contains, *inter alia*, the principle of cultural and social integrity:

- a) the preference of development on the basis of the internal development potential instead of mechanically imported development;
 - b) preservation and renewal of the positive values of the country and of its social and cultural identity;
 - c) support of the local colour, folk culture and spiritual atmosphere;
 - d) revival of traditional activities with a sensitive use of modern technology;
 - e) support of spontaneous forms of help or self-help.
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² Guidelines on Sustainable Development Policy. EEA Financial Mechanism. Norwegian Financial Mechanism. Adopted in 2006.

³ SD: National Strategy for Sustainable Development for the Slovak Republic. Source: <http://www.minzp.sk/dokumenty/strategicke-dokumenty/>

As the document suggests, cultural heritage plays an important role – not only in the form of monuments of material nature, but also spiritual values (world-view, religious, philosophical, ethical, aesthetic, social and other traditions) and knowledge of the past (history of municipality, region, nation and state). Cultural heritage affects all levels of identity (personal, civic, national, and also at a broader level) and creates a space for activating citizens' engagement, their involvement in public affairs, for increasing the attractiveness of the space, enhancing the identity of settlements and regions, promoting a sense of home and knowledge of the environment involvement (SD 2002:19). In practice, sustainable development relates to the protection, renewal and use of historic and cultural values of the rural and urban environment and also through various civic activities.

In 2002, the Agenda 21 for Culture was ratified at the summit in Johannesburg, South Africa. This agenda identifies culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development.⁴ The document applies the ideas of John Hawkes, Australian culture analyst, from his book *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning*. According to this author, culture should be understood in a broader sense, in line with the UNESCO declaration, and should play the central role in public politics. "Cultural diversity broadens the possibilities of choice which are open to everyone; it is one of the drivers of development not only with regard to economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence." Through its contents, Agenda 21 points out three dimensions of the perception of culture:

- 1) Protection and promotion of cultural diversity;
- 2) Development of participatory democracy;
- 3) Support of the cross-cutting nature of public policies.

Sustainable development in projects and research activities

Several projects targeting sustainable development have been implemented in Slovakia. The programme "Sustainable towns/regions in Slovakia" has been implemented since 1997. This programme has aimed to help local politicians, originally in two pilot Slovak towns – Spišská Nová Ves and Púchov, to launch the process of guiding these towns towards sustainable development through the implementation of a local Agenda 21. The purpose of

⁴ Available at <http://www.agenda21culture.net/index.php/sr/documents-sr/a21c-sr>

the programme has been, among other things, to reach a change in thinking at the local level and to change the approach mainly towards environmental issues. Last but not least, the programme has been intended to help the self-governments to fulfil the strategic development objectives to make the towns more democratic, wealthier, more functional and more cultural particularly through raising the environmental awareness of the staff of municipal offices, local deputies, citizens and other stakeholders, improving the environmental management of towns and, finally, by providing support to such decision-making processes aimed to achieve a sustainable development of towns which would include active participation of the public and co-operation between various public sectors. (Indicators of the sustainable development of towns 2000:54)⁵.

The following thematic indicators have been identified: air, water, soil, waste, biodiversity, noise, public green – recreation, population health, selected sources of pressure on the environment, resource management, environmental management, environmental education, and citizen participation in the creation and protection of the environment. On the basis of the specific experience of European towns and cities which were involved in the development/application of Agenda 21, the following indicators have been added: trade, mobility, quality of life, sustainability.

A number of Slovak towns joined these initiatives: for example, in 2003, the pilot projects *Joint European Sustainable Development Indicators of Cities* were joined by Púchov, Rimavská Sobota and Šaľa through the non-governmental organisation REC – Regional Environmental Centre. In 2007, the proposed set of sustainable development indicators for cities was published with six topics, of which topic no. 5 is inspiring for ethnologists – Socio-economic situation of towns, with the following principal indicators: social situation, economic situation and attractiveness of the city; and topic no. 6, with the following indicators: Environmental and social management of self-governments and businesses, and Citizen participation in public life. Ten Slovak towns and cities were evaluated under this project (including Banská Bystrica), and the results were published in the book *Ekologická stopa, klimatické zmeny a mestá (Ecological Footprint, Climate Changes and Cities, Bratislava 2008)*. The results of the model Slovak towns and cities and selected European cities are published in the book *Udržateľný rozvoj miest v Slovenskej republike (Sustainable Development of Towns and Cities in the Slovak Republic, Bratislava 2005)*.

⁵ Also available at: <http://www.seps.sk/zp/casopisy/zp/2001/zp1/macakova.htm>

These publications and the documents mentioned at the beginning could serve as a basis for a more thorough study of the sustainable development of towns and cities from the socio-cultural perspective.

The ethnological research of changes in the post-transition period of towns and cities relates directly to sustainable development issues and links environmental issues to the sustainability, historic development and historical memory and identity of the inhabitants of towns and cities. Selected topics have been studied in the framework of ethnological research: for example, Daniel Luther argues that the protection, renewal and use of the city's historical values in the context of Bratislava represent a specific issue of civic involvement. While the first decade of post-socialist transition was characterised by the tendency to reconstruct historic buildings and spaces, the next stage, accompanied by a major influx of multinational capital in the construction growth of the city, the protection of historical values has become a topic of civic activism. Citizens' efforts linked to social and emotional values, local traditions and daily life of the city – its atmosphere and often its *genius loci* – in order to preserve the historic identity of the city began to be confronted with the interests of investors and developers and decisions of competent authorities (LUTHER 2015).⁶

With respect to the transformation of the spatial structure of post-socialist towns and cities, authors often mention de-industrialisation – the process of reduction of the share of industrial, warehousing and technical infrastructure areas in favour of other functions. This refers to, for example, brownfields, former abandoned and partly devastated industrial sites, which can acquire new contents and functions in the conversion process. Original and financially affordable spaces are becoming the subject of interest of creative groups of people who have a big sense of originality and creativity and create alternative spaces in cities (art festivals, artists' workshops, galleries or spaces for musical events, etc.).

Most frequently, former industrial sites are rehabilitated for the sake of progress; after being demolished new buildings are constructed instead of them, serving for residential and business purposes. However, such fundamental changes in urban spaces – sites – are accompanied by the disappearance of numerous unique sites and historical events and

⁶ For more details see LUTHER, D. The Historical Identity of Bratislava in Citizens Activities: Limits to Sustainable Development of a City. In: Darulová Jolana (ed.). *Social and Cultural Diversity V. Citizens and Urban Spaces*. Banská Bystrica: FF UMB 2015.

stories which were related to them and which often formed a part of our industrial heritage. Industrial spaces (brownfields) can be split according to the purpose they are used for and also about who decides about their “fates” and whom they are designed for.

1/ Public spaces – designed for the public:

- places of cultural heritage or technical monuments;
- art spaces (gallery);
- entertainment (restaurants, pubs, wineries);
- for business purposes.

2/ Private (individuals) or community spaces:

- for residential use or residential sites accompanied by creative activities (workshops, studios);
- for community life and related various forms of activities.⁷

Civic participation, participatory governance, civic activism and its specific forms, such as volunteering, form part of the inter-disciplinary approach to the research of current problems related to the concept of sustainable development. The involvement and participation of citizens in local planning and decision-making processes is one of the most important civil rights. Today, more than decades ago, citizens demand much more information and possibilities to co-decide on the future of the town or city in which they live. Civic involvement in the tackling of urban issues can be observed at several levels: from individuals through groups (e.g. communities) up to various partnerships (permanent or ad-hoc groups of people from the private and public sectors). They create interest groups dealing with urban research and the documentation of abandoned buildings, explore their destinies, describe the atmosphere (appalling, military), collect narrations about buildings and sites (often in the form of urban legends), and, in particular, discover something exceptional.⁸

⁷ For more details see DARULOVÁ, J.: Transformations of Urban Industrial Sites: Examples of Good Practice and Bad Practice. In: Darulová Jolana (ed.). *Social and Cultural Diversity V. Citizens and Urban Spaces*. Banská Bystrica: FF UMB 2015.

⁸ For example, at the website Urbex.cz.

Common topics of civic interest in urban spaces include the quality of developed areas, protection, preservation and renewal of historic, cultural and architectonic values, increasing the attractiveness and functionality of public spaces, and protection of public spaces (parks, children's playgrounds, etc.), which can be considered a part of the sustainable development of a city. Citizens are also active in the field of local/urban decision-making and in various practices (public debates, petitions, etc.) and are influencing governance, thus co-creating future spaces of the city and life in them.

The social dimension of sustainable development of the strategic document, entailing support of the civic society and its involvement in the tackling of various kinds of problems and participation in decision-making processes at different levels, is directly documented through examples of participatory planning. The aim of participatory urban planning *Trenčín a ty (Trenčín and You)* was to initiate and moderate public discussions on the future of the Trenčín bank and to avoid past errors (demolition of a large part of the historic centre).

Participative budget is a means for joining elements of direct and representative democracy, which enables citizens to be directly involved in the decision-making on the use of finance allocated from the city's budget. Citizens can decide through discussions and by voting about what needs to be improved in the city and what the priorities are, and to join the implementation of approved projects. The idea of participative budget began to be realised in Slovakia in 2013 – the first cities were Bratislava – Nové Mesto and later Ružomberok and Banská Bystrica.⁹

Instead of a conclusion, I would like to return to the introductory definition of sustainable development and to the application of its bases in urban practice: even though the sustainable development of (not only) cities is declared to be an inter-disciplinary issue, the results and proportionality of scientific and socio-cultural generalisations do not prove this affirmation. The study of recent ethnological expert literature suggests that there is an absence of a follow-up of the detailed concept of sustainable development – in spite of the

⁹ For more details on spatial planning in Trenčín and on participatory budget in Banská Bystrica see BITUŠIKOVÁ, A. On the Way to a Sustainable Urban Development: Civic Participation in Selected Slovak Cities. In: Darulová Jolana (ed.). *Social and Cultural Diversity V. Citizens and Urban Spaces*. Banská Bystrica : FF UMB 2015.

fact that ethnology pays appropriate attention to the research of Slovak towns and cities, as demonstrated in the examples mentioned herein. I assume that if this has not been the case so far, the issues of the concept of sustainable development of Slovak towns and cities could become the basis for one of the focuses of applied urban ethnology in the future. The current concept is the research, documentation and creation of the conditions for creative cities or smart cities, previously mainly healthy cities and attractive cities. In a wider context, culture should become the priority topic of the inter-disciplinary research of cities, as it is one of the pillars of the sustainable development concept. This requires co-operation with other fields of science, e.g. geography, since recent research shows that it is not even necessary to cross the borders of theoretical-methodological approaches. Osman and Matoušek point out that the common denominator in, for example, geography, is a change from “economism” to “culture”, emphasis on processuality, daily life, creation of meanings and focus on the behaviour of actors (2014:14) as traditional foundations of research in ethnology.

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